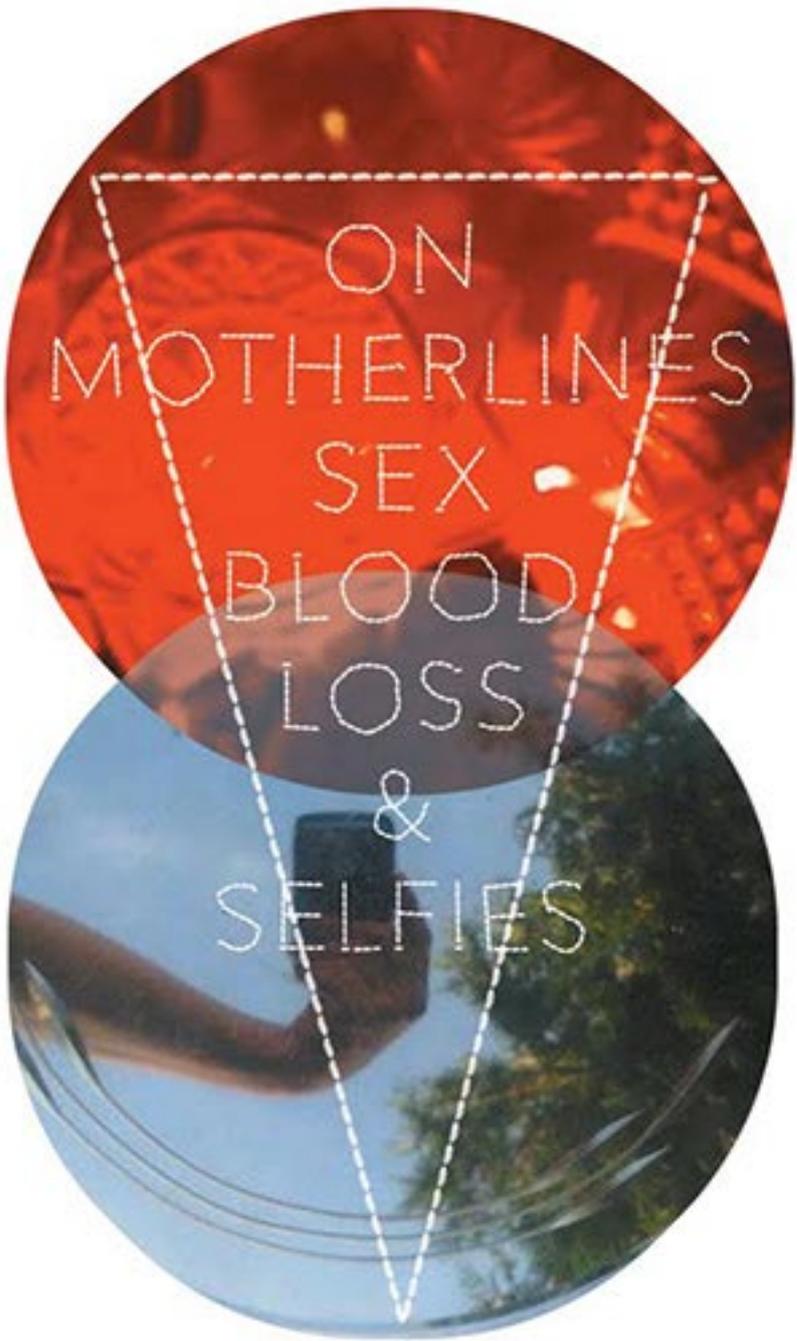


HER PARAPHERNALIA



ON
MOTHERLINES
SEX
BLOOD
LOSS
&
SELFIES

MARGARET CHRISTAKOS

FIRST EDITION
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Do thine own thing.

—MJC

paraphernalia: Arrived into use in the mid-17th century, denoting property owned by a married woman *apart* from her dowry, for example her own things...derived from medieval Latin, based on Greek *parapherna* 'property apart from a dowry', from *para* 'distinct from' + *pherna* (from *phernē* 'dowry').

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... on
... thinking sh
... what was hers she needed to
get a handle on her own stuff
and soon wake the hell up honey

It is July 2012. I turn fifty. My daughter has recently turned fifteen. Earlier the same year, at the age of eighty, my mother has suffered an ischemic stroke that has deprived her of the ability to create or receive unjumbled language; she speaks a new language for which there will be no reliable translation. I have begun to interpret her facial gestures and the varied affective sounds she makes to alert me as to her opinion or disposition. Oddly, the words she has retained, from the difficult garble of paraphasia, are unmistakable expressions of her love for and pleasure at seeing my siblings, my children and me. My mother loves me; for the first time this is not a happenstance camouflaged by irony, sarcasm, aloofness and fatigue. My mother finds me beautiful; her adoration seems to bubble up to meet me, along with kisses and nuzzles.

I hold her hand and stroke her skin. I comb her hair. I assist with small tasks around meals and page through favourite artists' monographs with her as she oohs appreciatively, with recognition and appraisal, at examples of the visual art she has deeply loved her whole adult life, but with which she especially began to identify after becoming a practicing artist as her four kids grew to teenagehood and began, one by one, to leave.

I have never before had such physical access to my mother. To be with her in this debacle is to have her and be had by her, an original phase of my life as a woman, daughter and girl. I glimpse a palpable umbilical rope that moves from the middle of my body through the middle of hers and which extends toward the other women of her lineage, from whom I am descended, but with whom I felt little attachment or identity.

Growing up I had an easier physical proximity to my Greek father's mother and sister; they became my notion of physicalized matrilineal

fundament. I could go to them and be hugged, comforted, fed, remarked upon. Far more than my mother's maternal British line, I facially resembled them and their kin; it seemed easy for them to embrace me. They loved me outwardly and let me know this.

My father's mother was infirm and delicate, often bedridden. Her husband had surprised everyone with an early death when she was fifty-three, and by the time I knew her she was perennially fragile, yet elegant, with graceful manners. I did not perceive her as a sexual woman, as she never remarried, nor did she seem to have had any subsequent romantic life after being widowed. Though she lived beside a freshwater lake, with a private beach, I never saw her in a bathing suit, nor even with bared calves. Sitting at the edge of her double bed or in her living room, I would stroke her skin and touch her hair. We shared quiet murmurs and unselfconscious hand pats of mutual affection.

My father's sister, after whom I was given my middle name Anne, after the age of fifty moved in a gradual expansion toward precarious obesity. I perceived her as having a large presence but no sexuality, or a sexuality that was arrested in a love of showy costume jewellery and brightly printed tent-dresses and capes, some velvet and fur-trimmed. There was indirect family lore about her life before she was fifty. A strikingly beautiful teenager and young woman, busy with church groups and her eventual elementary school teaching career, she had taken the apparently tragic turn of passionately falling for only unavailable men. A cousin, a priest. Like many daughters, she seemed to have been in love, in some overburdened way, with her own father, who reportedly adored and overindulged her.

By the time I knew her, her sexual body seemed blotted out of existence, or ballooned inside of gallons of soft proxy. Her dark brown eyes sparkled; she loved to take polaroids of me and my siblings, click, gah-zhoom. She did like to swim, paddling in a kind

of slow breaststroke, head held aloft above the water, and I remember her sensual pleasure in the waves under glinting sunlight as her physical encumberment lifted into a bobbing, playful immersion in the lake I loved and grew up swimming in, as often as possible, my entire girlhood, until I left my hometown at the age of seventeen. I remember the wide breasts she displayed in the large bathing suit structure, which also had a skirt over the top of her thighs. I recall her arms and upper chest exposed to the elements, and her hefty figure emerging onto the beach, with her head and the manicured thick dyed-black curls arranged into a still-dry upward “do.” I felt feminine kinship with her in our shared interest in the lake, but registered the truce she’d made with its possible pleasures.

My own mother did not like to swim. She didn’t like the water, having nearly drowned under its shallow blue membrane when she was still a toddler. By odd coincidence her Anglo and American parents had rented the beach property on Sudbury’s Ramsey Lake from my father’s Greek parents, and she had stumbled and gone under the water, staring up through it for several minutes as near-drowners do, until someone (I don’t know who) noticed and smashed her up into air again. As an adult she also reported having a kind of allergic skin reaction to being in the sun and after the age of fifty preferred to cover her arms, wearing men’s cotton shirts with buttoned cuffs, diligently sealing in the cleavage area and upper chest as well. There seemed to be something foreign about physically exposing what my culture indicated from every other direction was suggestive of female sexuality.

Still, I knew she was a passionate woman. About her earlier life, I knew that in particular she had been an official lead fan of Frank Sinatra, organizing other casual fans with timely updates on sightings and personal goings-on and providing attentive micro-reportage of his international performance activity. She was also exceedingly generous in creating group spirit in her work as a

bookkeeper. On more than one occasion as a prepubescent, I sat at our kitchen counter hearing her rehearse truly wonderful rhyming poems she had penned for her office parties; charisma and drive rouged her cheeks and escalated the velvet tones of her laughter.

She was intense, involved in her own manifestation, yes, but also maternally hell-bent and willing to stay up all night with me to make sure the last hookable rug stitch on a family studies project was in by deadline's dawn, or the last rhyming quatrain was secured on my (our, really) Grade Six epic poem about Jeanne Mance. I got the kudos at school, but knew the collaborations had been intimate, thrilling and worthy. She dutifully conveyed a puritan work ethic, yes, but also something more subversive: how the night's middle could serve art, above all, and that time was malleable.

While I was immersed in completing my own high school career, there she was, barely five feet tall, existing within one notable shimmer after the next, becoming expert in whatever new art vocation she took up, using her whole body to establish a ceramics studio in the basement, to complete late-night design assignments while she undertook a college visual arts program, to peel off moist hand-laid paper page after page of freshly stroked watercolour paintings. I remember her hauling out garbage bags full of gorgeous wool she happened to have on hand from her weaving practice—she had a six-foot poundable loom in the middle of our living room, and was obsessed equally by complex patterns of math and hue—in order to set me up to crochet my university boyfriend an entire blanket our first Christmas holiday apart. She seemed infinite.

At the same time she often seemed vehement and lonely, held in a silent marital standoff within our home, much as happened in my own marriage over its final difficult years. In her public life she was widely known for her bohemian originality, yet from a young age I had observed her obligatory tea-time propriety and daughterly

agreeableness on visits to her British mother's large and decorous living room. By the time I was ten or so she was rarely a visitor to my Greek grandmother and aunt's small mainframe cottage. There seemed to have been a split, or many splits, and I felt these in my own confused fidelities. As my mother became more of a practicing artist, I longed to emulate her; but more and more I didn't know how to do that and to remain connected to touch and sexuality.

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Instead, through my first decade of romances, I would get wrapped up in someone, some ordinary guy mostly, elevate him to sex-god status, and then complicate the attachment, whether requited or not, by becoming newly or additionally interested in someone else. It wasn't exactly a polyamorous inclination. It was in some ways a refusal to be limited, a mode of staying available. I liked the idea of being fluid and flexible, of migrating among various affections, and of rationalizing over and over that good love was expansive, exponentially propagative and the enactment of a kind of ethical plenitude in the world.

I also, though, can track a mini-history of enamoured mutual liaisons that veered toward an outcome of eventual unrequited sexual love. It was as if the movement from pleasure to the deprivation of the sexual love object was a turn-on almost more than any other factor. It was a diversion that led me to poetic writing, I see now.

[APR 23 2015]

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From 2012 to the present day is three years. It is April 2015, and for most of the last nine months I have written barely a creative word, certainly not a word within the bleak and tumultuous midlife stage of my motherlines itinerary. In some respects the lapse in writing has reflected the state of shock and languagelessness brought on by the treacherously levelling end of my twenty-three-year-long partnership. Well, we raised three glorious children together; the heart lifts to admire all that was creative about the marriage.

At the same time I have been adjusting to the strange metabolic flatness of menopause. I have watched a small troughline form on one side of my brow, as if a miniature riverbed has been dessicated of the clear-flowing stream that used to replenish automatically. Truth are the peaks and valleys of my mood chart. Almost gone—for the moment—are those spontaneous tremors of turn-on that always characterized my physical life; now if I stop and notice a sudden moistened charge in my groin, it may be with as much scientific inspection as bold, unedited pleasure.

I am only fifty-two. These emotions seem like they should belong to a woman in her seventies or eighties. But no, now I see, to become fifty as a cisgendered woman can mark a scraping off of sexuality and subjectivity that, no matter how much prepared by a hurrah feminist intentionality for agency, operates like a self-aware social trouncing. Did my mother feel these losses and erasures as she entered her sixth decade, sleeping separately in the house, all of her children entering adulthood, myself at age nineteen involved in a serious live-in relationship in Toronto? I saw my mother as vibrant, full of life and rich in community, eclectic, powerful, a small electric ball of opinion, always changing, actively learning, fearless, driven, unsleeping, free. I did not identify her as lonely, or ailing, or missing sex. I didn't have such words to attach to the older women of my

family, although it seems day-plain to me now that nobody was getting any.

I felt their looking upon me, though, as if my luck would be unconstrained. By 1979, I was poised for movement—away from northern Ontario’s provincialism, toward the frank chaos of contemporary art, a metropolitan life in Toronto, the freedom to explore lovers and garner sexual attention. When at twenty-two I told my mother I was going to marry the man I had made the blanket for—even though she was very fond of him—her pallor dropped a few shades. She asked, wasn’t I a little young? Always discreet, she did not argue aloud for me to protect the unlimited future she viewed me as having as a young female artist, but her tone was clear. I would be making an error.

It’s true that my development as an artist was starting to be vibrant and daring. Along the way I took creative writing courses, especially one with bpNichol that deeply influenced my open-form aesthetic, and recognized a talent for the poetic. I had pleasure in being before audiences, hosting small groups into aroused aesthetic encounters with language. And I slept with a woman and recognized that my experience with staving off monogamous clarity was rooted in a deeper desiring multiplicity, that I shouldn’t delimit my location, where I might go, and how I might come.

That early marriage ceremony was deferred, and my mother’s awareness that I was bisexual prompted a muting breakage between us that never quite got addressed, although a novel sprung from the erasure. Sex from that point was better undiscussed; its intricate details were unnecessary to share; something fuzzily self-shaming had entered my identity when I went back to my hometown. I have written about becoming unreadable as a poet whose language work (or “play,” as it is so often diminutized) seemed too experimental to paraphrase or organize with conventional literary legitimacy.