

YOUNG MOTHER

By Maria Luisa Puga*
Illustrations by Amanda Mijangos**

The birth? No, the birth was fine, I mean, apparently it was normal. Since it was my first, I was scared, of course, but I'd talked to lots of people — to my mother, my friends, even to the nurses. It was normal. You think you won't be able to stand it. That you'll break. That no one will even notice, or worse yet, that no one will believe it. I must have spent the whole time trying to find a way to communicate that I really couldn't stand it any longer. I wanted to be sure I'd convinced them before the screaming came, the real screaming, I mean, because I could feel myself screaming the whole time, or moaning, I'm not sure, but when all of a sudden someone said, "That's it; you've been very brave," and I heard her — I heard her cry — it was incredible, and I felt scared — I'd thought they'd brought her in from the room next door. She cried as if she'd been shaken awake. I couldn't understand. I also started crying, because I felt so sad and alone, and I knew no one would understand me. Everyone was shuffling around, and I felt like I was being yanked and cleaned and that people were putting stuff on me. When a nurse said, "Everything is okay, calm down. It's a girl, don't cry," I couldn't believe her, I couldn't. I thought I had died and was dreaming — or living my life as a dead person. I don't know what happened next. When I woke up, they brought her in, swaddled and clean, so that I could feed her. I did what I was told. I felt clumsy and I could feel her sucking on my breast. It was true. The milk flowed and something was sucking there. I touched her, felt her breathe, but no, I couldn't believe it. Then they took her, and I fell into a dark, narrow sleep, like I would in the months before her birth. A vaulted space. It's not like I thought it was bad, I mean, it didn't scare me or cause me pain. It was just the angst of getting to the other side. I don't know when it started. I noticed it one day. Perhaps the first time I felt her inside me. It was quite strange. Neither pleasant nor

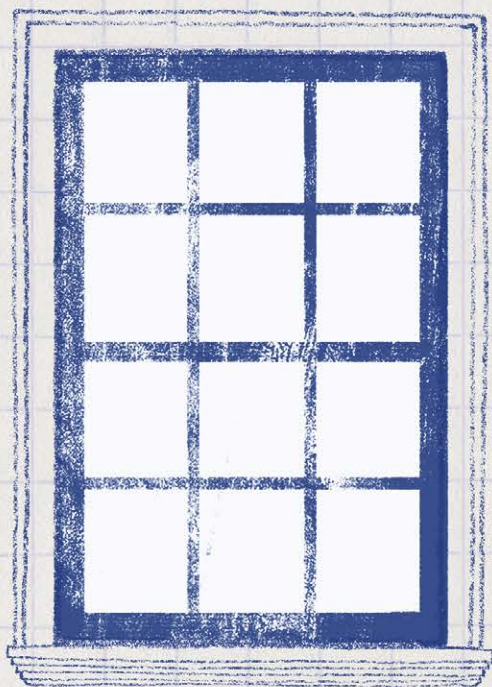
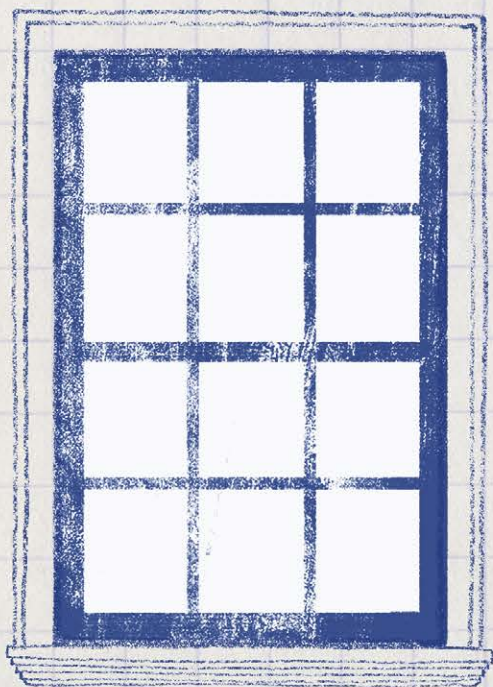
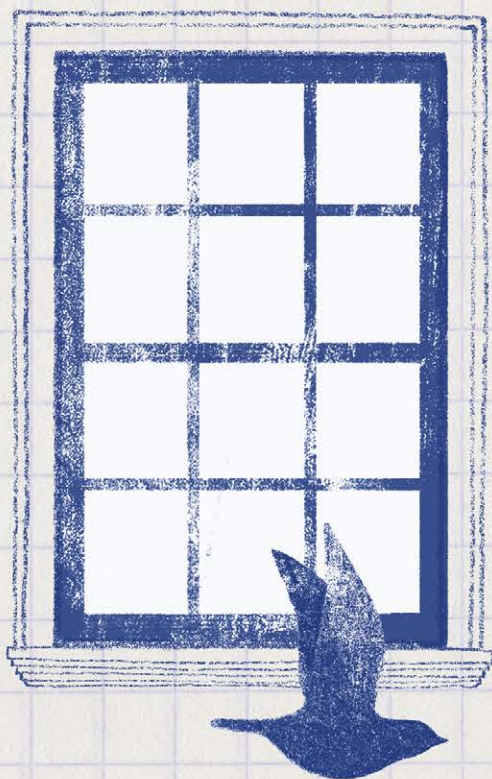
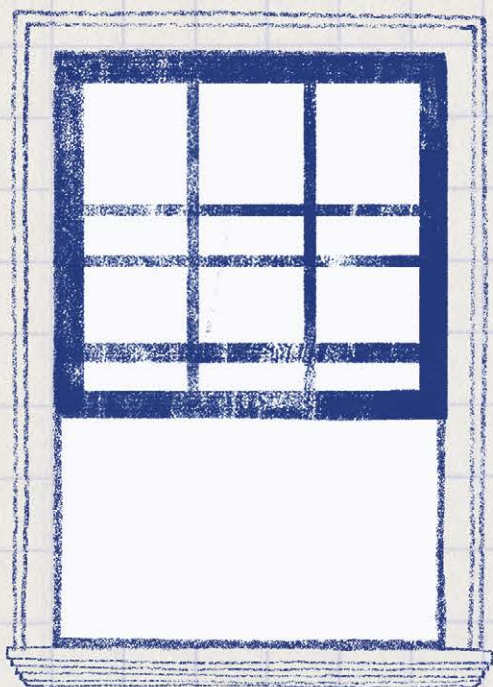
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unpleasant. Strange. As if I were two, without knowing who the other was. I started spying on her. We were both in my body — no, I'm not talking about the baby. When I thought about the baby, it was different. I talked to the baby a lot, all the time, I think. And Mario and I would make plans for when the baby was born. But that was different. That was when I'd force myself to stop feeling the vault, that other presence, that lack of a body. I'd force myself because no one else noticed. Not Mario, not anyone. Because I couldn't really see anything different when I looked in the mirror. And because the doctor said my pregnancy was going well, that I was in good health. And whenever I told him I felt strange, he'd say it was all normal, being my first. I forced myself to believe him. But I dragged that body along with me, feeling more panicked by the day. I felt that my voice was dropping lower and lower. That only I could hear it. That people would only be able to hear if I screamed a lot. Something in my head was closing up and getting darker, and I had to go find another way out, any way at all. I couldn't see anything from where I was. The night started to scare me. When the streets fell quiet, when Mario turned off the light for bed, I was terrified. And when the sun came out, I could see myself making breakfast, going shopping, preparing the baby clothes, talking to people knowing none of it was real, it wasn't real, I wasn't really there, but trapped in this endless cave that went on and on and on, and I even thought about trying to get used to it, because apparently people were accepting me as I was. Mario still loved me, and the doctor said it was all going fantastically. Sometimes my legs would swell, I'd feel nauseous, tired — the usual things that happen during pregnancy. I'd feel relief. Those were the only times when my body and I were one. I sensed that I had to protect my body against those other things. But I'm young, I'm strong. The unease wouldn't last. It'd go away quickly and leave behind a murky taste in my mouth. Right away, I knew I was back. I'd see everything from a distance. I was lost again. I didn't realize I started feeling sadder and sadder. That when I smiled, a contorted gesture would take over my face.





That the laughter wasn't my own. I think I failed to notice because I'd conjured up a hope. Or other people had. Maybe it wasn't even hope. Every time I said I felt depressed, people would say it was normal, that it would all pass once the baby was born. That it was all due to spending so much energy and who knows what else. That I shouldn't worry about it. So, I started counting the days. Living with my eyes glued to that date when the birth was expected. To wait out loud. To close my eyes every time I felt that vault. I also think that's why I started to hide it. To pretend every time I was with someone else. Even when I looked in the mirror. It was like holding my breath. It's almost over, almost over. Once the baby's out of here, there'll be people outside again. I had to believe that because I had to believe there'd be an end to it, a way out on the other side. I almost felt curious about observing what was happening to me from very close up. That being without being there. That un-being. That dark dream. Because I yearned for something else. And the impatience kept me from sleeping at night. And when they took me to the hospital, I grabbed the nurses' hands so that they wouldn't leave me back there, so they wouldn't leave me on the other side, whatever the cost. I saw it all clearly during childbirth. I don't know about pain. Pain was being surrounded by all those people, while I was trapped and alone and didn't know what to do or how. And seeing the baby being born, a girl, like I wanted. I heard Mario saying she'd be called Alina, a name he had chosen, but that I had chosen, too, with all my hopes and desire to live, for her to be called Alina, for her to be our baby, for her to teach us how to live with her. Feeling her feeding off me I knew that, no, I had not left the vault, that it couldn't be, that no one understood me when I said I wasn't well, and I'd hear that phrase again, another of those faraway, useless phrases, another illusory border, that postpartum depression is normal, that it'd be over in a few days, while the scream forming inside me couldn't find a way out, and my baby didn't know, and felt confident, alone, like me, alone.

"And now?"

"When the vault caved in, I felt strong. Everything shattered around me. Alina died. I'm broken. It's time to live any way possible, wherever I can, with what I can." **MM**

The autor was inspired to write this short story when she read the following news article in *The Guardian*:

The Guardian

London

Dec. 28, 1977:

"A YOUNG MOTHER SUFFERING FROM POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION JUMPED OUT OF A FOURTH-FLOOR WINDOW AT A TRAINING HOSPITAL IN LONDON, WITH HER THREE-DAY-OLD BABY. THE LITTLE BABY DIED; THE INJURED MOTHER LIVED...")

We would like to thank Patricia Puga for her permission to publish her sister's short story.