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Philematophilia

TRACI BRIMHALL

THOUGH I USUALLY ONLY DO IT WHEN he's asleep or when I know we're alone, my husband catches me licking our son from neck to chin. It disturbs him, this act that feels like a cross between something sexual and old-fashioned mammalian grooming. Later that night while I'm rocking our son to sleep, he sends me a .gif of a girl eating a cupcake. The whites of her eyes widen. Her mouth opens. Swoop. The little cake vanishes, frosting and all. The grin on her face more greed than pleasure. Repeat, both raptor and rapture. The subject line says: *this is what you looked like*. Over and over. Covet. Consume. Smile.

I try to justify what I've done with research, seeking out reputable medical journals that will verify my licks and nibbles are, if not normal, at least biologically understandable. At first it seems as though I might be the only one who's ever seen the soft underside of her baby's chin and needed to cover it, clean it, kiss it, but then I find a study that compared mother rats who were heavy-lickers of their pups to ones who were light-lickers. Heavily licked mice pups have lower cortisol levels and better overall health outcomes. A friend suggests an essay by a poet about tongue kissing her daughter as further confirmation that these urges occur in others. I forward these to my husband. *See??* I ask, as though the kissing proclivities of poets and some mice in a lab in Canada have cleared up everything.

IN COLLEGE, I TALKED ABOUT KISSING for my public speaking course, detailing the relationship of the lips to sexual suggestion and the biophysical responses of the sexual organs. It takes real muscle, those kisses. Or at least some do. A pucker only needs two, but those long, erotic, hypnotic kisses take all thirty-four facial muscles. And then there's the hormonal fireworks—oxytocin! dopamine!

serotonin! adrenaline! The whole body electric and present in the kiss, in those bundles of nerves on the face connecting with someone else's nerve bundle, eyes likely closed, hands who knows where.

At twenty, the kiss and my speech about it was all arousal. The peck. The head tilt. The lean in. The smooch. The godawful hickey. The trail of kisses from collarbone to neck, from neck to breast, from breast to belly. The make-out. The Big Kahuna of kisses—the French. The Romans stuck to three simple categories: *osculum*, kiss on the cheek; *basium*, on the lips; *savolium*, the deep kiss. Though I think these categories were meant to describe kisses between adults, I'd like to think the kisses I give my son are from the *savolium* category—deep, with a hunger like Saturn, like the witch in Hansel and Gretel, like the cichlid fish with her whole brood tucked safely in her mouth.

I CAN'T REMEMBER MY FIRST KISS. VERY few firsts are memorable to me. I even forgot my first kiss with my husband. For years I told people I went to a poetry reading in Wisconsin and then drove through the night to Michigan, stopping at a truck stop to brush my teeth before knocking on his window like a teenager and stepping in out of the October cold. He kissed me before I could even say hi. It was *savolium*, saving, six hours long. It's not as great as a lovelorn entreaty to a beloved on a balcony, or even as good as the earmarked pages in the worn romance paperbacks I hide under my bed. But it's a story with urgency and clean passions.

But my husband reminds me our first kiss happened when he was still married to his first wife. Things were coming to an end. They were in marital counseling for the fourth time. He said after the third they'd exhausted their narrative possibilities, but they were still very much together and had invited me to

stay with them for the weekend. I could say it was an accident, a drunken mistake, an attempt at each other's cheeks that landed too close to center, but what happened was this—he walked me to my room to say goodnight and said, *I'm going to kiss you, but I'm going to stop before it goes too far*. We were already too far gone, and it was wet, quick, more Judas than Juliet. Forgotten for years.

I REMEMBER SEEING MY PARENTS KISS once. It was shortly before their divorce. I came up the basement stairs, and there they were—eyes closed, clinging to each other. It disgusted me, all that needless and helpless ardor.

IN HER BOOK *KISSING: EVERYTHING YOU Ever Wanted to Know About One of Life's Sweetest Pleasures*, Andrea Demirjian discusses the two suspected origins of the kiss—taste testing romantic partners and the original blender for baby food. Some anthropologists believe our early ancestors would smell and taste a woman's saliva to see if she was a healthy potential mating partner. I can recall tasting cigarettes and spearmint, and once a mouthful of cinnamon altoids, but no flavor that announced an excellent genetic partnership. However, my husband and I have both bitten off pieces of cheese or fruit and passed them to our son. Though we've always set the soggy, slightly masticated mango or mozzarella on his high chair tray or in our hand so our son can pick it up on his own rather than offering him his dinner from our own mouths.

Our son has given us his own sloppy hungers. When I was wheeled into recovery after my C-section, I saw my shirtless husband with our son in his arms. His collarbone and shoulder were wet, and in my anesthesia haze I thought the nurses must've suggested he clean himself before doing skin-to-skin. But the wetness came

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from our son, eagerly rooting along his father's collarbone to his shoulder, shoulder to elbow, bone to joint, unsure why this first instinct did not come with the comforts or rewards he was expecting. When he was laid on my chest, I was able to hold one arm across him. Though most of me was still numb, I could still feel that odd, insistent pull, a sensation I'd never felt but could recognize anywhere.

A POEM BY BETH ANN FENNELLY begins: "Once I did kiss her wetly on the mouth / and her lips loosened, the tongue rising like a fish / to swim in my waters . . ." I underlined these words seven years before I had my son, like I knew already the truth of it or respected the confession. I find "Let's nurse one another's babies / She says even before / We tell what we've been reading" in a tattered copy of C. D. Wright. In Carol Ann Duffy's "Queen Herod": "and the black Queen scooped out my breast, / the left, guiding it down / to the infant's mouth" as though I should have expected this all along, as though I had been expecting it, noticing those privacies and collecting those narratives for some future use.

The first poem to mention the kiss is the "Mahabharata," a poem with a long oral tradition which describes kissing on the lips as a sign of affection. Much later, the "Vatsyayana Kamasutram" would detail a variety of kisses in the sixth century. Anthropologists theorize that when Alexander the Great invaded India he exported this knowledge to the Mediterranean to the enthusiasm of the unknissed masses. The lip-to-lip social kiss became Meet and Greet 101 until the fifteenth century brought the Bubonic plague and everyone began to turn to the side to avoid those germ-y hellos.

The lip-to-cheek adapted greeting I understand, dosing myself weekly with cough syrup and ibuprofen. But I'm disappointed to find all those historical kisses in literature are for affection, respect, or erotic pleasure between adults. There's no mention of kissing children in literature, unless you count the nearness of the wolf's teeth to Little Red's cheek or view Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* as a kiss with a knife and fork.

WHILE HE'S AT WORK, I TEXT MY husband a picture of our son in my arms, my tongue dangling like a threat over

the soft padding of fat on the back of his neck.

Save me! I narrate for my son.

At least he has a 50 percent chance of being normal, my husband texts back.

I answer his salvo with a colon and a capital P.

THOSE WHO ARE AFRAID OF KISSING ARE said to have philematophobia, a fear of illness or an inherited trauma related to an unwanted kiss.

I lied before when I said I didn't remember my first kiss. It's so easy to duck the truth when you offer another confession instead. My first was named Sarah. She lived down the street. We were friends until we kissed. We went on being friends. We kissed in her living room. In her bed. In the fort behind her house. In my basement, zipped into separate sleeping bags, our heads exposed, eyes closed, and losing time.

"We called it practicing," Marie Howe says. Those kisses where we "turned out / the lights and kissed and kissed until we were stoned on kisses." Sarah and I did not call it practicing. It wasn't. It was already the promise and the fulfillment. It was mouth and curiosity. Tongue. Tenderness. But this was before Sarah said she couldn't be my friend anymore, and I pretended to lose my voice so I wouldn't have to answer. I don't talk about my first because I couldn't then, and I can't now. Those hours. Those days that made desire seem possible. Before she said what I'd done to her was wrong. She didn't want it. I didn't know. She'd asked to kiss me the first time, but she said every one after that was all my doing, and she was only being polite. I thought her breath on my lips and her hand on my hips meant: *again, again, again.*

I ASK AN ONLINE GROUP OF OTHER mothers if they've had similar desires expecting to be affirmed in my appetites. After all, we all exclaim over each other's babies that they are so cute we want to eat them up. But they ask if I'm getting enough salt or need a new vitamin. I receive a private message that says, *YES!* Attached is an image of a small doll whose plastic face and arms are dimpled with teeth marks.

FINALLY, I HAVE SOME LUCK IN A JOURNAL. Researchers in Dresden have discovered why babies are so metaphorically delicious, which has nothing to do with

the mouth at all, but the nose. Cognitive scientists had new mothers smell the pajamas of infants and noticed it activated the brain's reward circuits, the thalamus bright on the black screens signaling desire, hunger, addiction. I send it to my husband with the subject line: *Why I'm a licker*. This, I'm sure, will reassure him.

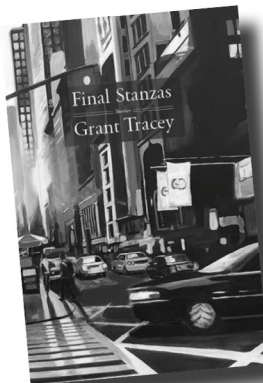
My mother was a kisser. When I visited home, I was besieged. For years, she continued to kiss me on the mouth. A lover of lipstick, she always painted my lips paler shades of red and pink. It wasn't until I saw that none of my friends did this that I realized I should turn my head and receive her in a more subdued and distant manner, without our careful lean to plant one squarely on each other's mouths with an enthusiastic smack.

My son has also started to kiss, or so I assume that's what he's doing when he opens his mouth and plants a wet circle on my cheekbone, his imitation still unsure of itself, the orbicularis oris still too weak or unpracticed to offer the chaste exchange of affection. He is still in that stage of orality, the nerves in his lips more sensitive than the ones in his fingertips. He takes everything in the world into his mouth to know it. I give him my cheek, my breast, my thumb, the loose skin of my stomach.

A FRIEND CALLS IT THE WOMB TAX, THE kisses she steals, demands, and sneaks in when her kids look the other way. She tells me to collect his debt by whatever means necessary. She offers me not only absolution for the guilt I feel for my secretive behavior, but an imperative to enforce oxytocin usury.

My husband remains unconvinced, so I send him the link to a video of mother rats nurturing their pups. Love, for rats, is quite smothering. Their incessant licking is also necessary to jump start the digestive system and allow the young pups to defecate. I hope that my husband overlooks this part of the description, lest he fear that my affection for licking and nibbling has gone beyond our son's roly thighs, and that he focuses on the blind pink rustle in the cage, the mother's unfevered eye as she licks and licks and licks, the scientist's narration discussing the importance of bonding behaviors. His reply contains a stolen tercet: "my blood approves, / and kisses are a far better fate / than wisdom." I send back a line of Xs. □

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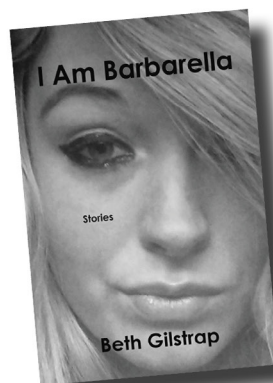


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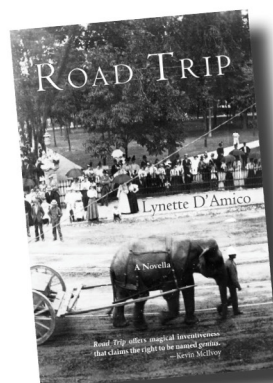


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