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Fear Not the Harsh Winter

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
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Date

A.K. Burns

Thesis Sponsor

December 15, 2019

Date

Lisa Corinne Davis

Second Reader

This work is dedicated to Sam Cockrell,
my best friend,
a gem,
without whom none of this could exist.

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Illustrations and Images

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Fear Not the Harsh Winter

A familiar feeling, maybe from a dream: on your hands and knees, you crawl through a dim cave. Darkened walls sweating slime. Enough space to inch forward between long, wet moments of waiting. Surrounded, constricted, clenched, you aim for the pinprick of light ahead, a beacon, a goal, an endpoint. New sensations prickle at your knees and fingers and fresh aches radiate from their cramped tightness. Slowly, and then all at once, the tiny passageway expels you into a yawning expanse. Your shocked eyes recover and adjust from pure white to the walls curving up to a blue sky above, the glimmering water of a pool reflecting its luminance below. Finally, open space.

Being born is a transformative experience. Never before have we taken our first gasp of air, or made a sound as we exhaled it. Never before have we been any other temperature than that pool of our mother's 98 perfect degrees, where we lived with constant muffled gravity, muffled sound. Never a solitary entity, unheld, cold, dry in the enormous world. We yearn to nuzzle, to feel skin, to be held, to go back.

We pursue and create vessels that mimic the womb for holding what matters most to us. We are born, we carry. We, humans, the gatherers, creators of bags, carriers of

uteri, lunch boxes, stories, tiny dogs, extra pickles. Some bags have a specific purpose and some bags hold what we pick up along the way. Says Ursula K. Leguin,

“If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket... and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people...then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.”¹

Carrying feels like the most important thing I can do in this world. It's why we learned stand upright, so we could carry our tools and babies across frozen tundra. We don't just gather the physical, we narrate our world through the stories we carry. It's how we build history. How we tell our stories fundamentally changes who we are and how we think of ourselves. We are like Matryoshka, vessels within vessels, carrying stories, culture, genetic material and cellulite.

With rhythmic contraction and relaxation, blood vessels propel our life force through miles of mazes to the heart. This (peristaltic) rhythm moves us in waves. We mirror our insides outside, vessels carrying what matters, instinctively drawn to carry the patterns of those who came before us.

¹ “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.” *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, Grove Press, 1989, p. 167.

I began my journey at Hunter College as a painter. I will always love to paint, but I came to an impasse. I wanted to be able to take up a viewer's whole field of vision, to invent something new, to engage the senses in a way that my work had never done before, to be political, mysterious, loud, complicated. The paintings could not do what I wanted them to. No matter how hard I tried to transform them, formally or conceptually, they could never leave the dense history of painting behind. So instead I left painting behind, finding freedom in conceptual art, which shifts importance from a focus on materiality to a reprioritization of thought processes, and diminishes the importance of finished, commodifiable artworks.

In my art practice I am interested in raising awareness of the private, existential and biological. I want to open metaphorical and literal spaces that have been repressed, ignored, and denigrated. Emotional and physical zones such as phobia, vulnerability, confinement, or birth, are ripe for reframing.

I have a chronic disorder called PMDD² that affects only AFAB³ people, to date almost no research has been done on it⁴. Even getting a diagnosis took many years. I saw doctor after doctor who told me that my crippling pain was from stress and anxiety, from needing therapy, from hypochondria⁵. Like many people with chronic illness, I spend a lot of time looking for ways to get through life.

After years of searching, I was prescribed pain medication. My first few days with the prescription were full of hope until I woke up one morning with a new pain in my stomach, the acid ache of an ulcer. My long-awaited prescription was making me sick, and left me with a new daily decision: do I choose back pain or stomach pain today? In trying to resolve my own health, the cure is damaging my body. I wear a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation unit, I get weekly acupuncture, I take CBD and vitamins and Progesterone pills and Chinese herbs and buckets of Aleve, yet all of

² Hollins, Vicky. "The Etiology of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder: 5 Interwoven Pieces." *MGH Center for Women's Mental Health*, 15 May 2018, womensmentalhealth.org/posts/etiology-premenstrual-dysphoric-disorder/.

³ AFAB is an acronym meaning "assigned female at birth". No one chooses what sex they are assigned at birth. This term is preferred to "biological male/female" and "male/female bodied".

⁴ Liu, Katherine A, and Natalie A Dipietro Mager. "Women's Involvement in Clinical Trials: Historical Perspective and Future Implications." *Pharmacy Practice*, Centro De Investigaciones y Publicaciones Farmaceuticas, 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4800017/.

⁵ According to the Global Survey of PMDs in 2018, patients waited an average of 12 years for an accurate diagnosis, and 30% of sufferers attempt suicide. Dennerstein, Lorraine, et al. "Global Study of Women's Experiences of Premenstrual Symptoms and Their Effects on Daily Life." *Menopause International*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Sept. 2011, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21903712.

those together don't take away my physical pain — and don't even get close to affecting to my psychological symptoms.

I pay out of pocket for all of these "solutions". In America, we have a massive industry dedicated to pain management, with millions dying from the remedy they offer. Every day, 130+ people die from overdosing on opioids⁶. What are our cultural goals surrounding pain relief? Marta Russell says,

"Disabled persons who do not offer a body which will enhance profit-making as labourers are used to shore up US capitalism by other means. Entrepreneurs and rehabilitation specialists have made impaired bodies of use to the economic order by shaping disablement into big business and turning the disabled body into a commodity around which social policies get created or rejected according to their market value."⁷

Profit-making is the answer. We offer numbness to those who are hurting, under the pretense of independence, with the expectation that they will continue to be "productive" to our society. Instead of surrounding those who are in pain with community, we send those who can work back to work, with devastating results. This isolation and solitude leads to further alienation and addiction, worsening the presenting problem. More and more studies are finding that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it's human connection. Johann Hari writes,

⁶ National Institute on Drug Abuse. "Opioid Overdose Crisis." *NIDA*, 22 Jan. 2019, www.drugabuse.gov/drugs-abuse/opioids/opioid-overdose-crisis.

⁷ Russell, Marta. "Capitalism and Disability." *Socialist Register*, vol. 38, 1 Jan. 2002, pp. 211–228.

“Human beings have a deep need to bond and form connections. It’s how we get our satisfaction. If we can’t connect with each other, we will connect with anything we can find — the whirr of a roulette wheel or the prick of a syringe.”⁸

And pain is unavoidable. How we experience it and help others who are experiencing it matters. This extends into America’s relationship with childbirth, which drastically shifted during the industrial revolution, when sedation became the common solution for pain management for birth and Cesarean sections began to increase in frequency. While in the past birth was a communal event with experienced women surrounding and supporting the birthing parent, it became a solitary clinical event. The fear of pain often leads to a cascade of medical interventions.⁹ For example, if someone is in labor at the hospital and it is going slowly, often the medical professionals will break the bag of waters or strip the membranes. This action puts the labor on a clock, because infection becomes more likely with the water broken. It also makes labor more painful. At this point, a nurse will usually suggest that the person in labor gets a pitocin drip to speed up the contractions and make them more effective. With this action, the pain increases exponentially, and usually results in the person in labor requesting an

⁸ Hari, Johann. “The Likely Cause of Addiction Has Been Discovered, and It Is Not What You Think.” *Hu!Post*, HuffPost, 18 Apr. 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/the-real-cause-of-addicti_b_6506936?guccounter=1.

⁹Studies have shown that having a labor companion present increases positive outcomes for both the parent and child. Bohren MA, Berger BO, Munthe-Kaas H, Tunçalp Ö. Perceptions and experiences of labour companionship: a qualitative evidence synthesis. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2019, Issue 3. Art. No.: CD012449. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD012449.pub2.

epidural, although many women go into labor with the intention of doing it without pain medication. With the numbing of the pain, an epidural can actually slow the labor back down, and because of the ticking time limit for the water being broken, an emergency C-section will be suggested. Whereas, in a home birth setting or when there is a doula present, there are no time constraints on a laboring person (within reason), so none of these interventions would be likely necessary.

When we understand the significance of pain, we can let it transform us. Dilation doesn't feel good, but it is a natural, vital process. We have been doing it for thousands of years. As a birth doula, my approach emphasizes confidently giving in to this process, rather than shying away from it.

Like many other birth workers, I have a "doula voice": deeper, slower, more soothing than my regular tone, a persona I transition into during the most intense parts of labor. "I wish you could just stroke my hair and talk to me in your doula voice," my friend says to me during a phone conversation about her divorce. My particular knowledge and experience with childbirth means that I can clearly communicate ideas which cannot be seen by the birthing parent or their partner because they are in a different mental state and often inexperienced. I know the right places to push on the lower back. I remind them that moaning in low tones rather than high ones when pushing is more effective. I

work in a different kind of pain management field, focused on community as the solution to privatized pain.

And labor is a liminal space. During my own first childbirth, 67 hours went by and I wondered if I would survive it. I was a vessel, an animal, an athlete, delirious, afraid, triumphant, exhausted. At sunset on Sunday night, outside in a small pool of warm water, while the neighbor's guinea fowl crowed up on the roof, I held my breath and pushed a new person into this wild world. Surrounded by women who had walked through these moments time and time again, I was ushered into motherhood. They knew what work they could do, and what work I had to do alone.



My thesis piece, *Fear Not the Harsh Winter*, addresses these differences in perspective and bodily meaning. I am using process and this space to rethink assumptions of phase changes, both metaphorical and literal constancy. In doing that, I hope to bring to mind the cycles that are already occurring around us all the time. We expect things to remain the same forever, whether painful or pleasurable. We desire certainty. We want to know something and know that we know it.

The work consists of two small, adjacent rooms which the viewer is invited to traverse. One room functions as an entryway to the other, the second room is an entryway to the city. The personal room leads to the public room. I am using the dichotomies within these two disparate rooms so that their differences can be felt.



Fig 1

The red room is filled with objects that reference passages and portals, movement, transit: a mail slot in the wall with a pile of junk mail below it and repeated exit signs. At the base of the wall there is a small mouse hole, inside of which is a stack of zines that can be taken by the visitor. My bright orange EZPass bills hang above our head on a flagpole. On hooks are four black quilted XXL coats with the same EZPass envelopes

embroidered onto them. A joke and not a joke, these coats insulate us as we “easily pass” through the door to the next room. A portent of what’s to come, the coats also reference the cold room in New York’s iconic grocery store, Fairway.



Fig 2

In the red room is all the mail that has been delivered to my house the entire time I have been working on this project. Although I’ve been living in the same place for years, the majority of the mail that comes to my house is for people who don’t live

there. Previous tenants' junk mail, spam, multi-year subscriptions to men's fitness and motorcycle magazines. They provide a portal into radical normality. This mail is automated, never touched by human hands until the mailman delivers it. It is a constant. In efforts to pause time, I haven't opened any mail, or paid any of my bills.

A refrigerator door is installed in the center of the main wall of the red room. It is covered in photographs, drawings, stickers; the ephemera of family life. The blue room can only be accessed through this door. A radically different space, in atmosphere and climate, awaits.

One must step up to enter the blue room. There are metal bowls of different sizes installed in the raised floor, and the wall between the gallery and Canal street has been removed. Ice sculptures hang from the ceiling on retractable dog leashes. Depending on the weather outside, they swing and shimmy, melt into the bowls below, or refreeze into new stalactite shapes. As they melt, the leashes pull the ice toward the ceiling until it's gone; on a warm day the work disappears, leaving behind only a big bowl of dirty water. A new view of New York City is framed by the objects in this room.

I remake these ice sculptures daily, filling trash bags I find in the MFA studio building with water and refreezing them overnight. In the morning I peel parts of the bags from

the ice and hang them from the ceiling. These bags of water are heavy and unwieldy to work with, and as time passes the layers of plastic and ice become more and more laminated, inseparable.

I grew up seeing Hillbilly Weather Rocks (see image 1) on the side of the road or for sale in gas stations when my family would go on road trips through the south, where I was born but not raised. The rock, which pokes fun at contemporary (or “newfangled”, as my Kentucky cousins might jokingly say) weather prediction, is typically hung along with a sign explaining what one can surmise about the weather by noticing the condition of the rock. For example:



Fig 3

“If the rock is wet, it's raining. If the rock is under water, there is a flood. If the rock is warm, it is sunny. If the rock is missing, there was a tornado. If the rock can be felt but not seen, it is night time.”¹⁰

My family background exemplifies the massive fissure between the political left and right. Northerners vs southerners, country vs city folks, educated vs uneducated, these

¹⁰ “Weather Rock.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 25 Aug. 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weather_rock.

divisions are palpable. Our political strife is exemplified in this simple Southern joke, the Weather Rock: science versus fiction.



Fig 4

The second room of the installation references Weather Stones as a way to think about things that are happening around us that we do not need modern technology to understand. In this room, however, the stone is replaced with a temperature-sensitive medium, ice. These “rocks” are giving us indications by their existence, melted or

unmelted, of the conditions in which we are currently living. In this room, we face the weather. Not comfortable or comforting, we face our fear, nonetheless.

In my work I am interested in building unique awarenesses of our bodies, making us see differently places and objects which we are used to interacting with regularly.

Temperature serves here as a way to snap us into the present moment. If one pauses in this room, they will see the lights on Canal street from a new vantage point. They will see their breath for the first time in an art space. They can decide to re-enter the main gallery or move forward into the city. The construction noise, the cold, fear, and garbage meld into something breathtaking. With this perspective shift, I'm offering one more way of imagining the present.



Fig 5

My surfer friend tells me this story: Sometimes, when you're far out in the ocean, a big wave comes and you're knocked from your board and under the water. Twisting out of control, you know you won't be able to swim up to catch your breath because of the incessantly pounding waves. When this happens, you open your eyes under the water and look for a bubble. You make your way to it and inhale. You're not just inhaling air, you're inhaling all the reasons you want to get back to shore. The thing that is giving you life is reminding you why you want to stay alive in the first place.

Installation Images







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