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A Letter to My Newborn

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Article abstract

This letter takes place as a conversation with my newborn about the struggles and desires I see on the horizon at the moment of writing. The letter's simple style and straightforward language invite you to immerse yourself in an intimate sharing between myself and my one-year-old and consider the perspective of a young child coming to grips with the world around them. I draw on past conversations with my mother about her illness and her ecological work, as well as elements of our family history working and living on the river Clyde. Falling somewhere between a poem, a story and a letter, I explore themes of change and hope, ecological precarity, health and illness, and a path towards more livable worlds. Two photos included with the letter share intimate moments with the reader related to my writing – the moment Clyde reaches for his grandmother at the water's edge, an ode to the river on which she grew up and after which he is named; and the moment my mother unfolds her hand letting an edible flower sit delicately along her hand's life lines as an offering of nourishment and interconnection.

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A Letter to My Newborn

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Abstract

This letter takes place as a conversation with my newborn about the struggles and desires I see on the horizon at the moment of writing. The letter's simple style and straightforward language invite you to immerse yourself in an intimate sharing between myself and my one-year-old and consider the perspective of a young child coming to grips with the world around them. I draw on past conversations with my mother about her illness and her ecological work, as well as elements of our family history working and living on the river Clyde. Falling somewhere between a poem, a story and a letter, I explore themes of change and hope, ecological precarity, health and illness, and a path towards more livable worlds. Two photos included with the letter share intimate moments with the reader related to my writing - the moment Clyde reaches for his grandmother at the water's edge, an ode to the river on which she grew up and after which he is named; and the moment my mother unfolds her hand letting an edible flower sit delicately along her hand's life lines as an offering of nourishment and interconnection.

Keywords

children, intergenerational, social change, ecological relations, precarity, hope

My dearest Clyde,

You have shaken me to my foundations in the best of ways. Time moves slowly with you - we lose our days to simply waking, feeding, playing - and in this unfolding, I notice the world in new ways.

As you grow, my love, you might hear, 'the world is your oyster'. *What does this mean?* I imagine you wondering.

Well, oysters are amazing sea creatures. They are caregivers in our seas who naturally filter the water around them, cleaning where they live for themselves and others. They are adaptive and communal, shaping uniquely to their environment and gathered together in ways that create shelter for other sea creatures. They are beautiful with shells lined with precious pearl. If you are born into a world that is your oyster, I would like to think that you are born into a caring, adaptive, generous and beautiful world.

But I am worried about the oysters. Last summer, a heat dome formed over the West Coast of Turtle Island killing over 1 billion marine animals, oysters included. It's difficult to comprehend this loss of life. Soon I'll teach you to count...1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10...we'll never wrap our heads around a billion.

My love, you were born into a time of ecological precarity.

In this time of precarity, we named you after a river. Maybe I sought to root you in the geophysical? The geophysical and yet intimately human...so many generations of your family have worked, loved, lived and died on the banks of this river (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Clyde and his Grannie reach for each other at the water's edge.
Photo Credit: Caitilin McMillan

This river carries generations of our histories and stories. Its banks are layered; our lives mixed amongst the sediment. This is one way you might start to grapple with the Anthropocene.

My love, you were born into a cycle of life and death.

Your grannie has been sick for some time now. First with multiple chemical sensitivities - an illness in which her body is overwhelmed by the toxins in our everyday environment. And now with cancer. I have learned from her that the health of the planet and the health of our bodies are intrinsically linked. Before you arrived, she started planting. Planting everything she could get her hands on. Her garden is each crevice of earth she can find in Toronto. She grows food and community with her gardens. She nurtures plants and life in a time of ecological decay. Planting is healing (Figure 2).



Figure 2: My mother holds out her hand / An offering of edible flowers and gathering of fresh vegetables from the garden.
Photo Credit: Caitilin McMillan

When we knew you were coming, your grannie was already traveling across Ontario planting trees. She plants Black Walnut trees, which are indigenous to this land. Like oysters, they are caregivers, adaptive and precious. On the date of your birth last Spring, she had planted over 1,000 Black Walnut trees. When I ask her about why, she tells me she has you in her heart and mind. This is how she has been preparing for you, for life, for death. This is how she yearns.

My love, you were born into a time of apocalypse.

For years, some have said that the apocalypse has already arrived. For many people it has - racism, sexism, climate injustice, poverty are all forces of the apocalypse. They are all forces of our societal making. I wonder how you might be a part of unmaking them? Your daddy tells me of the philosopher Reinhold Neibuhr who said that the human condition is to be able to imagine an ideal world but not quite be able to get there collectively...

I'll always keep trying.

One of my favorite philosophers, Octavia Butler, tells us that change is the truth of life: "All that you touch, You Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth Is Change." I think this offers hope when climate destruction seems unstoppable or injustice insurmountable. Remember, we are always in process, changing - and like your grannie, we can plant seeds - literal seeds *and* seeds of hope, joy, grief, and possibility for other ways of living, of being together on and with this earth.

Like the oysters and Black Walnuts, you too are an agent of change my love. You have already changed me.

Now, little one, *how* shall we go from here?

Always by your side,
muma

References

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