

choice

True Stories of Birth, Contraception, Infertility,
Adoption, Single Parenthood, & Abortion

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MACADAM CAGE

The other day I was in a convenience store in Vacaville, California, where a skinny guy with thin greasy hair, a dirty white button-down shirt, and a Poindexter nose, was handing out pamphlets. When I saw the bloody fetus on the cover I changed my trajectory around the convenience store to give him an even wider berth, but he took a step toward me. "Aren't you concerned," he said, "about the slaughtering of babies going on right across the street from this gas station?" I looked out the window at the sign that bore the familiar Planned Parenthood logo, put my tampons and my Gatorade down on the shelf full of oil filters and air fresheners in front of me, squared my shoulders, and headed for my car. What I wanted to ask him is, *Where are all the hunky good-looking pro-lifers?* What I wanted to ask him is, *Why are the only men willing to hand out these pamphlets the men who will never get laid?*

Almost every close female friend of mine has had an abortion. There is not one of us who does not still think about it, does not still mourn the loss of the child—or, if we don't think of it as a child, perhaps we mourn the loss of possibility. Nearly all of us still believe that we made the right decision. What we would like Senator Brownback and his supporters to understand is that we did what we thought was best for ourselves and the future; sometimes selfishly, sometimes selflessly, and always in the face of grief and regret and undeniable longing. What we would like Senator Brownback and his supporters to understand is that *far* more important than whether we call it a baby or an embryo; *more* important than stem cell research or the lack of it; and more important, *even*, than whether or not we bring a child into the world and by doing so change our lives and the world forever, is the fact that we do it freely, is the fact that we have a choice.

PERSONAL BELONGINGS

by Kimi Faxon Hemingway

1.

ON THE DRIVE to Chapel Hill that morning, I could only see small things: my ragged fingernails, lint on the dashboard, tiny, nascent buds on Bradford pear trees. Later, the picture would emerge, big, bulbous, and clear, but not yet. I was still inside it all, unable to see out. When the world goes black and your eyes are slow to adjust to the dark, you focus on what's in front of you. Your hand, for example. Maybe the stars. Any point of navigation at all.

It was the day before Easter and I was on my way to a city two hours from home, a city with an abortion clinic. I was thirty years old. It seemed suddenly that all former rules for living were out the window.

The sky stained the empty road pink. I curled into the front seat of Heather's small Honda, wrapped in a down comforter. The would-be father was crunched in the back, mostly quiet. We were all quiet. Heather's eyes fixed to the road as I breathed onto the cool, damp windows until the mist from my breath dissolved.

2.

The clinic was already packed by the time we arrived since it was one of two days of the week when abortions were administered. Heather and I shared a seat in the waiting room. The would-be father spread out on a patch of worn carpet and read our horoscopes from the city paper.

"You have been very fertile lately," he read, announcing my horoscope without the least bit of irony. Heather exhaled loudly, stood up and walked around between the clusters of people that I could not look at. I opened my eyes, pulled my legs into my stomach, and glared at him.

"What?" the would-be father said, hands up, half smiling. "It's funny."

This is all I'm going to say about him:

It was more than drunken sex with a man I didn't love, although, technically, that's exactly what it was. But it was complicated. We were complicated. It was dangerous and wrong in a way that looked right in certain light. Sometimes bad things are glittery and attractive and hard to ignore—it was the steadiness of his hands, that he could build a house with those hands and write a poem and touch me roughly, assertively, that kept me there longer than I should have stayed. We'd found each other at a friend's party one night and ended up at my apartment. Drunk, he neglected to pull out when I asked him. This, for a while at least, made him easy to blame.

A young woman with brown hair cut to her jaw read my name aloud from a clipboard. I stood up, legs like Gumby, cinched the drawstring of my pajama bottoms tighter, and then concentrated on walking through the crowded room toward the woman who stood in front of a door marked Private.

The woman, whose name was Rachel, led me to a desk in a small windowless room and asked how I was feeling. She was kind and had gentle eyes. It was this and the fact that she seemed like she might be my age that made my throat close up. I squeaked out some unrecognizable words.

"It's okay," she said calmly, pushing some paperwork my way. "Have you thought about what kind of abortion you'd like to have?"

I had not thought about it.

I knew immediately though what my choice would be the morning I peed onto that pink stick and waited for the boxes to fill in, knew that once they did, I'd finally have to act on what had always come so easily to my lips: every woman should have the right to choose an abortion.

"Well, because you are so early in your pregnancy, you might think about RU-486 as an option." I had only heard vaguely of RU-486. I thought it was similar to the morning-after pill, which friends of mine had taken in college.

Rachel explained that it was an ideal drug to take in the early stages of pregnancy, that the success rate was higher than a traditional, surgical

abortion given the fact that I was only four weeks pregnant. She said that many women had had positive experiences with the drug, in part because they felt it was a more private option.

The fact that this drug was now available as a possible choice within the right to choose an abortion was a very big deal, Rachel told me. A lot of people had fought long and hard to make it safe and available.

I learned more about RU-486 later. That it really was a big deal that women like me had access to the drug. Even though RU-486 had been successful in Europe by 1988, the Reagan and Bush administrations had tried vigilantly to suppress the drug's entry into this country because of political pressure, a hypothetical increase in abortion, and the fear that women would use it as a form of birth control. But after ten years of negotiations between Roussel Uclaf (the French manufacturer and distributor of the drug) and the FDA, RU-486 finally became available to women in the United States in 2000. On a political level, it was something I could get behind: it was progress.

It turned out I could also get behind it on a personal level. These were the words Rachel used to describe the experience of taking RU-486: organic, natural, almost like miscarriage. I liked the sound of those words. I especially liked the sound of this advice: "make a ceremony out of the experience." She likened the pain of taking the drug to very strong menstrual cramps. I could handle that, I told her; I'd had menstrual cramps since I got my first period. That was old hat. I would bleed for four hours maybe, she informed me, and then I'd be up and around in a couple of days.

"Or, you could come back in two weeks and have a surgical abortion when we know that the success rate increases." She paused and looked at me, "Of course, this is your choice. You need to decide which option suits you the best."

On the one hand I was hard as nails, knew my choice. On the other hand, I wanted someone else to decide, to take over, guide me. I thought of my mother. And how desperately I wished I were strong enough to call her. How much I wanted her here right now.

The pills seemed manageable, I reasoned, seemed better than driving

back to this clinic after two more weeks of waiting for something to grow substantial enough to be eliminated. Seemed somehow easier than slipping my feet into stirrups and having to listen to that terrible sucking sound my friends had told me about, the moment when the vacuum enters you and does its job.

I thought of the women in the waiting room, imagined recovering with them in a communal room, heating pads on our stomachs, buckets by our beds. Need to be in my home for this one, I thought.

I felt better imagining the women Rachel mentioned, the ones who'd liked the drug. They were women I could conceive of as friends, women who had ceremonies, and did yoga and baked bread. It felt almost, to use her word, a "natural" way to end a pregnancy. As if I were now connected to countless others who'd had abortions. It's the thing women say to each other after rites of passage like weddings and childbirth: welcome to the tribe.

"I'll take the pills," I said.

After I sat in that small office and swallowed two tablets of Mifepristone, Heather drove us all home. I tried to sleep in the backseat while the would-be father talked on his cell phone, laughing jollily with old friends as if he were on vacation. I prepared myself to take Misoprostol, the second set of drugs, the following day.

3.

One afternoon when I was a teenager, my mother and I stood in the bright light of our kitchen and chopped onions, talking about how weeks earlier I had held a handmade sign outside the courthouse in New Hampshire's capital with my teacher and a dozen other students, protesting for choice.

This is when my mother told me, almost matter-of-factly, that in the sixties she'd had an illegal abortion. I sat down, amazed. This was not something that happens to your own mother, I remember thinking. Her ability to tell the story with such detachment stunned me, as if she had easily extracted the lesson in order to pass on what was necessary. "It's so important that abortion always be legal," she said, looking at me.

A young woman who worked for the abortion doctor came for my mother at a friend's apartment in New York. The woman blindfolded my mother, then drove circles around the city to disorient her before arriving at the doctor's home office in Jersey City.

Weeks after the doctor injected a needle the length of my mother's forearm into her cervix, she was still gushing blood; the placenta and fetal tissue still remained and she had developed a horrific infection. She hemorrhaged for weeks, until one day, after losing so much blood, she fainted on a set of stairs in the Boston apartment building where she lived. She finally found a doctor who was willing to help her. He told her it was unlikely that she would ever become pregnant again.

The doctor was wrong, however, and on January 20, 1973, I was born. Two days later, on January 22, the world changed: *Roe v. Wade* had finally made abortion legal.

My mother's story and the lesson were inseparable in my mind. It seemed so uncomplicated: take the procedure out of the back alleys and put it in a clean, modern, medical facility. The assumption, the mistake, was in thinking that legal meant safe.

4.

I did what Rachel told me to do: I made a ceremony out of the event. I woke early, lit a candle, and tried to forgive myself for what was about to happen. It wasn't that I wanted a baby. I didn't, at least not yet. It was just that I was beginning to feel old, beginning to feel like my time was running out. It was also that my body was fighting to be pregnant. It wanted it, even if I didn't. The body change is instantaneous: moods shift, breasts swell, the uterus—already beginning to expand—pushes on the bladder.

I made a nest on the couch and piled pillows up, stacked toilet paper and maxi pads in the bathroom, played soft music. When the would-be father and Heather arrived for the showdown, I slipped the pills out of the small brown envelope, went to the toilet, and pushed them toward my cervix as far as they could go. Then I waited.

"This isn't so bad," I said as the first mild cramps hit about one hour after I'd taken the Misoprostol, half laughing with Heather at some silly

love scene in a romantic comedy she had brought over in order to distract me.

One hour later, though, the story was different. I was running to the bathroom in ten-minute intervals, soaking up thick pads, then screaming on the toilet while tissue, mucus, blood, shit, spilled out of me. Heather came into the bathroom and rubbed my back, and then she started crying. The crying scared me. I wanted her to be stronger. I wanted to be stronger. I thought of my neighbors and worried they'd hear me.

Heather helped me back to the couch. I felt wrung out, but it had only just begun. It was the last time that day that I made it to the toilet. The five feet between the couch and the bathroom seemed insurmountable, and when the convulsions, fever, and chills hit, my body thumped to the floor. I stayed there excreting fluids I did not know my body had onto the wood floor. The would-be father scooped me up and put me back on the couch. Heather cried more.

One more thing about the would-be father:

As I writhed in pain on the floor, on the couch, on the toilet, he called his mother. I tried to ignore the fact that at that moment he was giving his mother, *his mother*, a play-by-play of how the drug was affecting me. The phone call was meant, perhaps, to comfort him, I guess, or me. Either way, it infuriated me. *There's nothing private about this*, I said in my head, arguing with the clinicians.

He tried to hand me the phone so his mother could speak to me, give me some words of wisdom, or support, or condemnation, I wasn't sure. This was a mother who thirty years earlier had considered having an abortion, but ultimately decided against it. The evidence of the choices she finally made? The man speaking on the phone in my apartment. How grateful she was that she had made the choice she did. How grateful he was, almost existential. He would not be here today if she had chosen differently, he reminded me the night before my appointment. Still a choice, I'd said back.

5.

One week later I was still wearing a nightgown and diapers, still calling the clinic in hysterics. "Why am I so weak?" I wanted to know. "You didn't tell me I'd be so weak. And why am I still bleeding buckets?" I asked, and always the same answer: "It is common to bleed heavily afterward. In a few days, you should see some relief."

My body was fighting against itself. Relief seemed a far-off word, an abstract idea. My hormones raged; I expelled liver-like blood clots the size of my palm most days, including the day I returned to the clinic for a follow-up visit. The physician's assistant who administered the pelvic exam and ultrasound chuckled while I lay on my back, a speculum holding me wide open. "You sure are a bleeder, aren't you?"

I asked her what would happen to the blood and tissue floating inside me.

"It will just get absorbed back into your body," she said and then, moments into the exam, she talked about fitting me for an IUD during the visit.

I began to cry, buttoning my pants. "This is just so hard."

"Why is it hard?" she asked.

Even the very company that championed RU-486 has warned women about the drug. In the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, Edouard Sakiz, the former chairman of Roussel Uclaf, was quoted as having said that women "have to be very confident to choose this method. It may be physically more natural, but psychologically it hits you much harder. You preside over the killing of the baby, completely unblinkingly. For women who are confused or vulnerable, and of course, so many are in this position, it is really quite terrible."

The idea that the drug would make a very difficult and personal choice private, is appealing. Except that it doesn't offer privacy. You still have to go the clinic, you still have to leave the clinic with your paper envelope of pills and cryptic instructions, and then you have to administer the drug to yourself when you get home, and there in your home is all the

evidence, the haunting reminder of the choice you have made. At that point privacy takes on new meaning. As in *alone*, as in *private hell*.

6.

It was three weeks after that Easter Sunday, and I continued to hemorrhage. My body tried vigilantly to fight off bladder infection after bladder infection, my mind quietly, efficiently, detaching from my physical grief. I was divided into tiny compartments: this is what my body wants, feels, needs; this is what my mind wants, thinks, feels. I began to call my body, “the body” and the abortion, “the nightmare.”

During these weeks, I was aware that my neighbor, Rocco, was watching me around the house, shuffling to the laundry room in slippers where I scrubbed blood from my clothing; carrying my garbage to the trashcans out back; passing by his windows like a ghost; crying with the would-be father on the back stairwell. I didn’t mind that he was watching; in fact, part of me wanted him to know. There was a kind of disclaimer involved: *this is why I’m like this*. A confession could clarify things. A confession could explain. But there was also the feeling that if I told my story, I could get rid of it.

Rocco was a respected chef in town. One of the great perks of living in the house was that I was often the lucky recipient of his cooking, his guinea pig. The hallway perpetually smelled of yeast, garlic, and leeks. But even for all of his savvy in the kitchen, his sincerity about the French tradition of food preparation, his mature generosity, he was still twenty years old and driven by hormones. A couple of times, he propositioned me and my friends to spend a night with him, that doing so “ain’t gonna hurt our friendship,” so when he came to my door one afternoon, weeks after the abortion, and saw me green and hunched over and guessed that I was pregnant I was surprised by his perceptiveness. After I told him of the abortion, of my sickness since, everything in him contorted, like his face was a wet cloth being wrung.

“Good Lord, Kimi, you killed your baby?”

“Jeez, Rocco, please don’t say that.”

“Does your momma know?”

I looked at him, nodded, and gently closed the door. “Have to lie down now, Rocco,” I said, through the crack.

I had finally told my mother about my abortion. I had not known how to say it to her, how to even begin. She wanted me to learn to forgive myself. But first she wanted me to be healthy again. It must have been excruciating for her to see her failed abortion story repeated over thirty years later in her own daughter.

Moments later, Rocco came back to my door with an offering, chicken broth. He said, “Tell me what to do; the only way I know how to take care of you is to feed you.” But I could not eat, could not ask for what I needed, didn’t know what I needed, except to erase all this.

My mother wasn’t happy that Rocco knew about the abortion, that people knew.

“But Mom,” I said, “don’t you think it’s a good idea that someone in my building knows? You know, just in case.” According to my mother, I had been reading too much abortion literature. I accidentally came across a picture of a woman who died from an illegal abortion in a big book about women’s health. The woman was lying in a yoga posture, child’s pose, the soles of her feet smudged with dirt, the lower half of her body bloodied. Her naked skin appeared thick and stiff as plastic, her face invisible to the camera.

Looking at the picture, I thought of my mother, of all the other women I know who have had abortions, of myself, and I asked the *what if* questions. But there was an even stronger connection I felt to this woman, some self-recognition, and some sense that I was confronting my fear by looking at her, some sense that she’d been punished for what she’d done, some sense that I had been, too. I knew my mother was right when she said, *leave the books alone, don’t ruminate so much*. But this is my nature, I am haunted, cannot lift myself out of the mire. She made a clucking sound with her tongue, loud and aggravated, “God, Kimi.”

Once, as if to reveal the kind of person I am, as if to say, this is how sensitive my daughter is, my mother told a friend that I could never cut down

a tree, even if it meant planting a new one in its place, that I could not even throw out a sickly house plant. “She just can’t do it,” my mother had said. “She doesn’t like to hurt anything.”

This kind of person, one who cannot throw away a sick plant, seems an unlikely candidate for abortion, I know—let alone the kind of abortion in which you “preside over the killing”—but for me this comes as close as possible to revealing the complexity of the choice. Most women I know who are pro-choice have a serious moral consciousness, so, if they’re like me, the very thing that makes them pro-choice makes them particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the decision. Even the terms we use, pro-choice, and pro-life, seem misnomers—of course I believe in life. All life. But the life I chose first was my own. At first this seemed audacious, seemed like a kind of dare, one I’d certainly never been confronted with before. The kind where you become utterly conscious of your future and your own power in choosing it. I knew I had to save myself from a future I didn’t want, one I was too afraid to imagine. That seemed the only choice at the time. Even if it meant ending another life.

7.

It had now been nearly three months of the same—bleeding through my clothes, wearing diapers, anemia—when I finally decided to see a new doctor a friend had recommended. He gave me vitamin supplements and antibiotics for my uterine and bladder infections. This wasn’t the first time he’d seen this kind of fallout from RU-486.

“Chicken skin,” he told me. “What’s in your uterus—leftover tissue—it looks like chicken skin,” he said looking away from the ultrasound machine and at me sympathetically, fatherly. “That’s what’s left over after the drugs. That and probably a bit of fetal bone. It could be causing the infection.” Only as a last resort, he told me, would he perform a D&C given the high risk of infertility and scarring, and my lack of health insurance. He asked if there was some place I could go where people could take care of me, give me some support.

I decided to visit my parents at their home on an island off the coast of Massachusetts. Most days, I worked hard at pretending to be cheery, at

concealing the dozens of maxi-pads I used, bent on not making my parents—my mom especially—worry. It didn’t work. She was smarter than I gave her credit for. Such is the blindness of desperation. Part of me felt like I had gotten myself into this mess, and I was the one who was going to get myself out.

After the weeklong visit, my parents hugged me urgently and waved through a secure glass wall at the airport. I vowed to them to follow my doctor’s advice and to have the surgery if the less invasive methods were ineffective.

In Boston, I rushed through two terminals to meet my next flight, but by the time I reached the security gate, I could feel movement in my uterus. I knew the feeling; I’d been experiencing it for months now. It usually began with a rumbling in my lower abdomen, then cramping, followed by the passage of clots through my cervix and then the dampening of my inner thighs. This day though it was an uncontrollable gushing, immediately visible on my pants.

I had reached my terminal by the time the bleeding raged so much that I could no longer walk. I hunkered down in a faraway corner and called my parents for advice. My father was stern. I asked if there was someone he knew in Boston, a doctor friend who I could call.

“Not on a Sunday,” he said, “Just go buy more pads and try to manage the pain.” All I could find in the airport gift shop were thin maxi-pads, and even if I had found something stronger it wouldn’t have made a difference. I tied a scarf my brother bought for me in Mexico around my waist to conceal the blood on my pants. But it was futile, the scarf was soaked too.

I paced the airport between visits to two different bathrooms where I sat on the toilet and tried to wait it out, to no avail. I called home again. “I don’t think I can manage it,” I said to my dad on the phone. Going to an emergency room would be expensive and a long wait, he reasoned. “All you have to do is make it back to North Carolina,” he said.

“All I have to do,” I repeated to myself.

Then, moments after speaking with my father, I fell in front of a long ticket line.

I woke to a US Airways representative waving a flight brochure in my

face. The Airport Health Clinic was closed on Sundays, but there was an EMT on duty, the US Airways woman told me. She helped me back to the bathroom where she said the EMT would meet me. The bathroom that, after my previous visits, looked like someone had been murdered there; blood was everywhere. My blood. That I could not manage.

The EMT pushed the stall door open and looked at me, a 30-year-old woman crouched on the floor beside the toilet, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. He set a heavy black bag down beside me, and I could see through occasional sidelong glances that he was muscular and that his expression was kind. The EMT told me that it could just be my period. That sometimes after abortions the first period is extremely heavy. I said, "That's possible, I guess," even though I knew it was not possible. I had been bleeding for months. There had been no respite. No period of menstruation, just varying degrees of bleeding. That I clearly could not manage.

At the hospital, I waited in my room, perched atop a very deep, plastic bedpan and let blood drain out of me. An older Jamaican woman, a nurse's assistant, called me Baby and wiped me down with a warm cloth. The other nurses were unfriendly. This was the emergency room on a Sunday night.

After the young resident assigned to my case tried to give me a pelvic exam—admittedly his first ever—with a speculum that was too big, I was sent to a separate wing of the hospital for an ultrasound.

The sonographer manipulated the wand around and around to get a better reading, and when I lost control once again of my bowels and made a mess of her sterilized bed, she muttered, "Oh, God" and placed plastic beneath me. She left the room to find someone who could give a second opinion while I lay on the table with a plastic wand in my vagina. The room was dark except for my uterus hanging off the lit ultrasound screen.

I cried for my choice, for my inability to control what was happening, for the humiliation I felt, the despair, for the mystery of my body. I was alone and without insurance in an emergency room in a city where my family had once lived; I had no idea what was wrong with me, or how to fix it. That's the thing about abortion, what starts out as a

compelling and profound act of control over your life soon becomes an act of surrender. Suddenly a choice that had once seemed black and white boiled down to a simple desire: I wanted to make it out of this hospital whole.

When the sonographer and her colleague returned to the room they looked at the screen, then went into a back office where I could hear whispering. Moments later, they emerged, and told me what they were looking at. They were looking at a bad infection. They were looking at the placenta and an implantation site. They were looking at a partially developed fetus in my womb. My exceedingly high hormone levels, apparently, matched the information delivered on the sonogram screen. Information that suggested I was still pregnant. It had been three months since I had taken RU-486.

When there's failure in the choices we make, there is insurmountable regret. Later, the lesson resonates. But at the time, I had not been able to forgive myself. I felt that my choice had been wrong. I had chosen wrong. It wasn't that I felt particular regret for what could have been—a child. Though, to be fair, there were days when I did, but it was more specific than that. It was this feeling that I could not take care of myself, that I could not perform on a physical level. There are other women for whom RU-486 has not worked, like me, but there are more women for whom the drug has worked. I was part of a group that failed. It felt colossal. It felt like inadequacy. I couldn't even have a proper abortion.

The next morning, the hospital released me, and back I went to North Carolina where I would have the necessary surgery. I boarded the plane, my hair crumpled and matted to the back of my head, dried blood splattered to my back. The hospital had donated the outfit I wore—gym shorts and a Harvard T-shirt. My own clothes, soiled and crusted with blood, were folded inside a clear plastic bag that read, *Massachusetts General Hospital, Personal Belongings*.

8.

I can't say why the drug failed me exactly; no one can. As one of the doc-

tors at Mass General examining my case said, “The thing is, we don’t know what a uterus should look like three months after RU-486.” A week after my doctor performed the D&C, I went to see him for a follow-up appointment. He was stunned, he’d told me, by what he’d found when he’d done the surgery, by what was still left in my uterus all those months later. “This is not an innocuous drug,” he’d said, shaking his head.

It could be that the drug itself is less problematic than the way it is handled and prescribed in the United States. The protocol for RU-486 is very different in Europe than it is in this country. In France, for example, the drug is administered in hospitals where women are closely monitored in case of emergency. These women undergo a series of exams, blood tests, and evaluations before the drug is prescribed in order to ensure that it is an appropriate and effective method for each woman who considers taking it. But in the United States, clinics are often understaffed and may not perform the preliminary blood work or pelvic examinations necessary to better predict success for each individual woman. As my doctor told me, this is a drug still in its discovery phase.

Over half a million women in the United States have taken RU-486 since it was approved in 2000. Between 5 and 8 percent of these abortions fail, and ultimately require vacuum aspirations. All seven of the reported deaths related to this drug have resulted from systemic infections caused by the bacteria *Clostridium sordelli*. In five of these cases, the second drug, Misoprostol, was administered vaginally. The FDA, however, never approved vaginal administration of the drug. They recommended that it be taken orally, and claimed that this is “the only safe administration of RU-486.”

Planned Parenthood does not agree. According to a spokesperson for Planned Parenthood, vaginal insertion of Misoprostol can “offer fewer side effects and also enables women to have medical abortions up to 63 days, as opposed to the 49 days the oral is approved for.” But even so, despite this claim, six years after the drug first became available to American women, Planned Parenthood agreed to the FDA’s demands to adjust their administration of the drug.

In my case, it’s possible that the vaginal insertion of Misoprostol

caused the failure. But it’s also possible that the dosage of Mifepristone and Misoprostol I had been prescribed may not have been enough to end and expel the pregnancy, the milligrams reduced by the clinic as a way to temper the terrible toxicity of the drugs. The FDA recommends that women take 600 milligrams of Mifepristone and 400 micrograms of Misoprostol. I took 200 milligrams of Mifepristone and vaginally inserted 800 micrograms of Misoprostol. The drugs may not have been entirely effective if, as reading I have done suggests, I was pregnant with twins, which run in my family. The reason it took months to see that I was carrying more than tissue is that, as one doctor told me, “reading an ultrasound is like reading the Koran; it’s all in your interpretation.”

When I stood in that kitchen all those years ago and listened to my mother’s abortion story, I had missed the point. Abortion is political, intellectual, and medical, as I had thought then, but for the women who experience it, who agonize over it, it is more than that: it is emotionally scary and physically dangerous, even when it’s legal, modern, and the obvious choice.

9.

The morning I learned I was pregnant—hours after watching the pink squares on that plastic wand fill in—I went to class. It was a graduate seminar on pedagogy and it was boring and dry and I went only as a way to distract myself. This day, however, the professor surprised the class by bringing in William Stafford’s poem, “Traveling Through the Dark.”

In the poem, the speaker drives a river road at night only to stop when he comes across a recently killed doe. The speaker gets out of his car in order to roll the deer—now a “heap”—into a canyon so as not to cause accidents for other drivers. But he notices that the deer is pregnant.

The speaker hesitates after this discovery and then says, “I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—then pushed her over the edge into the river.” The reader also hesitates at this image, at the moment of discovery, and the hush of “hear[ing] the wilderness listen.”

After reading the poem aloud, the professor told the class—all teaching assistants preparing to teach composition classes of our own—

that some students might interpret this as an abortion poem.

“Where is the evidence to suggest this?” Methodically, he shifted the items on his desk.

The class collectively squirmed.

“It’s the last stanza that suggests the speaker, and all of us, are up against something really big, the part where Stafford says, ‘I thought hard for us all,’” one student said.

I thought to myself, what if Stafford means for the speaker to be a woman? I wondered how this changes our reading. The woman speaker contemplates saving the waiting, still-warm fawn. Is she more likely to save the deer? Less likely? Does she understand in a way the male speaker might not, what is at stake?

The odds of this discussion on the day I contemplated ending a pregnancy were eerie, enough to make me believe in patterns and signs, even fate.

The room was silent, except for the uncomfortable shifting of notebooks, legs crossing and uncrossing, throats clearing.

“This is a poem about making decisions in the dark,” the professor said, looking up from his papers. “It’s about how we are never allowed to make perfect decisions.” Everyone nodded, the room quieted. Heather positioned her body in front of me, as a mother might, in an attempt to shield me from the professor’s view. In case I was crying. Which I was.

10.

For months after the abortion, I had this recurring dream:

I am on a bed, a mattress, covered with white sheets. The windows are wide open; wind blows through the room violently, sanguine leaves scatter and make a mosaic of the bed. The would-be father gets up to close the window, says, “Watch out for the bugs, a lot got in through the window.” I sit up and look at the bed, its white sheets pulled tight, and see a small salamander or snake, grotesque and deformed. A black stripe runs down its back and tentacles grip the sheets. I reach for a hairbrush on a nearby shelf and start to smack the animal with the back of the brush; the word that comes into my head is *bash*. I hit it with the brush until life

bleeds out of it and it shrinks and flips over. I look again and see that on its other side, the animal was furry, a miniature kangaroo, or a squirrel, but now, after I killed it, it is simply a husk, a stain.

Even though I knew that having a child with the would-be father was a choice I wasn’t willing to make, I still felt deep remorse. Maybe because it went on for so long, or maybe because I was afraid that I’d lost my opportunity, that I had damaged my body so much that I’d never be able to conceive. Would the fact of having a child with the wrong person be worse than not having a child at all? I thought of this often. I doubted myself often.

Just as my mother’s doctor told her it was unlikely that she would conceive again, so did mine. He’d said that the scar tissue in my uterus, the months of bleeding, and the D&C that followed would make it very difficult to become pregnant when the time came when I actually wanted to be, when the time came when I chose to get pregnant.

I once read that the body stores memory in its cells, memory of injury and trauma and even pregnancy. So if that’s true, then this story, my abortion story, becomes more than an experience that my brain registers and remembers, but a narrative that my body knows on a cellular level even when I stop telling it.

My mother confessed that it was not until she became pregnant with me that she began to forgive herself and move on. And even though I now understand what she means, even though it has been four years since I took RU-486, and even though as I write this, I am nine months pregnant and married to a man I love, the story still feels partially unfinished. Now, on the eve of the birth of my first child, I find myself thinking of that dream, of things we inherit and pass on, and I can’t help but wonder about the life of this baby and the things he will be born knowing in his bones. I can’t help but imagine the choices he will have to make.