

# Becoming Baby

Ten lessons on stupidity, boredom, time and escape

1.

*“In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it’s not at all, but very interesting.”*

~ John Cage

VS

*“Mind you don’t get bored at home on your own all day, once your partner goes back to work. You’ll probably start to miss the office!”*

I SHOULD EXPLAIN. I heard variations of the second sentence a lot when I was pregnant, from medical professionals, from strangers on the bus, and people in-between.

I had existed as a woman under capitalism for 34 years at this point, so it was hard to imagine why anyone would assume I was not always bored, all the time. There had been many, many times in my life when I had been so bored that my boredom shimmered and spangled relentlessly like Glenn Branca’s *The Ascension* for months on end. There had been other times when I was so bored I could barely move for the weight of my own boredom. Sometimes, I felt horror and fear too, alongside the boredom, yet at the same time bored with that horror and fear, which was still, for some reason, horrific and frightening, even long after it had also become boring.

It had not exactly been a walk in the park. (In any case, it can’t have escaped your attention that in recent years it had been getting worse for everyone.)

What the strangers meant, when they asked me to mind that I didn’t get bored, was less of a comment on pregnancy, or having a kid, or even about the monotony of care and love. They were asking for reassurance, and for me to assent to the totalising capitalist-realist lie that it is our wage-work which is freeing and liberating, that our intellectual stimulation comes from what we sell our time for, that there is, therefore, a moral good to work, and that parenthood was bound to be a boredom or a drudgery which I’d need to assert my true self in opposition to. They were just checking in to see if I was still on board with all this. Because if that wasn’t true, what was?

I couldn’t help. I had been frantically pulling at books on the shelves of capital’s grand old house, hoping to find the one that would cause the whole bookcase to swivel around and take me to my escape.

There it was.

### 2.

*Mind you don't get bored when you are watching Wacky Races instead of going to work*

*Mind you don't get bored when you stay up all night reading about the Pendle Witch Trials*

*Mind you don't get bored when you earn less money*

*Mind you don't get bored when you reframe your life around love and care*

### 3.

Nothing that has happened to me since has felt as though it was following a correct and/or useful chronology, so I don't see the harm in rewinding three years.

It's hard to understand now, but when this weird thing happened to me in early 2016, there was nothing to read.

I've always reached neurotically for theory when faced with any life-changing situation, scrabbled around for some grandstanding that would both unpack my own mess of feelings and also situate it as part of a wider struggle or cause. It's never failed me yet. But when I had a baby, I couldn't find much at all. It compounded the weirdness. *A weird thing has happened to me, and there is nothing to read!* My oddness was undocumented: I had been rewired without a manual.

Where was the philosophy, where was the art about this weird thing? I felt fobbed off and irrelevant, and as though I was an embarrassing presence just for asking.

There should be a paragraph of redemption here, but I'm afraid I can't provide one. There should be a moment where I felt seen, where we all realised that my rewiring as a parent was interesting or valid or relevant. It never came, and quite right too. It is humbling and levelling to experience banality, to be reminded of the ways in which we are all banal, all basic. I'd recommend it, on balance.

### 4.

Everyone kept warning me about my own impending stupidity. I was, apparently, about to fall victim to "baby brain", at which point I would lose myself, become dumb and unviable. The only way to resist this was by actively maintaining a link with my pre-baby, economically active self. Any advice I read kept stressing the importance of going back to work, or maybe starting a business in your "power maternity leave". Don't lose sight of who you are, they say. Do something for you. Get your nails done. (Generally in the UK, "getting your nails done" often means a manicure from an immigrant woman operating in a hostile environment, in an industry which became notorious under the-then Home Secretary Theresa May, for its frequent raids by immigration cops. While a manicurist may well be a mother herself, when we talk about "the mother" in our literary panel discussions or our Shoreditch House mum-boss roundtables, we don't ever seem to mean her.)

There was only an opposition between caring for a kid and self-care. There was no sense that to love and care for someone else is a fundamental part of being alive – or that whether or not we have kids, we will surely still end up with love and capital making competing

demands on our time, and despite it all we will surely still end up caring, some time, for someone, with all the drudgery and vulnerability that entails.

This false choice has been allowed to come about because conceptions of parenthood are dominated by a particular conception of *motherhood*. Narrow enough, sure, but what a specific mother it refers to! What little discourse there is that speaks of an affluent mother who can only, necessarily, be diminished and impoverished if she takes on caring responsibilities. It is a totalising definition which makes no room for parents who are not mothers. It makes no room for people who aren't parents but who do have caring responsibilities. And it makes no room for the deep resolve that mostly working-class women need to draw on, when they disproportionately get locked into battle with the state and underfunded, poorly-functioning care agencies, for reasons which families with greater wealth or social capital are better able to avoid or conceal. In the UK, in the seven years up to 2013, 46,094 birth mothers appeared before the courts on applications to have their children taken into care. Records showed 7,143 mothers having more than 20,000 children removed in that time.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile in the USA, in May and early June 2018 alone, 2342 kids were separated from their parents at the US border.<sup>2</sup> There are many parents who are digging deep for strength to fight their court battles, attending family councils, dealing with endless chains of bureaucracy, building memory boxes for kids who they may never see again, disproportionately survivors of abuse themselves... and, well, I wouldn't call them *bored*.

But, fine, maybe the worst thing you can imagine is not being able to lean in.

5.

Round about the time I'd had a baby, I vaporised and vanished from the world and into my phone.

There was an image doing the rounds on Tumblr at the time, which I couldn't get out of my head. The image description as I found it: [a photograph of two people wearing white slogan t-shirts, one reads 'the expectation of sacrifice promotes female pain' the other reads 'don't believe in meaningful suffering']. The heartbreakingly abyssal truth of life: everyone wants their suffering to be meaningful, but it never is. Suffering is not profound at all. Suffering is just suffering. It is random and cruel, and like an episode of Seinfeld nobody learns anything from it and nobody improves. Some people don't even suffer at all, which only makes it worse.

Okay, birth hurts, but who does it hurt? I think it's supposed to go like this: by mastery of her own pain-threshold, a woman is supposed to become more so, more of a woman, and encouraged to feel part of a greater femme project. (By the way, here's a funny joke: natural and medicalised childbirth are both sites of oppression, there is no entirely good team, two thumbs up! Boom boom.) A lot of the rhetoric around birth, particularly, encourages a sense of an otherworldly truth conducted through labour. But birth, or parenthood, tells you nothing about the experience of being a woman. You can experience any one of these things without any of the others. Obviously! Not all women have babies, not all mothers give birth, not all people who give birth are women, or indeed mothers.

The main communities which I felt I'd grown closer to were the dead and the undead. Labouring is a séance where walls are thin like at Beltane - and babies are extremely occult. An adult who is tuned into a baby is an adult who is tuned into a different frequency to the

people who go on living outside. This intersects with modern (counter)culture's tendency towards witchiness; generally, this is a welcome queering of capitalism, a bulwark against that male performed liberal fedora-rationality which is often a cover for racism and sexism, but when you throw birth and parenthood into this mix, a lichen grows over this tendency which is something uglier, and something that we still need to resist. That is to say, it absolutely does not follow that uteruses hold some ancient truth. There is a tendency to project a sacred feminine pseudo-profundity onto birth which is dangerous and exclusionary, and furthermore deeply corrupt! This is just a bribe offered by the patriarchy for your troubles, for your pain, or for your continued oppression. It is an abuser who tells you that you are so, so special. I guess some people figure it's just in their interests to take the bung, but this is absolutely not what we are all pretending to believe in sun signs for. *Don't believe in meaningful suffering!*

### 6.

Things have changed a bit since then.

While any issues surrounding parenthood are still more or less excluded from contemporary art as gauche or sentimental, they have recently been allowed back into literary circles. Here's a prediction: as contemporary art plunges deeper into an entirely justified identity crisis, the next couple of years will most likely see the mother be allowed back in, insofar as art has found a new porosity with literature – but at this point, the mother will be critiqued and problematised, because the mother who we have recently permitted to exist in literature is just one type of mother: photogenically anxious, usually white, always cis, always privileged, generally or functionally straight, and weird as it sounds, usually married. (I hope art spits this right out.)

Enough literature makes a trend, and there has certainly been enough to mean that questions of motherhood are now nudging towards being passé. Mothers are the new nature writing. No sooner than you could make a substantial *Having a Kid: A Reader*, the whole enterprise will be deeply unfashionable once more. Some of the books are good, although many, many more are not. Everyone read Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* in 2016, I guess you did too, and I haven't come here to pick a fight with Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers*. But auto-fiction like Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's work from the mid-2000s onwards attempts to mitigate its own moneyed white middle-class heteronormativity by going into way too much gross detail about, like, dicks; honesty as a badge of authenticity, for sure – but how flimsy a boast that is! Authenticity always was a kind of lumpen rockist pose, intolerant of ambiguity or transformation. I'm not so sure that's what kids and parents should be striving for.

The bookshops filled up with mothers. Not even kids. Just mothers. With noble exceptions, what this turned out to mean was affluent, white, straight, cis, normative women, worrying about what they had lost (attractiveness to men, promotion opportunities) or what they could not stand to lose (those same things again, plus also their apparently inescapable biological destiny: what a pickle!), and how they might be changed. And as horrifying and tyrannical and essentialist and exclusionary as this was, there was another problem too. Becoming this 'mother' just wasn't even what it was like.

### 7.

What a new parent does gain is some abjection points, and abjection is absolutely a currency: there is a very specific type of non-male bonding that runs on an engine of stories of fluids or smear tests or

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waking up in a strange bed with a Monster Munch packet stuck to your leg. Trading these is a care transaction, like how monkeys pick fleas off each other. The abject material gathered during even an uneventful pregnancy and birth is enough to fuel this kind of bonding for life, and with strangers too - being publicly pregnant accelerates a degree of intimacy that would ordinarily be earned and built up over many years. As a consequence, throughout my pregnancy I used to lie to strangers a lot; about basic and boring details, how far along I was, whether it was a boy or a girl or my first or whatever. It rebuilt the wall, a degree of formality, restoring the "vous" where a "tu" had been imposed on me. It also made me feel a little bit like I was pretending to be pregnant, which was more exciting.

### 8.

None of which is to say that this life-changing event doesn't change your brain and thought processes. I'd spent my adult life trying and failing to mould myself into a perfect worker, one more diligent and with a better concentration span than I could easily summon. But now, the disruption was rewarded, even encouraged.

So, "baby brain" as a phenomenon is the state in which the new parent is distracted, forgetful, stupider, unable to participate in society. By parent, they mean mother again (although like a lot of things where the popular imagination conflates parent with mother, there is no real and compelling reason for this to be the case), and by society, they mean capitalism. The rich, white, normative mothers exalted by the literary world make this so much worse, since the should-I-shouldn't-I lose my identity tension accepts as the core of its argument the notion that the maternal brain will lose more than it gains.

Why would caring diminish a person?

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It's true that my baby brain had scarcely a thought for what I might have lost by "becoming a mother", although I am conscious this might be a humblebrag, or at the very least something which says more about the hapless parade of increasingly minor and trivial scrapes that characterised my early 30s life than it does about caring for a child. In any case, I'd gained much more from this altered state than I'd lost, dropping out, tuning into the baby. It turned out that the infant's fractured gaze, with its splintered time and raw emotions, was helpful for creating as well as living, so long as you could accept the new disrupted clock, and its rapidly changing intervals of time.

It was all highly dissociative, and that brings with it its own bliss. I had a mushroom trip once years ago, where I felt my reflection – although still present – had fundamentally severed from me, like when Wendy steals Peter Pan's shadow. This dissociated self came back to me like a flaky but beloved old friend, and she brought with her a sense that I'd joined the baby in somehow managing to escape from normal space-time. I felt renewed, as though the baby was ageing instead of me. With no waged work to get up for in the morning, we knew only a knitwear-on-top-of-knitwear cosiness so extreme that it seemed to be a radical act.

And in this dissociative state, extraneous to space-time, the baby and I (for the time being, we were sharing a consciousness for all practical purposes) felt the boundaries between life and death were degraded and collapsing. This early phase gets called "the bubble", and its boundaries and borders are like a bubble's, transparent and diaphanous. An extremely heightened state at the best of times, it's not enough that a new parent has conducted the arrival of this electric life. Instead, they are encouraged to fixate on death, imminent stalking death that could occur at any moment.

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No one really tells you about this death bubble. Anxiety is amplified, and more to the point, monetised. There is no shortage of things a parent can buy to stave off their creeping dread, a micro-industry around safe sleep practices. Most of these thermometers, safe mattresses, sleeping bags, monitors, webcams, etc are decorated with tastefully cute critters. The *GroEgg*, a digital thermometer that flashes bright red if your room is dangerously hot, comes in three different varieties: penguin, monkey, owl. If the 'lil penguin' glows red, your cot death risk is higher. The world had shrunk, the domestic space had become the universe, and its borders were guarded by this kawaii necro-surveillance army, patrolling the boundary between the living and the dead.

But: all that, only joyous.

### 9.

The poet Rachel Zucker, sometime after the birth of her child, said: "I still haven't decided whether I want to be a mother". I know what she means, but perhaps it's better to linger in that indecision. It is just a bit gross to care. How could this thing happen to you, and you would still think you matter? I did not want to matter – ew! – not on my own.

Even my own existence was not remotely about me anymore. I wanted to dissolve, and hastily, like a tooth in Coca-Cola. I wanted to bury whoever I had been before and to cover up her existence. I only wanted to be this new thing, which is to say that I wanted to become an unobtrusive white cube, a wall on which the child could be mounted, or a forest floor in which the child could grow.

My own maternity was by far the least interesting thing I could imagine thinking about the whole situation, but other parents kept

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asking me about 'motherhood' as though it was a new job with appropriate levels of performance management, and I didn't really know how to answer. I guess the white-feminist industrial complex runs deep. Didn't you just feel more like a kid than a mother, I'd say back to them. When this happened to you, didn't you feel a consuming kinship and understanding with your kid but much less with the other adults in the playground?

I just felt like a kid. I was *becoming kid*. My gaze was a kid's gaze. This is distinct from the mother-martyr, another sub-trope of the popular conception of motherhood, who neglects herself by never stopping for coffee or getting her hair cut. The parent's identity is a cyborg identity. An adult fused with a baby is an improved adult, equipped for play. I was a shut-in with limited horizons and I was ready for anything. I was a weepy drop-out, an instinctive, emotionally precarious participant in broken and busted up time. And the pastures were finally rewilding – an unhappy and compromised ecosystem becoming replaced with something ancient and strong. I was slippery and immediate, like my son.

### 10.

The trouble was, I felt fine.

Did I ever tell you that I'd started talking out loud, but under my breath, to my long dead grandparents and great-grandparents, across time and across continents and languages. I wasn't sure they'd be much help, from what I know about some of them, but I thought they might like to know how I was getting on.

Chronology is a force of conservatism so everything is better when it breaks.

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Days and thought processes splinter into a thousand pieces, as though everything is happening all at once. You're waking up, cleaning the baby, reading five pages of a book, going for a walk, getting dressed and undressed and going to bed all at once – like a YouTube clip of a firework display fail, where all the fireworks all go off in a glorious 90 second burst set to The Misfits' *Last Caress* or whatever.

A monotony is not the same thing as a cacophony, and this was more of a cacophony.

Whether or not any of this is a problem depends on whether your circumstances allow you to suspend any expectation of linear time; if you can find a way to trust in it, your days can pass in tired and confused bliss, with nothing to separate today from yesterday, except for what you read while you were feeding the baby, or perhaps today was the day he licked you right in the ear.

It turns out that you can change more or less every aspect of your life, lose every single thing you have carried this whole time, and find that you are still there. On the other hand, the sole new element in your life, the child, is something that you know with an absolute certainty that if it was ever taken away from you then you would cease to exist. I would belong only to the past.

My walls were rebuilt as something simultaneously stronger and more tender. Every time I looked into the black and yawning abyss, which was admittedly quite often, that abyss seemed to grow stronger and more tender too.

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<sup>1</sup> Lancaster University research, 2014, quoted in the Daily Telegraph Magazine, 24 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Figures from Department of Homeland Security, quoted in the Guardian, 19 June 2018.

**Tessa Norton** works primarily with text and events. She was in residence at Wysing Arts Centre throughout 2018 with her family, working on a publication inspired by the rupture to time that accompanies early parenthood. Past projects and events include Marriage is Punishment for Shoplifting in Some Countries (Flat Time House, London), The Pure Ideology Personal Brand Workshop (Legion TV, London) and Award Machine (Grrrr, London). She regularly contributes art writing to various publications including The Wire, LAUGH, Corridor 8, Hoax and Art Licks, and past readings include Shady Todmorden, The Tetley and Liverpool Biennial.