



2021

Love, Repeating

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Recommended Citation

Hanley, Leah (2021) "Love, Repeating," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol2/iss2/12>

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Love, Repeating

When asked to tell the story, Mom always starts by prefacing that I was born during the nurses' strike of 1984. More accurately, I was born days after the largest nurses' strike our nation had witnessed had dissipated and more than 6,300 nurses from 16 hospitals in the Twin Cities area had returned to work. Tensions had been high leading up to the historic strike. Nurses across the country were feeling vulnerable and undervalued, facing high layoff rates and having little protection for job seniority. Tensions remained high in the workplace when nurses, who successfully went on strike for almost six weeks, were thrown back into the whirr of providing daily healthcare alongside the nurses who had crossed the picket lines every day.

Mom describes being in labor as worse than being struck by lightning. On the night of her due date, her water sprung a slow leak; she didn't go to the hospital until 4:00 in the morning. A gaggle of student nurses plus a midwife were assigned to her care. They determined Mom's body was not progressing fast enough after her water broke, and labor needed to be induced. On their first attempt to start an IV, the needle plunged below the skin's surface, but her slippery blue vein rolled away from the sharp tip. After several attempts, blood spouted from her arm like a fountain. They wrapped it up and tried again on the other arm. Finally, the IV was in place and the Pitocin was dripping. Her blood started to creep up into the tubes, so to counteract the vacuum they increased the IV pressure like a fire hose. Throughout the day, different nurses entered the room, adjusted the knob as they exclaimed the pressure was too high, then whispered feverishly with other nurses and silently returned the knob to its former position.

Pitocin causes the uterine walls to squeeze with intention. Mom cried out and removed every item of clothing in her agony. The midwife told her to save her tears for when she has to push because contraction pains aren't the hard part. "Didn't you go to lamaze class?" the nurses asked her unsympathetically. Mom hadn't, anyway. No one mentioned any options to manage the pain, and mom didn't know to ask. Eventually I was born into the world, my slippery cocoon too, with a swarm of student nurse faces staring down. Mom lost three pints of blood and later passed out in the bathroom.

My maternal grandparents were eagerly waiting to greet us in the recovery room. Everyone crowded around me, the beloved firstborn grandchild on both sides of the family. Sharing Mom's room in a bed close by was a weeping

woman who grieved the birth of another stillborn baby. My grandmother quietly drew the separation curtain closed and discreetly asked the nursing staff to give her a different room. Soon the childless mother was wheeled away, and Mom insisted my bassinet not be removed from her bedside for any reason. She spent countless hours gazing into my face, marveling at this tiny person for whom she had waited almost a year. The nurses insisted she take a bath to help her body heal, but the hospital was under construction and had no hot water. After the ice bath, one nurse stealthily stuffed Mom's bag with extra hospital baby shirts and sent my parents out the door with a wink.

*Love is a song that never ends
One single theme, repeating.*

The movie credits roll as my son watches *Bambi*. My mind ruminates on the lyric as I pause to consider my heart's capacity to love. When I allow myself this moment of introspection, I marvel at the magnitude of life. Sitting there transfixed by the lullaby is my flesh and blood. His rosy cheeks and shining eyes were built in my womb. But his body swiftly outgrew my workshop and now blooms as I tend to it daily. Hourly. Constantly. With the steady tick of seconds, his body fleshes out, and his spirit is buried in my heart.

I wonder if octopuses have triple capacity to love with all three of their hearts. Three single beats repeating, like a fugue from The Well-Tempered Clavier. When I lived in Monterey, California, I volunteered as a tour guide at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. During orientation and training I developed a deep love for the Giant Pacific octopus and treasured the few minutes of solitude I could scrape together to spend gazing in peace at this eight-legged wonder.

The octopus is a clever, mysterious creature. It can change the color and texture of its skin to masterfully hide in plain sight. Without bones, it glides through the water in wild, blubbery forms, and it can manipulate its body through the smallest crevices in order to escape, hide, or hunt. It has no teeth, but with thousands of suction cups on its eight strong arms, a sharp knife-like beak sheathed in its head, and a coarse tongue, it has the ability to trap and consume crustaceans. Its suction cups not only give it a firm grip, but also provide a way to touch, taste, and smell. Octopuses in captivity are notorious for solving puzzles to reach their food and for escaping enclosures. At the aquarium, the octopus exhibit is lined with Astroturf along every inch of the lip,

because aquarists learned that octopuses hate the feeling of it and will not climb over it.

One morning before doors were opened to the public, the volunteer staff gathered around the octopus exhibit and witnessed a glimmering display of soft white pearls, small as grains of rice. The newest resident octopus had laid her eggs the night before. The senior volunteers looked sadly at the long strands dangling from every nook and cranny of the rock facade and every surface of the window glass, shaking their heads as the octopus gently fanned water over her treasure. It was a great misfortune that the eggs were not fertilized and that she would soon perish. I listened in fascination to an explanation of the octopus life cycle. These octopuses live alone, only coming together once in their lives to mate in a secret den at an appropriate time. Afterward the female lays her 18-74 thousand eggs and broods over them for up to seven months, giving up food and all means to live, until she dies of starvation shortly after they hatch. The hatchlings live on plankton until they grow large enough to hunt and eat crabs and other shellfish. Soon after, the hatchlings start their search for a mate. The whole cycle only takes 3-5 years. "But we don't say 'She dies,' we call it, 'cessation,'" the head volunteer said gravely. I turned to the octopus, legs delicately tasting every egg in their turn. I watched her body swell and deflate as the water entered her bulbous head and streamed back out to spray her eggs. Her eye was an endless black pool. Was she gazing into my eye, too?

The color of my eyes tends to be a topic of conversation between interested persons. "What color *are* your eyes?" they ask as they lean in, squinting, analyzing. "Are they... blue...?" Every I.D. card I own states plainly that they are blue. And usually they are. But I've had many compliments throughout my life on my "beautiful green" eyes, followed by a list of other people they knew who also had green eyes, and sometimes a short statement on the rarity or odds of being born with green eyes. When pressed I do answer "blue" to the question, but I'm never confident. In high school my parents caved into my years-long request to wear contacts instead of eyeglasses, and I unhesitatingly ordered a pair that tinted my irises purple. Weirdly, they looked natural. They were so convincing that strangers would stop me, spellbound, to compliment my eyes and ask if they were real. I usually smiled and answered, "Yes, they are real." I happily wore the contacts all through my high school years.

My purple eyes were the first thing my now-husband noticed about me. We passed each other in the choir room on the first day of school, he a freshman and I a sophomore. "Whoa!" he said loudly, body swaying back with arms

flailing in the air. “Is that your *real* eye color?” Who was this joker? I leisurely rolled my eyes. “Yeah,” I answered, teenage sarcasm and annoyance seeping from the single word. I walked away and left him blinking silently after me. We ran in the same social circles over the following years, but our interactions all had the same flavor of interest and irritation. It wasn’t until our minds met that our hearts fell in love.

For our tenth wedding anniversary, we planned a trip to Europe. When the time came, I was in my third trimester of pregnancy, so we changed plans and had a staycation three hours from home. Neither of us knew what to expect from parenthood. We both had three younger siblings and plenty of younger cousins, but neither of us had any prior interest in caring for children. Sure, my husband always wanted to be a dad and a grandpa. I warmed up to the idea of being a mom like the spring thaw after a long Wisconsin winter. Why have my own kids when there are plenty of waifs around the world to choose from? But my young heart didn’t know then what it understands now.

Statistically, most first-time mothers give birth after their due dates and I was no exception. My doctor had recommended scheduling an induction for the weekend following my due date, and when that date arrived with no signs of labor, we packed our bags and headed calmly to the hospital. After a night spent anchored to a delivery bed by a saline drip, heart monitor, contraction monitor, baby heartbeat monitor, and whatever else modern technology had to offer, my body still was not ready to be in labor. We were sent home with a rescheduled induction for the next week. For the second induction, we were full of nervous excitement knowing that this time we would not leave without a baby. Again, I was given medicine and hooked up to all the machines. Again, my body did not respond how we expected. After a day, my water broke in a trickle. And after two days of unproductive labor, a total of 47 hours from check-in, I was wheeled down the hall for an emergency C-section.

The operation room had glaring lights, shiny metal surfaces, and stark white walls. The anesthesiologist had cold fingers when he touched the small of my back. On the table, a blue cloth screen was raised over my ribcage to shield my view and a medical team was busily preparing for major surgery. I felt pressure on my lower body but no pain. My husband appeared at my side looking dazed. Although he was assured the procedure would not start without him, the abdominal incision had been made and cauterized moments before he crossed the threshold. There was no way to avoid the ghastly sight as he was led around the blue curtain to stand by my head. The combination of seeing my bare legs splayed, the gaping wound, and smelling burnt flesh was

enough to stun him. We were both terrified. With a firm grip on his hand, I tried desperately to avoid looking straight ahead at a blurry reflection of the surgery in a piece of metal on the ceiling. My body was being violently jostled, pushed, and tugged, and my husband recalls seeing the attending doctor's feet leave the floor as she placed all her weight on my body. Meanwhile, one of the nurses flittered around our heads, snapping pictures of the birth with our phone, insisting that we might want them some day.

When my son was finally carved out of my body and placed into my arms, I felt a wild urge to growl and bare my teeth at anyone who approached him. My parents, sister, and brother-in-law had been waiting for us in the postnatal bay. As I was wheeled into my recovery room, my loved ones loomed over me on all sides to see the newborn baby, and I unexpectedly felt anger well up at the thought that they wanted to hold him. I squeezed him tighter to my bosom and managed, as politely as possible, to say that they could hold him tomorrow because I did not want to share at the moment. Days later when we returned home, I intentionally snubbed our friendly dog, refusing to acknowledge him while I held my baby. I refused to bring the baby down to his nose to sniff. Now that my instinct to so fiercely protect my infant son has faded, I look back on this feeling toward my loving old dog with perplexity. Never has there been a question of aggression in our dog in any situation, and yet I felt such a strong distaste for allowing him to be near my helpless infant.

Motherhood is a testament to the power of natural instincts. My love for this little pink baby was unfathomably deep, and bigger than I expected. When I was alone with my son for the first time, I looked tenderly at his sleeping face, and my very first concrete thought was, "I wonder if this is how God feels about me."

Monterey Bay is a cornucopia of life. In the middle of the bay is an underwater canyon that stretches 50 miles into the Pacific Ocean with a depth of over 12,000 feet. This crevice in the earth heaves life from its core to the surface. Mammoth sea creatures are distended from the deep to breathe fresh air, then submerge again to live and die beneath the waves. Cold water from the floor of the Monterey Submarine Canyon is drawn up to the surface when the coastal winds blow the warmer waters away from shore. With this upwelling flow plankton blooms and drifts of fish larvae. Animals from whales to hatchling octopuses, from sea lions to pelicans, feed in these rich waters.

Gray whales pass Monterey Bay twice a year. They spend their summers feasting in the arctic mud, then migrate south for the winter to Baja California, Mexico. No food waits for them, but the pregnant females birth calves in the luxuriously warm lagoons where they mated exactly one year earlier. When the new calves triple their birthweight, all the Gray whales head back north toward Alaska where they can eat again. A new mother nurses and protects her calf the whole 5,000-mile stretch. A calf drains its mother of 50 gallons of milk every day for about 8 months, adding to its blubber padding by roughly 70 pounds a day. Often during the long migration, the calf rests its tired body on its mother's tail flukes. Together they hug the coastline, partially to use landmarks to guide them home and because the calf is safer in shallow waters where Orcas can't swarm.

The most treacherous stretch of the journey is the 30-mile gap of coastline at Monterey Bay, where the submarine canyon lurks below. Giant kelp thrives in the shallows of the bay, growing 10-12 inches daily, and clusters of it form kelp forests. These giant kelp forests serve as sanctuaries for thousands of fish, mammal, and bird species. But this dense shelter that lulls its inhabitants with gently swaying rhythm is a strange land to whales. They brave the open ocean instead, mother and calf swimming snugly together.

Orcas are clever hunters, and they love the taste of calf meat. Closer in relation to dolphins than whales, they are extremely intelligent, use sonar to communicate, and travel with their matriarchal families. Some are believed to migrate annually to Monterey Bay specifically for a whale hunt. They hide in the shadows of the canyon, ears trained for the unique sound of calf breaths at the surface. Anticipating danger, experienced Gray whales muster the energy to stealthily dart across the bay with their calves, taking breaths as quiet and as shallow as possible. Desperate mothers may herd their young into the kelp forest to seek refuge, an attempt to hide the calf's presence or size from sonar, but the stringy kelp could easily entangle and drown it. If the Orca sees a chance, it will summon its pod and up to 50 of the black and white phantoms will attempt to separate the calf from its mother. They will try to and exhaust the calf by ramming, chasing, and dunking it. The mother's only defense against attacks is to thrash her powerful tail flukes and intercept blows with her massive body. Eventually, if the Orca pod is large and tenacious enough, they will succeed in drowning the calf. The mother will grieve on the way back to the arctic seas without her baby. Meanwhile, the carcass of her offspring is ripped to shreds by Orca teeth and gnashing sharks. Its bones sink through the salty brine and are

swallowed by the dark rift in the earth's crust, to be picked clean and decomposed by crustaceans and worms.

When my cousin was eight years old, her body was attacked by a rare form of cancer. It started in her neck and slowly devoured the rest of her small body via the lymph nodes over the course of two turbulent years. Make-A-Wish Foundation graciously sent her and her parents to Florida to swim with the dolphins before her eventual passing at age 10. She didn't want anyone to cry at her funeral, so she adamantly requested that everyone eat Warheads and laugh. Her father still finds Warheads where he least expects them, even though he goes out of his way to avoid them like the plague. Eventually my aunt and uncle divorced for reasons that reached beyond experiencing the death of their child, but when tensions peaked, one of their last arguments was a tortured accusation that my aunt had planted a Warhead in their bed under the sheets. But she hadn't; they just show up.

Prior to being a mother, I sifted through life as a sponge sifts the current for nutrients, taking in and digesting the details to use them later when forming opinions. My thoughts were calculated and tempered, and my brain was in charge of telling my heart how to feel. My heart is a good listener. But now I sometimes think of my cousin when I look at my son, and my heart aches. This is what it is to love impossibly.

On the TV, the camera zooms out on Faline with her two fawns in the thicket and pans up. Bambi stands proudly with his father on a high ledge, looking down on the domestic scene. The music swells as a high tenor sings the theme song again:

*Love is a song that never ends
Life may be swift and fleeting
Hope may die yet love's beautiful music
Comes each day like the dawn*

*Love is a song that never ends
One simple theme repeating
Like the voice of a heavenly choir
Love's sweet music flows on*

What is left when the last notes of music fade away? A reverberating stillness, a sustaining breath, and a lasting memory of how it made us feel. Later we hum that single repeating beat into life, until it blooms into a song of its

own. The earworm buries itself deep into the soft tissue of generations, decomposes, and transforms into fertilizer for something bigger than itself.

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Leah Hanley is currently a graduate student in the M.A. English program at the University of North Dakota. She is an Air Force veteran, a private pilot, and a graduate teaching assistant of English Composition. In her free time she enjoys cross-stitching, cooking, puzzles, reading, traveling, and playing board games with family.