

Body Reverence

On Sunday morning, our dog Greta was sick. She's a cattle dog, elderly and beloved, and I let her sleep in the laundry on the winter nights because I worry about how the cold must get into her bones. In the morning on Sunday, when I open the door, I have baby Sophie on my hip - I'm carrying her nappy to the laundry tub - and the smell hits me hard. Greta has vomited in three different places on the laundry floor. I'm glad I'm not pregnant, or I would be vomiting too. She's ashamed: she's tried to hide it in the corners.

One of the things about mother-love is that it is body-love.

Changing nappies. Tenderly wiping away vomit. Coaxing reluctant noses and mouths and ears towards cleaning. A child gives herself to you with complete trust: a child not your own lays back for you to change her nappy, a child presents you with her bottom to wipe, a child opens wide her mouth for the spoon you hold.

Mother-love is a covenant of care.

The night before Greta was sick, I'd woken in the silent moonlight,
knowing there was something wrong. Laid listening, anxious and alone.
And then Emma, who's five, had come. "Mummy my tummy hurts.
Mummy, I think I'm going to be sick."

We kneel over the toilet together, I rub her back. Vomiting is so frightening,
so upsetting, feels so horrible when it's all coming out of you. Afterwards,
I put her in my bed with me to sleep. I listen to her tummy gurgle
ominously, feel afraid to push her back to her side of the bed.

She sleeps, and I lay listening. I feel her feet pushing against my knees.
And as she sleeps and her tummy gurgles, I hear Sophie wake, hear her start
to whinge.

The trouble is, you see, there are different tricks for getting each of them to
sleep. It's best not to go in to Sophie too quickly. *But I don't want Emma
to wake again.* Emma's tummy gurgles, and Sophie's need is getting more
insistent. Should I go in? Should I wait? *Maybe she's hungry? Maybe
she's got out of her wrap? Maybe she's cold?*

Our bodies cold, our bodies hungry, our bodies sick. We are all of us in bodies, all the days of our lives.

Visiting nursing homes, you know this. All those dear old women and men, sitting in their chairs, lunch eaten, dinner still to come – each of them needing to go to the toilet, each of them waiting for someone to take them, each of them able to focus on nothing else.

Our bodies are our rightful place of being. They house our spirits with reverence. They are the pathway to our shared humanity. And the honour of mother-love is that through it, we come to know the body face to face. And knowing this, we know our connection to all humanity, and know too, the pathway to the roots of compassion.

It is Sophie's nappy that has woken her. I change her, wrap her tightly in her sarong-papoose, snuggle her back into her cot. The moon shines still and quiet and Emma doesn't wake.

- Nicola Hoskins, June 2001