**Vignettes - Season 3, Episode 3: Motherhood - Transcript**

**Millie Baylis:**

Hi there and welcome back to Vignettes, the EWF storytelling podcast.

My name is Millie and I’m the Program Coordinator here at the Emerging Writers’ Festival. I’m recording from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay respect to their elders past and present, and to the elders of wherever this podcast might reach.

For today’s episode, we’ll hear readings themed around motherhood from Tabitha Lean, Ella Baxter and Gabriella Munoz.

Motherhood is a subject that seems to come in and out of fashion in literature, but it’s something in which almost everyone has an experience or feeling. And because it’s Spring, and we’re joined by Mother Nature, we wanted to hear more stories on mothers and mothering.

For this episode, we looked for new stories of motherhood by emerging writers that we’re perhaps a little less used to hearing. We asked three writers, who are also mothers, to share whatever story they wanted.

So today we’ll hear one mother reflect on the pain of being separated from her daughter while in prison; a mother trying to talk about the pandemic with her children, and a new mother’s first days after giving birth in lockdown. Here they are.

First, Tabitha Lean. Tabitha Lean is a Gunditjamara woman, storyteller, poet and abolition activist, and we feel really lucky to have her on Vignettes today. Please do go check out her really important work if you haven’t before, you can find more of her writing at therevolutionware.com or through her Twitter at @haveachattabs.

Here is Tabitha.

**Tabitha Lean:**

Suffering Separation

My name is Tabitha, or as my ancestors know me, Budhin Mingaan. I am a Gunditjmara woman born and raised on Kaurna yerta. I am a formerly incarcerated woman, a mother, a partner, a lover, a writer, a poet and an abolition activist.

Here is my piece: suffering separation.

My daughter was 7 years old when I went to prison. She was in grade 2. She still called me Mummy and held my hand to cross the street. We played tea parties, baked together and painted trinkets. She loved listening to me read stories and trips to the library. I plaited her hair every morning for school, and she’d started tying her own shoelaces, finally.

Then on that day in August, they took me from her. She came home from school, and I was gone. They had disappeared me into the system: that cruel and unforgiving place, the violent colonial frontier they call prison.

My dad met her at the front door and with a grave face told her I wasn’t coming home for a very long time, and she would be coming to live with him. Her two big brothers would not. One was to start boarding school, and the other moved into student accommodation in the city. She, with a small bag packed with her most treasured things, was being moved to the country: mid north to be exact, where there is no mains water, no mobile phone range and no streetlights.

Her days were filled with new challenges – a new small country school, making friends, adjusting to life in the country, being away from her brothers, sleeping on her own for the first time, new routines, a grandfather that became her guardian – and her nights were filled with tears - sad, lonely sobs and dreams of better days.

I would ring her every day. I’d line up for sometimes two hours for that sweet 10-minute phone call. Mainly, I would cry silently as I listened to her recount her day. I’d smile as she told me she loved me more than anything, and I’d howl when she’d ask, “when can you come home mama?” She’d meet every one of my cries with “don’t worry mummy, we’ll be together again soon”. Every day I wrote to her. I’d draw crazy elaborate and colorful pictures for her, decorate the envelope and send her poems I had written just for her – my small declarations of love which I hoped would stave off the pain of separation.

And as each rejection for my release on to home detention came, she’d cry and say it wasn’t fair. She’d tell me she wanted her family back together, that she missed me and her brothers. At our visits, I would bring her twisties and coke that I bought on my weekly buy. We’d colour in, and I’d hold her tight so that the love I was transferring from my heart to hers would last the fortnight until I saw her again.

Then one day, they said yes. Yes, I was going home – still shackled, but home. We moved into a new house, her brothers came home, and life as a family began again. The scars of separation were ever-present as we navigated this new life, but we were together. Those first few nights we all slept on mattresses on the floor in the lounge. We watched SpongeBob, ate fish and chips and talked about all the things we would do together now that I was home. I fell asleep each night with a smile on my face because we were a family again.

But life and happy endings aren’t all peaches and cream. There were teething problems. I had to learn to navigate the community corrections system, applying weekly for passes to take the kids to school or medical appointments. I had to rediscover my role as their mum returning after two years of daily absence. We had to start again, and without a job, this was tough. And my baby missed her Grandad, she missed his dogs, she missed the school, her friends, and life in the country.

I want you to know the pain and trauma and chaos prisons wreak when they disappear a parent into their cages. I want you to know that the scars of separation exist, they are real. I wear them

on every surface of my skin…

…buried deep within my pores rests wells of devastation, and pools of desperation.  There are well worn tracks of worry, ridges of broken promises and shattered dreams so deep fear rests comfortably in the ruts of melancholy.  There are mountains built upon my greatest torments that cast the shadows of doubts and discontent through the valleys of woe and floods of sorrow threaten to drown the anguish trapping trauma in the grotto of my soul.

My body is plagued with fury, trapped by the grinding stress and caught in the continuous loop of problems and punishment. Vulnerability cowers in the corner burrowing into my heart, while negativity makes its home in the furrows of my impatience, all the while animosity builds and fills the caves with resentment, leading to cycles of self-loathing that have you choking on the venom of hatred and antipathy. Guilt hangs off me like a second skin, plastered by my shame.

For every scar there is a thin line of stitches where someone has fracked through my body’s armour to repair the irreparable wound - war wounds that only bleed to remind me of the pain of separation; the thieving of time that can never be returned.

And, even at the day’s end where the earth in my bones returns to the ground, where my ashes turn to dust and my carbon meets compost and I know days no more in that long and lonely rest, the only reprieve from sleepless nights and pacing anger, sweating stresses and itching worries…

even then I will not be healed,

even then I will not be whole,

even then I will not be free

of the scars of separation.

Every day I live to regret every single life choice that imprinted those same scars on my young daughter’s body.

Because of her, I am changed.

Because of her, I am loved.

Because of her, I am Mama.

Always, Mama.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you, Tabitha.

Next, we have Gabriella Munoz.

Gabriella Munoz is a Mexican-Australian award-winning writer and editor based in Melbourne, Australia. Her essays and translations have been published in *The Victorian Writer*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Istor*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and many other places. She writes about migration, motherhood, adoption and popular culture.

**Gabriella Munoz:**

Hi there. My name is Gabriella Munoz. I’m a Mexican-Australian writer, editor and a mother of two wonderful children. When I write about motherhood, I talk about my adoption, my relationship with my adoptive mother and my childhood in Mexico City, but this piece is about my children.

Last year, when all this started, my children were five and three and I didn’t know how to talk to them about the pandemic.

Instead, we discussed our feelings and cried, but we also danced and played. We got colourful kites. We imagined they were airplanes, dragons, even submarines.

But the seasons changed, and we packed the kites away.

The doomsday clock stroke 100 seconds to midnight.

It’s been over a year. Days blend with each other like when I was a child and my week started and ended with Sunday mass.

I think of my firstborn, so impossibly small. I thought he wouldn’t make it. Tears, fear and love filled the postpartum period.

The days blended during those first weeks, like they do now. I have forgotten most details about those early days.

I print photos to keep memories alive, repeat the same stories over and over: ‘you said *banananana*. Your first word was Dad. You only slept in your pram.’

But I don’t need photos to remember all the last days. Last day in my belly. An imprint. You are in an incubator so far away from me. No one told me how fragile you were until there were no more painkillers dripping into my veins.

Last day at the hospital. Last day in your cot. Last day I breastfed you. Last day before your sister arrived.

The last day before this pandemic mess, you went to school and your sister to childcare. We had a routine, and we woke up and you were ready to go out, see your friends, come back home with new stories to share. And then you woke up and it was different. I pretended to be a horse, a knight, a monster, a mountain, a dancer, a plush toy, even a radio station. We played every day until I fell asleep reading books and you tried to open my eyes. ‘Mummy, keep reading.’

Mothers, we try to be enough.

Growing pains. Beginnings and ends.

I see you drift away. I become an anchor.

Mothers. Anchors. Mothers drowning. Mothers missing their mothers, their grandmothers.

I miss my abuela.

My daughter plays with a Frida Kahlo doll. She tells me she wants to be a mother.

I ask her why and she says ‘I don’t know but I’ll go to work and you’ll take care of the babies.’ She laughs. I give her a hug. Smile. Then I remember the doomsday clock.

Lately, I’ve been thinking about mass. My abuela used to take me every Sunday.

A restless child praying for the mass to end, for the saints to take their eyes off her, for the Virgin Mary to forgive her sins, for the priest to just stop with his end-of-the-world sermons.

The little girl at church clasps her hands. She is scared of the Kingdom Come. Does stealing chocolate mean she’ll go to hell?

My children don’t go to mass.

Abuelaused to buy me treats outside the church, leftover communion *obleas* and ice-cream. The world wasn’t ending. Guilt and fear forgotten.

Now, after my children finish their school work, we get treats.

All is forgotten – momentarily. We chat with the shop owner who then hands them salted caramel ice-cream and rainbow sorbet. Band-aids fall.

I see my children wave hello and goodbye to their friends. Their sad eyes fixed on a computer screen, the exhausted look of other parents monitoring the sessions, helping with words and numbers.

We go to the park. I hold their hands, sometimes tighter than when they were learning to walk. I can’t protect them from the unknown.

At the park we pretend to be dinosaurs.

My son asks why dinosaurs died. My daughter listens. There are more questions, ‘did dinosaurs have Covid?’. I sputter: ‘it was a meteor.’

We talk about meteors. I shift the conversation to shooting stars. *Protect, protect, no doomsday, no fear, no apocalypse; we are not dinosaurs.*

‘But mum,’ my daughter says, ‘will a shooting star kill us like the dinosaurs?’. ‘No, no’, I say. ‘I didn’t mean that.’

‘Shooting stars are for wishes. When you see one, ask for a wish.’

‘I want three hundred dolls,’ she says.

All is forgotten until five minutes before bed.

And then more lies. My *abuela* always made me confess my sins. If she forced me to go today, what would I tell the priest? ‘Father, I have lied to my children because they fear COVID-19 and mass extinctions. Are three Hail Marys enough this time around?’

We break virus-shaped pinatas, sanitise our hands and wear masks. My son complains about his glasses fogging. Me too. We make it a game; pretend we are snorkelling. They miss school. The end of *their* world.

My grandmother asked me who I would spend the end of the world with? I was eight. I told her I would like to spend it with her. She’s disappeared from my dreams.

There have been fire, floods, earthquakes and plagues.

My children ask, ‘Will I see my *abuelitos* again?’.

‘Yes.’ I lie to them. Guilt.

Sunday mass taught me guilt. It didn’t teach me survival skills.

It seems like the end of the world and you little ones are here with me. I hold guilt and broken promises as one holds a dead bird. We have love, kindness. Sadness too. I mother your sadness.

It feels like the end of the world. As they know it, as I know it. Mothers mothering their children’s sadness. I close my eyes. The world is still fucked. Mothers with broken hearts, torn apart from their mothers and abuelas*.*

We manage to smile. Perhaps there is a silver lining.

But it’s still 100 seconds to midnight.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you Gabriella.

And last but not least, we have Ella Baxter.

Ella Baxter is a writer and artist living in Melbourne. Her debut novel, New Animal was released in March this year – which I highly recommend you go and buy to read if you haven’t already, I can confirm it’s really beautiful. She is currently working on her second novel, *Woo Woo.*

**Ella Baxter:**

Afterbirth

Each time I open the freezer door, I see my placenta in a biohazard bag. I kept it because I didn’t want to lose any more parts of myself on the operating table, and so I arrived home from hospital clinging to both the bag and my baby. Now it sits amongst the blueberries and peas, waiting.

The other day, when my baby was calm and good, I held the placenta up to him and said, *Look my love- remember this?* And he responded by stretching his mouth wide and squealing. I quickly put it back, but his pink face had already crumpled and his legs had begun to kick. When he is upset, all my atoms fire and I turn to liquid tits first. Milk streams down my stomach, soaking into the elastic of my pants, wrapping me in an aqueous belt and I throw towels down to protect the floors. Sometimes I wonder if he remembers his birth the same way I do.

During my labour, everyone went off script and I was smote. I felt completely conquered when blood clots the colour of sunsets and the size of eggs fell from my body each time his head hit my tailbone. Lying on a table while seven people in masks cut my tiny son out of me was the strangest abduction of my life. And now, I find that all the memories surrounding his birth have suspended in time, like a series of alternate worlds trailing far out behind me, and I have attached myself to them, and I wear them like a tail.

On good days, I can relentlessly bid and lose on eBay for as long as I like. My baby sleeps in a cot with wheels, and I roll him through the house so that he is always next to me because we both like it that way. As soon as he wakes and wants to play, I try to take the tail of memories off. I pretend to eat his feet, then sing him songs, then lift him up to the window to show him the demented magpie larks. When he falls back asleep, he is a heavy love in my arms and it feels like my only job is to hold him, and I can do it well. I play music and drink wine on good nights. I have unending showers and plait my long hair in peace.

On bad days, I sit on the couch and look out the window at the useless, loud birds for hours, while I breastfeed for hours. My son likes to hold onto a lock of my hair, or a button on my shirt as if keeping me in place. When he complains about invisible and unknown things, and the day seems like it quadruples in length, I thread him into his pram and push him through the back streets of Brunswick. On bad days, I make every effort not to think about his birth at all.

I don’t yet own a shovel but I live near a park. At dawn or dusk or at the times my son decides are not his preferred hours to be inside, I walk around its circumference looking for somewhere to bury the placenta. I stand on the roots of a tall date palm and let him touch his fingers to the trunk because this just might be the spot. I kiss his rockmelon head, and tell him he is perfect, and that motherhood is both sacred and unholy, and that he is loved, and that I suspect he knew me properly - before all of this - before I even knew him at all.

**Millie Baylis:**

Thank you so much Ella, Gabriella and Tabitha for these pieces today.

We hope you enjoyed these readings, and if you did please do join us again next week for our second last episode of this season, *Bloom*, which coincidentally includes a couple more stories that relate to mothering… Also, please tell your friends about the podcast if you enjoyed it or drop us a review!

Just a reminder that the open artist call-out for the 2022 Emerging Writers’ Festival is now open. You can apply to be part of our festival on our website, and applications close on the 3rd of December.

This podcast was audio produced by Joe Buchan,and our theme music was created by Thu Care. You can find out more about the team behind this podcast and the artists featured in this episode on the EWF website at emergingwritersfestival.org.au

END EPISODE.