

A History of my Relationship with my Mother in Twenty-three Arguments about the Laundry

In my parents' house the second-smallest room and my mother's every sixth waking thought is devoted to the laundry

Growing up a pair of my jeans frayed at the heel, a favourite jumper, would disappear for months it seemed, having been sucked into the faintly musty mountains of colour-coded, fabric-sorted, care-instruction-heeded, but as yet undone laundry

I started to wonder why, as a not exactly lazy teenager, I had never helped with the laundry

I started to wonder why there was always so much laundry

Until in my thirty-fourth year I moved back into my parents' house, though not my childhood room, bringing one husband one newborn and an awful lot of laundry

I didn't understand then how laundry didn't mean in any normal sense just laundry

I started to find neat piles of folded pastel sleepsuits pressed to perfection, or strung up in the airing cupboard on tiny hangers saved, it seemed, since my own babyhood, boxed and shipped halfway across the world, and something tugged in my stomach that wasn't about laundry

In time, it became, *Mummy, please don't do our laundry*

I would find her a staring, agitated zombie coming down for breakfast at nearly lunch and she told me that she couldn't sleep at night because she was waiting for the tumble drier to finish its cycle at some point past three, and if she did not wait for its *beep beep beep* there's always a chance it would burst into hidden arcing flames smouldering from the compressed greyish fluff spun from all our mortal hair and laundry

It transpired that she has an unshakeable belief in the need to load the drum no more than a quarter of the way, despite my protestations about killing the planet with laundry

Pushing the pram through the twilit park to let off steam my husband would growl, *She's crazy, it's not just the laundry*

I sought to illustrate to her that putting more than one towel in at once would not result in disaster, flood, famine, or destruction of said laundry

As I said it, I recalled how friends at school had laughed at my pronunciation of that word, *ta-well*, with two syllables, picked up from a non-native speaker mother whose fingerpads were etched with brown

cracks like drought-struck fields because of the sheer graft (*I'm not a wife, I'm a slave*) she devoted to household work like the laundry

Eventually the corner-heaps of socks and sheets and god knows what got too much and I spent a weekend with an eight-week-old in the forget-me-not sling at my chest, bending and lifting, bending and lifting, my heavied leaky body to cycle through load after load of fucking laundry

I worked my way down through ancient strata of crumpled clothing, socks stiffened as if in Everest permafrost, trouser legs splayed like victims at Pompeii, recognising revenants, fashion hauntings, till I reached towards the bottom a school cricket cap spattered with black spots and blotches my brother must have last worn shortly before puberty, which he'd tipped into the wicker basket and lost to the psychic trauma archaeology of laundry

In the eighth or ninth month we went away for a week, desperate for space, and my mother shrank to teddy size a woollen shrug of mine slung from the back of the guest-room door, putting it through a hot spin-cycle because *You said your clothes didn't need any special care, so I thought I'd help put it in the laundry*

In more time, it became if she would stay out of ours, I would stay out of her laundry

I am still amazed by the soul's opacity towards itself, as illustrated by our adventures in passive aggressive laundry

Stood in front of the ancient Miele dryer one night, she told me that as a child of five or six, when her mother couldn't afford to look after her and she was farmed out to live with other families, the way she earned her keep was to be in charge (she gestured to a welt I'd never noticed on her wrist) of their ironing, her small fist steering one of those old bronzed hollow ones loaded up with orange coals (a detail so absurd it almost made me laugh), and all the other family's assorted laundry

Sometimes, glancing up from his paper at the hangers perched on every knob, their untenanted shirts, my dad used to say, *This house looks like a Chinese laundry*

If there is a god who flits about and pities such shopworn tumbled souls as ours let it be the god of laundry

Now that I, husband, child one and now two, have our own home again, and she has hers, I think of her at night still sitting at the morning room table alone at three-thirty, in the reading lamp's illuminated pool, flipping through the *Radio Times* with a bevelled pink highlighter waiting for the *beep beep beep* too high-pitched for her ageing ears to hear that signals an end to the latest round of laundry