

Soft Pink

SANDY POOL

On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing that could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

(I)

In British Columbia, the salmon are dying to be pregnant. They are hurling themselves over jagged rocks through the myriad streams of the Pacific Northwest to spawn and then to die. In Goldstream Provincial Park, millions of salmon appear mid-October, and may be seen for about nine weeks. Little is known about their time in the ocean, or how they find their way to their home pools in their parent streams. All we know is that this secret communion happens each year, and the salmon know exactly what to do.

I want to see the salmon run because a poet-friend tells me the salmon are adorable— like pink pregnant puppies without legs. I take a special bus to Goldstream Provincial Park, where a viewing platform is set up so tourists can observe the salmon without disturbing them. I see other tourists in front of me gasping at the river. When I finally peer over the edge, there is a large pile of pregnant salmon thrashing wildly in a deep crevice between two large rocks, and beside the salmon, two emaciated black bears who have saddled up to the all-you-can-eat salmon buffet.

One bear holds half a salmon in its mouth, and I am just close enough to make out some salmon-colored guts and a single fishy eye. From inside the bear's mouth, the eye is creamy; raw as peeled lychee fruit. "*It's all about instinct, you see?*" A tourist calls to his wife who is making a show of covering her eyes and peering out from between the cracks. "*This is all good, natural stuff! Real National Geographic!*"



Dreaming of catching a fish from dirty water: If you had such a dream, it means that you will have many difficulties and problems at work. It is possible that some important people will make obstacles on your way to success.

Twelve months after seeing the salmon, half-drunk, I am standing in the bathroom of a Walmart in Western New York. I am squatting over the toilet waiting for a little stick to turn blue. In the harsh mall lighting, the lines appear roseate, fleshy. My breasts had been aching for five days straight. At thirty three, I had never been pregnant. I am amazed at how fast soft pink takes hold of my body.

I don't know when I first start calling the baby soft pink. Looking back through my text messages, I know that I started using the 'code' soft pink when texting friends. What I never mention to anyone is that in my head, soft pink is a salmon.

I am living in western New York because it is my first job out of my PhD. I am teaching a heavy course load, but I am overjoyed to have a job. I have worked for twelve years for the chance to teach creative writing.

For the first few weeks of being pregnant, I live in a dense fog, which is really a combination of Propranolol and denial. I teach classes. I take walks. What else is there to do? Soft pink is already in there. At night, I

imagine her thrashing around in a bath of Aperol and amniotic fluid.

My dreams are also full of fish. In one dream, I am chased by a giant salmon that is also able to run on land. I look this up in my dream book, but it doesn't say anything about a salmon with legs. It says if you dream about a fish swimming, then it refers to your subconscious mind. There is also another interpretation of this dream: if a fish is swimming at the bottom of the water, you will be in a dangerous situation. On the other hand, if a fish is swimming on the surface, it is a symbol of wealth and good fortune.

By week three, I am waking up from these dreams to run to the toilet. I work through my nausea, hiding constant puking from my colleagues and students. One day, an unsuspecting student pulls a peanut butter sandwich from his backpack, and I am forced to flee the classroom, as if I am running from a deadly assassin. The student assumes I have a peanut allergy and writes me a four-page apology email, begging for a good grade in my class.

Soft pink is making it harder and harder to work. I am dreaming all night about Godzilla Fish and puking all day. I know I should call the man who helped make soft pink, but I am afraid of telling him we are pregnant with an alcoholic salmon.

Instead, I read books about babies, to try to get the truth into my head. On one website, I even try to look up the size of soft pink at one month. Unfortunately, before I can even figure out what kind of vegetable soft pink looks like, I spot an incredibly misplaced ad for Eggs Benedict, and I close the computer immediately.

I start taking 'coffee-breaks' to throw up in the washroom. My boss mentions I look pale. I laugh it off and say I am preparing for Halloween. On the walk home every day, I pass a bumper sticker that says "pray for the unborn" in the shape of a fetus outlined in rosary beads. I try to keep it together.

When I research St. Bonaventure, I am excited because the poet Thomas Merton used to teach there near the beginning of World War II. It was at St. Bonaventure that Merton decided to join the Trappists. After I arrive, I learn there is a heart-shaped clearing on a mountain in view of campus called ‘Merton’s heart.’ The myth says Merton visited the clearing and the trees fell down when he died. In reality, the hillside had been cleared for oil drilling in the 1920’s, and the trees have since regrown, leaving the bald patch.



Mary Beth Sledzik, St. Bonaventure University Archives

I like hearing myths about Merton, but I know nothing about being Franciscan. I am incredibly nervous about teaching at a Catholic institution. The students know more than I do. They gossip in hushed tones about Merton’s ‘Vagina Hill’ and the shacks on the back of campus where friars go to get drunk. Luckily, I hardly see any friars around, and my colleagues at the university are fairly irreverent. One colleague introduced himself at a cocktail party by saying *“Welcome to St. Basketball. I’m sure you know about the big scandal?”*

I said I did, but he regales me anyway in sordid detail: In 2003, a student on the basketball team is found to only have a welding certificate instead of an Associate’s degree. This leads to widespread firings including the head coach, the athletic director and even the university president, which in turn leads to the suicide of the chairman of the board of trustees....

I take a break to throw up in the dean’s bathroom.



When I emerge, my colleague is still holding court with a different young woman about the institutional basketball scandal. I take the opportunity to sneak out and walk home in the rain, past the sticker of the fetus.

When I get home, I finally call the man who helped make soft pink in a fit of drunken despair. After a long conversation, a pause:

Well, what would you like to do?

I would like to not be pregnant; I say quietly.

I hang up the phone and set up a camping chair under an awning in the backyard. I try to sing a song for soft pink. Something soothing—a lullaby. I put my hands on my belly like the women on TV and I try to imagine soft pink splashing around in the waves, but I don't feel anything.

I'm so sorry soft pink, I say. *I am so sorry.*

The following Monday I am scheduled to teach Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, but I pull it off the syllabus. I can't bring myself to talk about it. I don't want to talk about the INSTITUTION of motherhood—how it is formed or maintained. I don't want to be part of the INSTITUTION of motherhood. I keep re-reading the passage: *My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience. It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness.*

I have never thought of myself as tender. I am the kind of person that people run away from when I finally tear up, because it means all hell has broken loose. I am the kind of writer who flippantly says *my books are my children—what else do I need?* I am the kind of person about which is said: *"she is not soft."* My own mother does not understand me: *You used to be so sweet* she said on her death bed, *but now you've been out in the woods too long.*

For twelve years, I've been enmeshed in the INSTITUTION of academia, stubbornly struggling upstream. All these years later, I'm still struggling, an adjunct, underpaid, overworked. I can barely write. My instinct is still to keep moving. I call my friends Renée and Cari, crying: *I'm still using a god-damned*

Tupperware bin as a kitchen table! I'm still in major default on my student loan! I still have feelings for my ex-girlfriend! I'm still scared of my own vulnerable narcissism! What kind of mother would I BE?!!

Adrienne Rich: *To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work.*

The thing is, I don't want to do the work. I am afraid of the work. Guilty feelings: soft pink in my stomach and I cannot afford to feed her. I do not want her. All I want is to sit alone and write. How could I be so selfish?

Adrienne Rich: *the fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are merely reproducing old forms of intellection.*

I remember the first time I read *Of Woman Born* in undergrad. It moved me deeply. I call my own mother to talk about it. I ask her if she was afraid of her own body—if she actually wanted to be my mother. *More than anything in the world,* she said. *What else is more important?* And then she said: *but I certainly didn't have chronic fatigue syndrome before you showed up.*

More fear: Am I going to become chronically ill? Do I want my child to grow up with an ill mother? Will soft pink resent me the way I resent my mother? What if soft pink inherits a faulty auto-immune system? How will I live with myself?

Dreaming of killing a fish: If you have dreamed of killing a fish, it is a good sign. This dream means that you will defeat your enemies in the near future.

At Goldstream Provincial Park, I did not want the salmon to die, but I stood on the path for a long time thinking about the salmon, admiring their dogged determination to just get on with it. The salmon were

not constantly considering and reconsidering their life choices. They were just swimming and fucking and dying. It was so simple—their fishy lives leading solely to this moment with all the built-in tragedy and circularity of a Wagnerian opera.

It just isn't the right time; I keep telling myself. I need to keep swimming.

(II)

A long time ago, before the stars, my grandmother saw a black inky prophesy. Like Aeschylus, she swam in a dark glen. She was afraid of starfish and their cozy spikes, the groaning algae, the raging lingcod and their silly pyramid schemes.

Each year she became darker and more sullen. She lost most of her trademark sparkle—almost everyone mistook her for a single flashy eye. My grandmother did not understand. She cried: *But I am so beautiful now! Why can't anyone see me?*

When she died, they made her into a blinking star—so we could all admire her best asset.

By the time I was born, I was a jackal of the seas—barking waves into submission. My beauty was hardly more lavish. I took after my mother with her fish cackle and fickle migrations.

Nowadays desire makes us all very brave—we struggle upstream towards any obvious inevitability.

But we cannot remain unscathed. No one can.

Even men's mouths change shape when they enter the river. The scientists cannot understand us.

Ask any salmon their favourite joke, and they'll tell you a riddle: There is a house on earth, which echoes with a clear voice. The house itself resounds, but the guest makes no sound. Yet both the guest and the house run on together.

The answer, of course: both the river and the fish.

(III)

Dreaming of a fish coming out from your body. In most cases, it is a pregnant woman who is dreaming of a fish coming out from her body. This dream indicates that this woman will have a baby girl.

I book a bus to Toronto because I cannot afford an abortion in the U.S. I spend most of this bus ride feeling overwhelmed with gratitude that I can move freely. I can't stop thinking of all the people who do not have this kind of mobility.

I think in particular, of the writer Annie Ernaux in France when abortions were illegal, attempting in vain to self-administer her abortion with a knitting needle. I think of all the people who died because they were so desperate for the choice I have. I think of my Catholic childhood friend, who dropped out of university from shame. I think of my trans friends who are not considered 'real' mothers. I think of the woman in Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* committing infanticide on the front lawn after a severe bout of postpartum depression.

When I arrive at the clinic, there are protesters but they are minimal and keep their distance across the street. One of them is holding a huge red sign with the words "killing centre" with an arrow pointing across the street towards the clinic. Beside him, another man with a sign: "Smile! Your mother chose life! Shouldn't you?" The man who helped make soft pink turns to me and says: *It's really so hard to tell which part of that sign is most offensive.*

At first, I am unsure at how I feel about having the man who helped make soft pink at the appointment. He says a male therapist with an expertise in trauma told him to come. I want him to ask me how I feel about it instead. Regardless, I love him deeply, and cry with gratefulness when he arrives.

The outside of the building is dark grey, nonde-

script. When we go inside, the security guard asks us a series of questions and waves us in. The waiting room looks like the front room of most Victorian houses in Toronto—small parlour with fireplace and the remnants of a bay window. The walls are covered in a thick layer of brilliant white paint. The features of the room remind me that I am in Cabbagetown, named for all the poor Macedonian and Irish immigrants who moved to the neighbourhood in the late 1840's who were said to be so poor, they grew cabbage in their front yards.

The waiting room is filled to the brim with women. Some women are alone, and others are sitting with men, or older children. One girl who looks about thirteen or fourteen is quietly reading *Black Beauty*.

I am called into another room for a consultation. The white-coated doctor peers at me with an air of professional sympathy: So how did it happen? He asks. The question takes me by surprise: *I don't know*, I whisper.

The doctor speaks in a loud masculine voice, and I really wish he would whisper so soft pink can't hear. *I...I was on birth control*. The doctor nods. *Ok... how long has it been since your last period?*

I cannot answer any of his questions. Finally, he uses the ultrasound machine and tells me that soft pink is nine weeks old. This part I find impossible. To me, it had already been years. He says he does not know if soft pink is a girl or a boy. He takes me upstairs.

At the top of the stairs, the nurse takes my blood pressure. *Oh*, she says...*you're one of those*. She looks over at me and giggles nervously at the look of panic on my face. *What I mean is you look cool as a cucumber, but your pulse is high*. I laugh, mostly from awkwardness. *I went to theatre school*, I say.

The operating room is unexceptional except for a map of the world hanging in the right corner. I try

to see where the Pacific Ocean meets the river, but I cannot find it. I am asked to lay down on the bed, and I do. I am asked to hold still, and I do. I am told I am being given the freezing. The drugs make me dizzy and confused. I flinch. The nurse holds my hand while the doctor tells me about how he always wanted to be a poet. I tell him most poets wish they'd gone to medical school. Poetry is just another institutional beast, I tell him. We both wince.

In the recovery room, I try to stand too quickly and immediately pass out. Twenty minutes later, I come to and I am sitting in a circle of women. Old women, tired women, young women. I do not know these women, but two women are crying, and I start to cry too. We talk about the INSTITUTION of motherhood. We talk about our grief, our feminisms. I see suddenly that my pregnancy is no longer an event, but a duration—what to do when all there is to do is sit and talk and wait and know soft pink is gone?

Annie Ernaux: *I had given birth to both life and death. For the first time I felt caught up in a line of women, future generations would pass through us. These were grey, winter days. I floated in the midst of the world, bathed in light.*

I step out of the clinic into white November brightness. On Gerrard, dead leaves skim the gutters like dusty tumbleweeds. The air is sharp and the city still reeling, always reeling in its own chaos of broken water mains, distant sirens.

On the way to Yonge, I pass my old stomping grounds—the hassle-free clinic and a coffee shop I love. Further along, I pass Humber College, where I used to teach, which was constructed on the grounds of the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital which was built using the labour of psychiatric inpatients. I also pass Allen Gardens, where I know Oscar Wilde gave a lecture in May of 1882. Allen Gardens, I later learn, also houses Toronto's largest flock of pigeons and was the site of the

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Allen Gardens Riot of 1965, when it was announced that the self-proclaimed leader of the Canadian Nazi party was scheduled to give a speech. I want to think about soft pink, but she feels far away in a river I cannot name. I distract myself by thinking about buildings—their sordid histories, the way in which power is maintained and transferred behind the walls.

Later when I am all alone, I sing a quiet song for soft pink:

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
till China and Africa meet
and the river jumps over the mountain
and the salmon sing in the street.

I marvel at her angular fins forging ahead, past the abandoned mine entrances, the railway trestles, the drupe-laden dogwood. I admire her plump spotted belly brushing against gravel, her honey-rimmed eyes flashing in muddy water.

She is painfully elegant in her navigations, always moving, inching towards infinity.

In the deep glen where she lives, all things are older than man.

She hums a soft pink mystery.

