

New Life Revisited: Dante's Traumatic Imagination

published in American Poetry Review

New Life Revisited—Beatrice and the Traumatic Imagination

I

Why do we read literature? I'd spent much of my life reading, but in my mid-thirties suddenly I couldn't answer that question. I stopped reading, or, rather, I read in a completely different way; I read *about* things. I read to learn, worried that literature simply repeat the traumas, the violence and amnesia of our culture's history.

I was married, had two healthy children, and was working as a writer and teacher. But I felt haunted. In the past years, I had been absorbed in an intense process of self-discovery, and at thirty-six I began to recall the trauma of an early childhood sexual assault that I had blocked out.

As I unraveled my own past and began to question the foundations of how I had set up my life and my understanding of myself, literature seemed like both a place of re-iteration of my own—and our culture's problems—and a vehicle of escapist fantasy.

I wanted instead to stand in the present moment fully, in my own female body, with clarity, to free myself from the entanglements of the past. But in order to do that, I needed first to go back to that past. And in order to go back to the past, I needed to look again at my own history of reading and of the imagination, which had both given me so much and had also left so much important information out.

WG Sebald's *Austerlitz* is in part about this very problem: how does our imagination both point us to the past and protect us from it? How do we make sense of the injustices, pain and suffering of the world? And how is the history of art related to these personal and larger social stories?

In Sebald's novel, the eponymous main character has spent his life studying the history of architecture and the relationship between buildings and history. In the architecture of the grandiose train station in Brussels, for

example, Austerlitz sees the barbarous, almost unthinkable brutality of King Leopold's destruction of the Congo. Civilization and its great monuments speak of violent power that exacts great suffering. This power at once supports the culture and wants to be glossed over and forgotten.

It is only when Austerlitz is in late middle age that he realizes that his fascination with architecture, and with train stations in particular, stems from his own forgotten journey on a train during the kindertransport. At the age of five, Austerlitz traveled by train from Prague and from everything he loved to a train station in England, where a new, lonely life, cut off from its past, began. Only after more than four decades does Austerlitz realize that though he has spent his whole life studying in different forms the history and monuments of European trauma, he has importantly avoided Twentieth century history and anything that might bring him into contact with his own specific traumatic memories that were put away because they were too unbearable to process.

As we become stronger, the unbearable becomes more bearable. What we have blocked off begins to become integrated.

Like Austerlitz, only when I was strong enough could I begin to remember what had happened to me. Even then it often seemed all but unbearable. And I felt that traumatic experience separated me, kept me apart.

This resistance, this blocking off, and this sense of isolation are all common symptoms of trauma. But in reality, traumatic experience—even as it is defined by its unusualness, its breaking of normalcy—is not an unusual human experience. Rather, trauma is one of the foundational experiences that mark what it means to be part of our world, especially in a history, as the history of the civilized world has been, that is so deeply marked with violence and that at the same time so often covers over that violence.

But as we name our traumatic experiences we are able to see more clearly our own stories and our collective history. As we are able to see and name what has often gone unseen, blocked off, invisible in plain sight, around us all the time, we are able to begin to re-integrate our stories both individually and as a society and begin to heal.

I wanted change, and so I stopped reading in the ways I had read for most of my life. After all, one way to change a life so full of reading is to do other things. But over time, I came back to literature. I came to see that literature

also can help us name our traumas and see more clearly, though, or perhaps *because*, literature, like the train station in Brussels, sometimes seems to be simply participating in and growing out of a culture of brutality without naming it properly and without working towards transformation. But eventually I came to believe that it was my reading and writing of literature, my re-reading and re-writing, and even my resistance to reading that in large part allowed me to read and re-read, write and re-write my own story.

As in so many things, the more consciously we read, the more the reading itself becomes not just a re-iteration of our history, but a mirror that allows us, if we look closely, to engage in reflective, transformative change. If we go to the places that allure us in literature, we also often find the places that we resist, the places that we do not understand, the places that are blank, and if we pay attention to those places that need active interpretation and re-interpretation and that call out for a different kind of story, we can unlock a new kind of story.

Austerlitz uncovered a story of trauma and deep childhood loss. The novel tells a unique fictional story, but it is also a story that many of us can relate to, even if we have not experienced anything as horrific or extreme as the kindertransport of World War Two.

I share part of my own experience of reading and re-reading here as a kind of memoir through reading, a memoir of the personal and the social and literary imagination that both reflects our world and is a place to recognize the potential for creating something different, a place in which, in recognizing and naming and our full lived, physical experiences, we recognize our common humanity.

II.

One of the books that was a touchstone for me on this journey was Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, a book that intrigues me, confuses me, and that I came back to time and again over a period of fifteen years. Through my reading and re-reading of that book, my interpretation and re-interpretation, I came to tell my own story, and I came to understand better a story about women and men, violence and art, lived experience and the imagination.

La Vita Nuova is the poem behind *The Divine Comedy*, perhaps the most

famous poem ever written in the western world. *La Vita Nuova* established a prototype of lyric poetry and helped create a model of personal, accessible poetry. But mostly importantly for me, it introduced Beatrice, the prototypical female poetic muse.

Beatrice is one of our most important female characters, and, just as Dante's heroic journey provides a prototype of the hero's journey, even today Beatrice provides a prototype of the female ideal, even for the vast majority of the population who have never heard of Beatrice yet alone read *La Vita Nuova*. But on some level, she is our female model, whether we know it or not.

I first read *La Vita Nuova* when I was a graduate student in literature. Eric was a teacher, so we had the entire summer off. We'd saved up money and rented a family friend's apartment in the old walled Italian city of Lucca. We spent our time writing and taking walks, looking at art, reading books, eating and making love. Away from home, in another country, surrounded by another language, by other people's things, by other people's memories, we felt utterly free.

Sometimes, climbing the stairs to our fifth floor apartment in a stone building built in the thirteenth century, I'd stop on the landing at the turning of the stairs to look out through the narrow, open, glassless window overlooking one of the main town squares and have a feeling of vertigo. I felt so lucky. And then that luck would seem piled precariously upon all the other experiences of the people who had stood on the same stone stair for hundreds of years before me. I imagined women walking up and down the stairs, pregnant, holding in their arms their small children, or walking up and down the stairs from the funerals of those same children.

I wondered whether, from the same glassless window, shortly after our building had been built, anyone had seen Dante, who during his exile lived briefly in Lucca.

I had thrown a copy of *La Vita Nuova* in the large suitcase of books we took with us, and when I picked the book up in our second week in Italy, I found myself strangely intrigued.

In the hot afternoons, when it was too sunny to go out, Eric and I would sit in the apartment's main room at the large, old wood table and write. Eric

was finishing a novel, and I was writing long poems. When I ran out of inspiration, I'd pick up Dante's small book and flip back and forth between the English translation and a copy of the Italian I had picked up in a second hand shop in Florence.

In graduate school, I was studying visionary poetry, and I had read *The Divine Comedy* for the first time that year. But something about *La Vita Nuova* particularly intrigued me. Of course there was the richness of the language. I'd read the Italian out loud in my poor accent. But there was something else, too.

Dante first sees Beatrice when they are both nine. She makes such a deep impression on him that his whole body begins to tremble: "The moment I saw her I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all my pulses, even the weakest in them." my translation read, (Reynolds, p29). Dante interprets this trembling as a divine sign of Love, and from this time on he says he is ruled by Love. But he does not see Beatrice until nine years later, when she greets him, much, of course, to his great delight and "bliss."

The night she greets him, Dante dreams about her, and he starts writing poems about her. He has become "captive" to Beatrice, his love, and he writes: "When lo! Love stood before me in my trance. Recalling what he was fills me with horror." The image of Beatrice, and Dante's association with her is, from the first, overwhelming. Personified Love and horror seem to go hand in hand.

Though Dante and Beatrice have almost no other interactions, Dante continues to dream and write about the young woman. Indeed, in medieval Florence, Dante needed to hide his love, so takes on "screen loves" to mask his feelings and the object of his attention.

From the first, then, this love is necessarily unrequited, and as such full of sorrow. Its very unrequited nature seems to be an excuse to feel unhappiness. In this melancholy tone, furthermore, the book recounts one death after another: one of Beatrice's friends dies, then her father dies. And finally Beatrice herself, after several years in which Dante continues to write about her though he has little contact with her, dies as well.

After her death, Dante continues to dream and to write about Beatrice

much as he had done before: she is his muse, his true love, the perfect woman, she who, despite the world's horrors—or perhaps in part *because* of them—can lead him to Love and to heaven.

I was intrigued by the book partly because I it felt so foreign to me, and trying to read it in the Italian only complicated my understanding more.

This far removed “courtly love” was very different from the intimate love between Eric and myself. I spent all day with Eric, talked with him and listened to him talk, knew about his childhood, his ambitions, slept next to his body each night, and knew its touch and smell and taste. And yet this idealized, distant love between two people who hardly knew each other was also not completely unfamiliar; this kind of romantic infatuation and idealization is the stuff of contemporary pop love songs, and perhaps some of that romantic idealization is part of every relationship. And in reading this poem in a foreign language, of a man imagining and idealizing a woman and love itself, I found myself strangely doing the same thing: Beatrice became for me in some strange way my own idea of the perfect love.

But it was not Eric primarily whom I saw in the image of Beatrice, but rather myself. In my imagination, I half wanted to be Beatrice, that first, and still most famous, European muse, that canonical image of womanhood, that ideal woman, at a distance, adored.

“This most gracious lady...found such favour that when she walked down the street people ran to see her....When she was near anyone such reverences possessed his heart that he did not dare to raise his eyes nor to respond to her greeting...Crowned and clothed with humility, she would go her way...Often people said,...’This is no woman. This is one of the angels of heaven.” Dante writes of her. In her perfect humility and grace, she stands above everyone else. (75).

Through Dante’s words I imagined Beatrice, slender and beautiful with long limbs and straight brown hair, able to do just what was required of her at every moment, never upset, never losing her equanimity and pose. On our weekly trips to Florence, I used to imagine Beatrice walking on the cobblestone streets. She was always just ahead of me. I saw her upright form, her graceful step. I imagined her taking the arm of a friend. I saw her turn her head to glance behind her and laugh; I saw her slightly pointed nose, her round, small mouth, her delicate, almost nonexistent lashes—and

then I saw her turn away again, whispering something I could not hear to a friend and flutter on ahead of me down the street. Beatrice seemed to have a certain lightness that I wanted for myself; her humility was her greatest gift, and raised her above the crowd. I saw her floating above the filth of life.

Even as I wanted to live my own life, in my own terms, with my own voice, there was a part of me that still was compelled by the image of the perfect female muse, that perfect idealized beautiful woman who can do nothing wrong, who in her authenticity and purity, remains always unsullied, above mortal life. Some teenage girl self still lived on in me, who wanted to float above the world, half-anorexic, intoxicated by the idea of being utterly pure, untouchable.

On our last trip to Florence that summer that we finally visited Dante's house. We made our way through the narrow back streets of Florence that were thick with the August heat and over-run with tourists until we arrived at an unassuming stone edifice that looked more like a chapel than a house. Like the other houses on the narrow street, Via Santa Margherita, Dante's house is constructed out of large, heavy pieces of irregularly cut granite and has small and narrow windows framed by a smoother, lighter stone.

I was particularly tired that day, and the little shaded courtyard with its potted red geraniums was a welcome quiet oasis after the crowded dirty streets. Inside, we walked up the narrow stairs that lead to the house's living quarters. The stairs had a sharp turn in them as if dramatically to introduce us to the private spaces of the great poet. But when we arrived at the top of the stairs and looked around, the rooms were sterile and unimpressive.

I looked at the various books and objects hung behind glass on the walls, but they didn't mean much to me. I entered the room that had, we were told, been Dante's bedroom. I tried to imagine the young poet as a boy. To spark my imagination I tried to imagine the boy in bed as his mother, Donna Gabriella Degli Abati, lay dying elsewhere in the house. I tried to imagine the youth, the young man sitting on his bed at night recording the dreams that he recounts in *La Vita Nuova*. I stood for a long time looking out the narrow window, looking out over the courtyard below wondering whether Dante himself had stood on those very stones and had looked down to the stones of the opposite buildings and the stones of the

courtyard below. But though I tried to imagine the poet, I never quite could.

Outside once more, it was not Dante that I imagined on the streets as we walked from his house, but again Beatrice. I seemed to see her everywhere I looked. We visited the site of Beatrice's family's home where a bank now stands, and then walked to the chapel where, looking lovingly in the direction of Beatrice who sat blocked behind another young woman who was more directly in Dante's view, Dante decided to choose that other woman as his "screen-love," to cover up his love for Beatrice, which people were beginning to talk about.

Standing there, it suddenly seemed clear to me, as it had not been before, that the true object of Dante's love and desire is not Beatrice at all. Beatrice herself is a kind of screen love. What Dante is really interested in is the power of the imagination and of language itself to remake the world. Beatrice—the love object, the ideal woman-- herself is really just a kind of blank that his own imagination fills. Indeed, the prototypical woman stands in for the male's imagination.

Suddenly I felt very, very tired. The other tourists all around us, with their cameras and souvenirs and gratingly loud voices, were getting on my nerves. And it seemed silly that I had been imagining Beatrice walking over the same streets all summer. We made our way back to Lucca, and the next week we returned back to the States.

III

Towards the end of the summer, Eric and I had decided that it would be a good idea to start trying to have a baby. I got pregnant almost immediately. I realized later when we did the calculations that I must have been a week pregnant when we visited Dante's house, and that must have explained my fatigue.

It wasn't until the following fall, when Gabriel was already almost five months old, that I thought of *La Vita Nuova* again. At a party, talking to someone about our time in Italy, I mentioned our visit to Dante's house. "Ah yes," the graduate student in Italian literature said, and chuckled. "What?" I asked him. It turned out that "Dante's" house was not really Dante's house at all, but a reconstruction.

When I thought about it, I had to laugh, too. This seemed somehow appropriate. Dante's work is built upon the strange juxtaposition and interweaving of the real and the imagined; the very experience of authenticity that sparks the imagination was itself the product of a fiction.

The day after the party I took *La Vita Nuova* down from the shelf and looked at it again. The book interested me in a new way. Now it was not just Beatrice that I idealized in my mind, but my pre-pregnant self; I seemed now to see *myself* floating, untouched by life, above the cobblestone streets of the Italian cities.

It seemed to me now that I had been living partly in an imaginary world that blissful summer before. At twenty-six, in love and never having been pregnant, my body had seemed to me a kind of weightless thing, often full of desire and desirable, but essentially without anything that really grounded it.

Almost immediately my pregnancy grounded me: there was no escaping my body. I was tired; I was nauseous; I was getting bigger and bigger; a baby was growing inside of me; it would come out of my most private part. Pregnancy made me aware of my animal, vulnerable, powerful, physical body in a whole new way. And then motherhood was more physical, more difficult, more important and rewarding than anything I had imagined. And I felt as if I had been thrust all at once into a much more vivid, real world, where absolutely everything mattered, and where there was no escape: now I was responsible for another tiny, vulnerable human life that I loved more than I had loved anything ever before.

And if before I had become a mother I had been able almost always, somehow, to imagine a kind of escape from ordinary life, motherhood seemed to teach me, over and over, that there is no escape—the body, pain, suffering, intense love—they were all parts of life. They were all both extraordinary and utterly ordinary. This was all there is, and it was made up of flesh and blood and love and tears, and we are all mortal.

Now *La Vita Nuova* seemed to me to be an escape fantasy: a young man tries to explain and escape whatever pain he has in his own life, whatever anxiety and uncertainty, through his imagination, through his imagination of a woman he does not really know and through the poetry he writes about her. All the great dramatic emotion around her, all the "Love" and trembling and horror is a way to displace other emotions that he could not

name.

And the woman is able to play this role because, in fact, she is not really seen. But now I wanted to see that woman, really see her.

All the descriptions of Beatrice, all the ways in which she is placed as the center of attention, in fact are ways of avoiding what is really there. In this sense, the images of her are in some ways like King Leopold's magnificent train station, which celebrates the greatness and "civilization" of Belgian society but that in fact are built on the pain of Africans—that is, the celebration is predicated and literally built upon a pain that is not seen or named, though I did not make this connection until years after Gabriel was born.

The connection I did make when Gabriel was a baby was that Beatrice's body is not really present in Dante's poem. And now, in trying to imagine the real Beatrice, I tried to imagine her body and her embodied experience. Dante had celebrated his love for Beatrice, a woman he knew only through looking at her, and yet that very body was utterly foreign to him. Indeed, it was only because that body had in fact *disappeared* that he was able so fully to imagine it and make it his own in his poem.

For Beatrice, whom he immortalizes, is dead. Indeed, Dante is able to immortalize Beatrice and idealize her exactly *because* she is dead, because her physical body is no more.

Of Beatrice's actual death, Dante explains at some length that he cannot write about it:—"no words of mine would be adequate," he says, "to treat the subject as it should be treated." And then from that absence of words, from the explicit place in which language falls off, he continues to write poems about her.

The poem has been so full of longing distance and of the death of other people close to Beatrice that one hardly realizes that Beatrice herself has died. Dante's descriptions of her are, after her death only, if anything, more vivid.

But what of the real woman? She had not simply flitted down the streets of Florence, untouched by life. She had died in her early twenties. Who was she? What had her life really been like? What had happened to her body?

There is a moment in the development of a very young child, when she realizes she has a body, distinct from her mother's. Something like this happened to me again in my pregnancy: I suddenly realized not only that I was a woman, but that I had a *woman's body*, and this body that could do this amazing thing of creating another body out from out of it. Of course I had always known that, but now I knew that in a different way: it was so amazing, and I suddenly saw the world differently. And I saw women's bodies differently.

What was the story of other women's bodies?

I went to the library and did some research. Almost everything, I learned, has been lost about the historic young woman who was Dante's muse. Critics and scholars, novelists and poets write of her role in Dante's work. For hundreds of years they celebrated Dante's enduring and, they assert, beautiful and pure feelings for her. More recently they write of her symbolic place in Dante's work.

All that remains about Beatrice are a few dates: birth, marriage, death. What we know about the real woman is passed down by Dante's son, who was emphatic about the existence of a young woman on whom the character Beatrice was based, and by Boccaccio, who, fifty years after Dante's death, wrote the great poet's biography, and identifies Beatrice as Bice Portinari. She was the daughter to the prominent Folco di Ricovero Portinari. At the age of twenty-one she married Simone dei Bardi, who was very rich and from a prominent family. It was almost certainly not a love match, as almost no matches among such prominent citizens were, and as Dante's own marriage, to a woman he was engaged to by his father at the age of twelve, was not. Whether Bice ever fell in love with anyone, we do not know. Three years later, she died.

Beatrice, the character, dies. Bice, the woman, at the age of twenty-four, died. Here character and woman merge.

I think that partly through imagining Beatrice, my own angel of the house died. I could not longer myself as the beautiful young woman, untouched by life, outside of actual history. And though I had been writing before I became a mother, motherhood broke a certain kind of silence that I carried in me.

I wanted to re-imagine Bice, the young woman in her own body, coming against her own mortality. When Gabriel was six months old I made notes

for an essay about Bice. I felt, as I imagined Bice, as if I were laying a new image over an old; where in Dante's work she died painlessly and ascended straight to heaven intact, in my imagination, I saw her dying in childbirth. In my notes I wrote:

"She is in her own bedroom, where she has lain so often before, in her own bed with its white sheets, and the window, which so many mornings was opened to the sounds of the day, is open now, too, though it is quiet outside. It is dark both outside and in, where only a few candles are lit. Women shuffle around, muttering to one another. And then again the screaming starts.

Someone tells Bice to breathe. And still Bice screams. And then for a few second the screaming stops.

No longer weightless, Bice moves and she is in pain. And if she does not move, she is in pain. All she wants is for this to stop, this not just pain but, what words to use for it, this fire, this assault.

And this body--she has forgotten that her body can ever be her own. She has forgotten that the world is something in which she can ever feel at home. And then it starts again and the respite gave her no strength. When someone new enters the room and says her name, she is not the one anymore that is being addressed. She has nothing to do anymore with the people; why are there so many people in the room? She has nothing to do anymore with herself.

If only she could stop, just lie still beneath the assault, but she cannot prevent this thing, what is it, these limbs, this mass, from moving; now she is moving into it, around it, but never above it. It is always above her with its heavy weight. Until she can't imagine anything, anymore, being different; she only knows, she knows this now, in her bones, in her body that is hardly her body anymore, that everything has been a mistake.

And now Bice starts to scream.

This is not the start of anything. There will be no more beginnings and ends. Who called it a passage into the world? There is neither in nor out. There is neither the real nor the imagined. There is only now a fire; I think it is a white fire that Bice sees.

And on her white sheets, red blood. Her body that once was pure is being

ripped open; blood is coming from her. Every part of her now feels exposed. Someone sticks a hand up into the cavity of her body..

The body, this thing that comes up against its own end is in extremity, and then it is no more."

V

I gave birth to Gabriel at 2am on a high floor of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. I had some very sharp contractions for many hours, induced by Pitocin since my water had broken, and then had an epidural. Outside, the city lights reflected off the half-gray night sky. I had wanted a natural childbirth, but had not started having contractions on my own, and then the pitocin contractions were so exhaustingly, piercingly painful, seeming to bring me right up against the limits of my own breath, and went on for so many hours, stopping and the starting again, each time like a new onslaught, that I was grateful not to need to go through them on my own. Even with the epidural, in the middle of pushing the baby out, I felt so exhausted that at one point, I simply stopped—almost like falling asleep at the wheel—and then, in the next second I realized that this was *it*, there was nothing and no one else but me here and my body to get me through this. And if I had any inner strength—any connection to anything else beyond myself—this was the time to call upon it.

But my most prominent memory of the birth was the ecstasy of holding my new healthy son. He was perfect—his tiny nose, his mouth, his tiny hands with their five spaghetti-like fingers, each with its own tiny perfect nail. I was flooded with awe and happiness. I had never loved something as intensely as I loved that new little form in my arms.

My own birth experience seemed to point in two directions: the pain and fear (that was both brought on in part because of one medication and then mitigated because of another) in one direction, and the pure joy of holding my healthy son in the other. The pain and fear lurked—a kind of threat of a past and a future that did not fully materialize, while the joy was birthed with Gabriel's healthy arrival.

The world had such capacity for suffering and for joy. And it made me both sad and angry that so many women for so long –and still, today, in so many parts of the world—are trapped in the suffering and die needlessly in childbirth.

Beatrice came to stand for me for the death of the female muse, with her body cut off from its own power, in a failed childbirth, in a time in which women did not have agency over their own bodies and destinations. For many years, that was as far as my imagination of Beatrice took me: she came to represent for me a female potential that had been lost for centuries in European culture—the voice of the woman writer writing her own birth story, the voice of the woman poet dreaming her own love poem. The voice of the mother creating her own more female centered culture in which to raise her daughters and her sons.

Beatrice represented the danger that comes with birth and to the female body when that body is not fully known. The very conditions that allow us to idealize the female body—thus in effect preventing us from really seeing the woman—are the same conditions that lead to the literal loss of those women because of high maternal mortality rates: The more the female body is made other, the more she loses agency over her own body and power in a culture, the more birth becomes dangerous in that culture.[1] Generations of female scholars now have taught us the history and importance of women-centered childbirth projects.[2] Had Beatrice lived in a time in which women's bodies were not taboo, would she have died in childbirth?

I put my essay about Beatrice aside when Gabriel was six months old. I came back to it after Simone was born, when Gabriel was five and I began to work on a memoir about becoming a mother that I called "New Life." Naming the book after Dante's early work, I explored the different roles of women throughout history: motherhood, birth, death, the history of women in literature and in our imaginations.

But after I had written the memoir, something was still nagging at me: there was something else I was circling around, something else that I wanted to say that I hadn't quite said. I took the memoir apart and tried to put it back together.

In that process of rewriting my memoir, a process of listening carefully to myself, to my own body, I began to remember what had happened to me as a very young child. Largely through that process, I began to recall my early childhood trauma that had cast its shadow over much of my life but that I had never been able to name. The memories came back to me through the body, through painful, piercing sensations.

Over time I began to remember—or remember as much of it as I needed to know—a freak encounter with a babysitter when I was less than three in my bed that felt life threatening and that put the imprint of violence into my very cells.

I became aware that I had been living with my whole life knowing and not knowing at once: knowing and holding that violence in my body without being able to recognize it or identify it consciously in my story.

And now when I looked at the figure of Beatrice I was even more upset: what other suffering did Bice undergo? Behind the perfect female body, how much is concealed? If Beatrice had died in childbirth, like so many other young women, was she also, like so many other women, the victim of sexual abuse? For the history of women is not just the history of being unseen and dying in childbirth but also of great, and usually unseen and unspoken, force against our bodies.

Indeed, the very conditions that allow women to be idealized and unseen, turned into an object of attention and robbed of subjecthood, are the same conditions that lead to sexual violence.

When I went back to my description of her birth/death scene, I saw it was also a rape scene I had written.

“If only she could stop, just lie still beneath the assault, but she cannot prevent this thing, what is it, these limbs, this mass, from moving; now she is moving into it, around it, but never above it. It is always above her with its heavy weight.” I had written.

I had written: *“Her body that once was pure is being ripped open; blood is coming from her. Every part of her now feels exposed. Someone sticks a hand up into the cavity of her body.”*

Like Austerlitz looking at King Leopold’s train station, I felt that wherever I looked, behind the monuments of our culture was a hidden violence veiled behind a lovely facade. And I was horrified by the ways in which I had unwittingly also participated both in the façade and on some level in the unconscious violence. I had written rape into the birth/death scene. My own imagination had written in violence, without even quite knowing what it was doing, had erased Beatrice, had erased some of my own self.

I didn’t want any more unconsciousness. I didn’t want unwittingly to pass trauma down or narrate it unknowingly, without signaling what was really

going on.

I didn't want to be obscure. I wanted to call a spade a spade.

What had happened to Bice? What had happened to generations upon generations of women? What had happened that wasn't being narrated? Wasn't being seen, though there were clues all around us?

I turned away from literature and turned more to healing, to activism, to the importance of seeing and saying things clearly and directly.

VII

Over time, though, I came back to literature.

And I found myself coming back to Beatrice and to Dante—to what Dante did and didn't see in this mysterious woman in white.

The blank nature of Beatrice that at first had seemed primarily to signal an absent façade upon suffering, came to be like a mirror that showed me, even before I had known it myself, what I need to learn about my own experiences.

In Dante's powerful poetic imagination, I was able to come into contact with the sources of my own power. In what he did—and did not write—I was able to see the poetic imagination turning over the mystery of human existence, the mystery and power of what we can and cannot name, can and cannot bear, and our constant desire to make meaning and beauty in our lives. And in seeing the limits of Dante's imagination and vision, I was able to see, too, over time, the limits—and strengths-- of my own vision.

As I reflected on my own reading of Beatrice, I was aware that I was still the student of Dante's great work, and that on some levels all of my insights about the work, even as I saw its limitations, were somehow still orchestrated by the work itself.

Beatrice stands not just, as I had first thought, for Dante's poetic imagination, and not just as an escape from loss, but for trauma itself; indeed, Dante's canonical poetic muse is the image, one might say, of the blank space of the traumatic imagination.

And it is not only Beatrice who has been traumatized, but also Dante himself. Indeed, Dante's great subject, although it is not usually talked of this way, is the attempt to heal from trauma that is— and is not—named. *The Inferno*, which is so often looked to as the "hero's journey," can more simply, perhaps, be read as a poetic exploration of the many forms of human trauma. Dante descends literally to the hell realms of human experience and the human imagination.

And the conditions for this journey to and through trauma are set up *in La Vita Nuova* not only in and through the figure of Beatrice, but also in Dante's own narration of himself.

Trauma, remember, is characterized by forgetting, by breaking off from one's own experience. Dante names his book, "New Life," after just this kind of forgetting. In the opening pages of *La Vita Nuova* Dante tells us that he is cut off from his own past because he cannot remember his early childhood. He refers to his life as a book, the first chapter of which is "blank." He recovers his memory of himself at the very moment that he sees Beatrice for the first time. Structurally, then, Beatrice the muse plays her symbolic role not only because of her own traumatic loss of life, but for a trauma in Dante's life that he cannot name.

Here are the opening lines of Dante's early love poem: "In the book of my memory, after the first pages, which are almost blank, there is a section headed *Incipit vita nova*. Beneath this heading I find the words which it is my intention to copy into this smaller book or if not all, at least their meaning."

Like the character Austerlitz, Dante is explicitly cut off from his own early life. And while most of us do not remember our earliest years, Dante's blank is especially long and extends, he tells us, to his ninth year. Nine, of course, is a symbolic number, and reappears throughout the book, but nevertheless, it is the age not of early childhood, but of burgeoning youth and pre-sexuality.

What were Dante's particular wounds of his early childhood that he cannot remember? Like the particulars of Bice's life, the particulars of Dante's life are mostly lost: we know that his mother died when he was quite young. No one is sure exactly when, though some think he may have been around

nine, the same time he first sees Beatrice, the time his memories and his “new life” begins. Dante, thus, begins to remember his own life exactly at the moment when he loses the woman who is most important to him –his mother--and when he first sees Beatrice, his muse.

Beatrice is the placeholder, her own “screen love” not only of Dante’s own imagination and poetic longing, but also for his own trauma. And the equation of love and trembling, love and loss, love and horror, and unrequited longing that Beatrice immediately represents for Dante makes sense in this light.

The great distance between Dante and Beatrice that most caught my attention years earlier is a sign, equally, of Dante’s own estrangement from himself. In Dante’s work, the fractured and traumatized self looking for a home, a place to land, becomes explicit when in the middle of his life the poet becomes lost in a deep wood, unable, any longer, to locate himself or his own direction in life. From there he begins his heroic journey down into the depths of hell and human suffering, to those places of the unspeakable where he can reacquaint himself with himself, and rise up through Purgatory and into Heaven reunited once more with his muse.

A chronicler of his age, Dante paints harrowing pictures in *The Inferno*, of the violence of the middle ages. But though Dante goes all the way to Hell to look at the various realms of suffering, never again does he touch on childhood, that period in which he lived with and then lost his mother, that period in which who knows what other traumas occurs.

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante seems to realize that something is lost in that first “blank” chapter, and the entrance of Beatrice in his life just at the moment that this chapter closes is no coincidence: he seems, on some instinctive level, to be wanting to reach back to what he cannot remember and cannot name.

But in the thirteenth century he did not have the tools to read the “blank.” Indeed, the elision of childhood experiences in early modern literature suggests the almost complete cultural amnesia around childhood that extended for centuries. It is not until the Renaissance that artists become able even to depict an accurate child’s body, and even in the late Renaissance babies often look like small pudgy adults. For much of “civilized” history, children were simply not really seen. Just as women were not seen.

Women and children both are erased. And having erased women and children, everyone's experiences are erased.

VIII

When Gabriel was born, the doctor put the baby up to my chest and he nursed. I don't think anything prepared me for how much I would love him, and nothing prepared me, either, for how much, already, the moment he was born, he was his own person, moment by moment, in his own body, with his own sensations and experiences.

Beatrice, the muse, is the "other" but she also stands in for part of the self, the idealized, resilient space that suppresses the pain in order to survive.

But as we get stronger, our polar selves can re-integrate.

One of the most powerful aspects of pregnancy—one that I could not fully absorb consciously at the time, though I think it made a physical mark on me— is the fact that when one is pregnant, one is both self and other. And when the baby is born, that baby is both other and utterly familiar—if we can let ourselves go to those depths of recognition.

Motherhood brought me into contact with new life not only because it put me so closely in touch with a new, living person, but also because it reminded me of a dormant part of myself, that animal part, that very small child that I had so completely forgotten.

***La Vita Nuova* is a book, almost explicitly, from its very title, about not being able to connect to that childhood self, and about needing to construct a web of longing and meaning over the top of an unidentified blank. The results are distorting, and also deeply familiar.**

How many of us are detached from our childhood experiences?

Trauma experts tell us that in order to survive the traumatic experience, we split apart; we float off into our own imaginations. As a child and as a young woman, I could not incorporate what had happened to me. In many ways I had a happy childhood, and many happy memories, but I also had the tendency to escape up into my head, into my imagination. My body could walk and dance and make love, but in all those activities it wanted to float up; I wanted to fly above parts of myself and parts of the world; I

wanted to rise up above vulnerability and remake the world. I wanted a form of perfection—a form of perfection that does not really exist—that I recognized in Beatrice when I first read *La Vita Nuova*.

But giving birth, becoming a mother, made me land in time, in reality, in history and in my body in a different way. Perfection as such—despite, or perhaps because of the impossible roles mothers are asked to assume—is not possible. We are here with all the joy and all the mess.

Motherhood helped me integrate the different polarities of life experience and of my own psyche. And in that re-integration and in that connection to my own early childhood self, I felt a new connection to the unseen—not just to the unseen spaces of trauma, but also to the unseen places of spiritual connection and to the sacred that are so often covered up.

After I gave birth to Gabriel, after Eric and I had oohed and ahhed and held him and rested with him, exhausted at five am in the morning, I let the nurses take the baby from me for the rest of the night so Eric could go home to sleep and I could be wheeled into another room to sleep. Off Gabriel went in the hospital, newly born, wrapped in a blanket, away from the womb, from the mother's smell and touch and sound. He came back a few hours later, and I woke from a deep sleep, ecstatic, to have the doctor tell me my baby was healthy and strong, and Eric came back soon after.

That my son was separated from me for a few hours was hardly one of the worst things that has happened to him—he was cared for and healthy, and he and I both were very deeply lucky to have the care and health and safety that we had and the modern medical practices that kept us both safe and healthy. Nonetheless, many indigenous people are horrified by the ways we treat our infants, by the ways in which we still do not recognize the humanity of our children. How, they wonder, can they take the new baby from its mother? This inability to see things through the infant's or child's experience is a strong tendency that runs throughout our culture—one need only read a history of childrearing practices of the past five hundred years to see the extent to which children have been unseen and often mistreated. More tightly knit cultures that live in community and closer to the earth and to the natural rhythms of their own bodies, tend to honor children's—and women's—experiences more.[3]

Our cultural practices as children are still defined by centuries of belief that a woman's body and sexuality is somehow sinful, that children are

born fallen, and that they need to be “schooled” into full personhood. As such, infants and children are too often seen as “other,” not as sacred beings gifted to us for our love and attention. But of course, in not recognizing our children’s humanity, we do not fully recognize our own, or we simply repeat the ways in which as young people we were cut off from ourselves. And in being cut off from ourselves, we are cut off from our primal source of love, power, and connection.

What happened to me as a young child in bed, my body and my spirit violated? I know, as I must have known then, as only a young child can know, that what happened to me—the violence that was done to me—came from another person who was somehow cut off from not only my humanity, but also his own human power, someone who misunderstood brute force for true power, who in failing to recognize another human being, with her own life and spirit, could not see his own sacred spirit. I knew on a visceral level what Simone Weil reminds us of in her great essay “The Iliad or the Poem of Force”—that violence, overwhelming force, turns both victim and perpetrator into objects, things. And even when we are not personally subject to violence, we live in a culture that, nevertheless, habitually treats other people as things, objects, figments of our own imagination that will do what we want them to do.

But we do not need to remain things.

Dante, who comes out of a deeply violent culture, and writes from that culture in his greatest work, both tries to transform that power that makes the individual human experience into an object and falls into that habitual trap: Beatrice represents both his ability to transform, to imagine a place of freedom and escape, and his inability really to do that. The image of the traumatic imagination, Beatrice shows us the ways in which we all long to transform through the imagination and are limited by it, the ways in which we desire to make connections, and, without the proper tools, cannot.

The figure of Beatrice in Dante’s work represents both the historic pathological creation of women as *things*—separate from their own life force. And at the same time it shows us the human, even resilient reasons for this imaginative transformation of the woman—the desire of the traumatized imagination to create an idealized other.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind

**Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future^[L]_[SEP]
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
T. S. Eliot writes in "Burnt Norton."**

Human kind cannot bear very much reality. We turn to poetry, to literature, to help us deal with the reality that we cannot otherwise so easily bear.

But it does not need to be an either/or. I believe if we read consciously, we can both escape and transform reality, we can find a space of creative engagement where we can play with the unnamable and over time come to name it.

When I was twenty-six, Eric and I used to walk around the intact walls of the medieval Italian city of Lucca each night. We'd walk to the Western edge of the walls and sit under a plane tree and watch the setting sun as parents, their children running ahead of them, strolled behind us. We felt free and at peace that summer, and the city seemed to us to be an all but perfect place. But the walls that were for us such images of peace had been built hundreds of years earlier, of course, because neighboring city states were almost constantly at war with one another. And even within the same city different groups—such as the white and black Guelphs in whose now forgotten struggle Dante found himself caught-- often had deadly disagreements. And only sixty years before we sat on those walls, just outside of Lucca, serious fighting took place during World War Two.

We are surrounded by the history of violence. The human imagination continues to separate, to make other, to render other people into things. We do this in part not because we are evil or have ill-will, but because almost all of us, living in a culture of so much violence for hundreds of years, are traumatized, and our traumatized selves, cut off from our own integrated childhood self, cut off from our own suffering, makes the human experience polar.

But if we could reconnect our imagination back with our bodies, if we could reconnect with our power and vulnerability as children, if we could reconnect with our true source of power and vulnerability, if we could see women and children and ourselves—all of us—as we really are, might our world would be a very different place? If we could re-integrate the other that is the self, might we see other people as less other, less different—

either for good or for bad? Might we be less violent, less greedy, less unhappy, more able to accept things as they are, more able to see other people's and our own spirits?

Might we use our imaginations not just to create intricate plots and collections of words that rhyme, and not to create escapist fantasies, but to step inside the feeling of things, to penetrate the surface of our own life and of other people's lives and enter into a state of real compassion for our lived, embodied experiences?

Perhaps I am naïve. But I like to think, instead, that it is the power of the imagination, schooled in part through literature that can allow us to imagine a more compassionate world and a way to get there. This, partly, is what Dante, himself the great dreamer who travels to hell to visit humans who have mistreated one another and then travels up to heaven, has come to represent for me.

Beatrice, the figure of the traumatic imagination, is also the character who leads Dante to God. She represents, of course, love, and joy and is the figure who presides over the entire book of the *Paradiso*. She also represents the lost mother who connects us back to our childhood selves, with all our capacity for suffering and for joy, and this reconnection, Dante seems to suggest, is the work of redemption.

Stendhal famously said a novel is a mirror walking along a main road, and Brecht famously said that art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it. If we look very carefully in that mirror what we see reflected in it will also show us ourselves; what we see broken in it will also show us ourselves; what we see shattered in it, lying on the ground in blank shards, will also show us ourselves. And in those shards, we can imagine an integrated whole, a world that we can help call into being.

For a while, I stopped reading and writing literature altogether. But then I started again. In reading and writing, in re-reading and re-writing, I came to the mirrors I needed to find. Over time I have come to see reading as one piece of a transformative process. While reading alone won't give us the tools we need to make the world a less violent place, it might help, if we allow our reading to be an exploration of consciousness, to see ourselves better, to help us recognize ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves.

And reading literature and poetry can give us the imaginative space to turn things over, to try things on, to explore, and to take our time in the process.