

Tiny Letters: Notes to myself in the abyss of

motherhood

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Tiny Letters (<https://tinyletters.github.io/>) is a long form blog hosted on SubStack, a platform that houses the musings, aspirations, critical and non-critical writing of writers from all over the world. **Tiny Letters**, the blog, grew into something much larger in 2024 when it became an online digital archive of many mothers' stories of their first 40 days of their baby or babies' lives. It is a repository that invites women to tell their stories. It's a beautiful and soft space and it is a hard and difficult one. To date we have about thirty stories and it's growing weekly. We encourage as many women as possible to visit the site and fill out the Google form which can be found [here](#).

While the personal blog was started by Dee Marco in 2023, The **Tiny Letters** collaborative project is a creative coming together between Lara Koseff and Dee Marco. This article reflects on both these experiences as modes of writing and creative theorization that name and see the radical labour of everyday mothering. I start with a personal reflection titled 'The Babies and Me' and then move into part two, 'The Babies and All of Us'.

1. The Babies and Me

In February 2023, after the surprise C-section birth of my baby, I started a very personal blog called 40 days post-partum. I had awoken on a warm Saturday morning to the feeling of very strong contractions. I recognized them as the indisputable sign of the baby on her way out... I poked my husband across the bed from me (we invested in a King sized bed after our second baby became a near permanent bed sharer, not that it's helped us much)... He didn't even stir. 'Hey... we are having a baby today...', I whispered, in my best attempt at an across-the-bed-whisper, trying not to wake the toddler sprawled out in star-fish pose. I relished the last few quiet moments before life would change yet again. That's what the end of pregnancy is: standing on the precipice of a massive life change, one that alters you in ways you could never imagine, and a new life that continues to change as your child grows and, with each additional child, you change once more. Nobody tells you to remember to hold onto the bits of yourself, for it'll be a long time till you see that woman again both literally and metaphorically.

This is a piece about the parts that unravel and go down a long path to somewhere else. I still don't yet know, and I am two years post-partum with my third and final baby. I reflect on my pregnancy and how my creative project, **Tiny Letters** for Mothers came to life beyond just me. This is a musing piece that reflects, in its form, the incongruencies, and the inarticulate nature of early motherhood. It is also a piece that reflects some of the loss of early motherhood. It is one of many creative contributions I try to make

to make the work of mothering public and to remind us all, that parenting is not meant to be a solitary job. Parenting, mothering, has been eroded by capitalism and so, like the larger communal family, so too mothering has become solitary, staid, and lonely. It has also become scary because there are often not many to turn to other than oneself or a phone screen.

This is the tone of the [Tiny Letters](#). [Tiny Letters](#) is a labour of love for myself at a very particular time when I was a newly minted mom of three, terrified beyond recognition and still as bloated and swollen on the other side of labour and birth as I was in this description above. The platform I used at the time was called [Tiny Letters](#) and initially, this was not a project. This was a series of tiny letters from me to me. It was a way to see myself in a time when I couldn't see anything. Most new mothers feel a great sense of overwhelm; I knew this to be normal. What I didn't know to be normal was the ongoing wave of sadness I'd never experienced before. The baby was perfect. I was not.

Initially, to write something to myself about each day for 40 days seemed big but not impossible. With each day though, I learned what a huge responsibility I had placed on myself in such a vulnerable time. I felt a desperate need to write on my laptop and not in a diary or a book – I wanted what I was experiencing to be read widely and elsewhere, beyond me. I wanted that this memory documentation of the incredibly mundane, to be read by mothers around the world so that they too might recognize it as normal and so they, unlike me, wouldn't feel so alone. I felt my laptop would take me seriously and my book would just swallow me whole. Swallow the words, swallow me, swallow the baby. I wrote in short bursts, often half asleep and with a new baby suckling at a breast. I still write like this. I am often inspired by Toni Morrison's description of writing while raising two young boys along: 'I stole time to write', says Morrison.

Morrison reminds me and all of us, that we must carve out and steal time for creative work, even with babies hanging from our boobs, even half asleep.

Writing is a method of thinking and has proven, for me, to be my primary method of creating. Over the last few years I've learned about how much more radical writing can be because writing about pain and motherhood is not comfortable and its often hard to read or listen to. It brings up parts of ourselves that are fractured and messy and judgmental and unkind. Writing in the form that I do, so counter to the more formal academic tone in which I'm trained is a constant learning that pulls on my interiority as much as the memories of the babies and labours and births. The choice for form, muddled tenses and longer than usual sentences in parts, is intentional in how I intend to take you along with me, through the memory of feeling my waters break, whispering across a bed, and giving my toddler one last hug before she wouldn't be the baby in the house anymore. Black feminist writing locates my thinking and I locate this work as creative theorization, in the understanding and belief that for a long time, lived experience was abstracted from theory. This is often still the case and I see it often in academic spaces. Theory is textured through the language and validation of whiteness and very particular ways of speaking, writing, articulating that is considered more valuable than others. Creative theorization allows us to read articulations of lived experience as theory too. This scholarship and the groundwork that has already been done by key feminist thinkers such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, as well as Sharlene Khan, Pumla Gqola and other black feminists from the Southern African context, allows me to build on such work, particularly in this terrain of mothering. Often mothering is not considered as radical a form of protest or as spectacular as feminist labours performed, enacted, and fought for in other, outside of the domestic space, contexts. Such forms of theorization such as [Tiny Letters](#) (both the personal blog style entries and the more recent platform to which mothers contribute) are important at pushing the boundaries of what is considered important labour, important thought, and important modalities of constructing those thoughts and experiences for multiple audiences. The work, on both fronts, thus feels urgent and very real. It is often work that is literally happening in real time competing for multiple spaces in a mother's psyche, alongside soundscapes and physical scapes that are less than favourable for creating.

This positionality is not favoured by all in critical spaces such as the art world and/ or more disciplinary specific academic contexts. It is rarely taken seriously. In this way, I consider this work as creative labour

and theorization because it is work that's simultaneously vulnerable and brave, a lot like motherhood. I am often reminded of discourses from western feminism, by artists and scholars such as Mary Kelly and Adrienne Riche, both who, at a critical time in world history, still help us with the vocabulary for and about motherhood.

Baby number 3 was a big surprise and my pregnancy with her felt longer and hotter than either of the others. She was a summer baby and I'd only ever given birth in Autumn or Winter. I'd never seen my legs and feet as swollen and I write about this in detail and in relation to a project called House of Complaints, [here](#).

The choice for a name for her was complex too – as these things go, there's a lot of sentimentality to the arrival of the baby and how parents hope and imagine and dream that their children will go through the world. A name is a marker of most of those things, rolled into the frayed nerves of new parents and the serene and beautiful presence of a new little one. We decided to name her Sanaa – when our second baby was but a couple of months in utero, we decided on a name we loved. We thought it was Amharik, an ancestral acknowledgement and ode to my paternal line. However clumsily, it turns out it was Swahili and has nothing to do with my heritage, at least not anything I know of. We learned this very close to her arrival, by which time we had already been calling her this for months. It would've been hard, perhaps even traumatic to have deleted this already live person at this stage. My husband in particular was very attached and so we left it, mismatched, without much logic. In his words, it was the one thing he wanted to remain or be as it was and so it was.

The littlest one's name is also a kiSwahili name and even though there's no fancy or special explanation for why two of our children have these names, I like to believe the names chose them, felt right, felt solid, beautiful and buoyant, all qualities we wish for them in this wild world.

We named her Sanaa: art or brightness and radiance. In Arabic it also means prayer.

I digress...

*Sanaa was born on 28 January 2023. It was another sweltering day at the height of a Highveld summer in Johannesburg... and my feet were the size of little mountains. I observed them often, as I tried to put them up onto all kinds of surfaces (not particularly helpful with other small children to care for) to help drain them. Even now, nearly two years later, I want to describe them in the detail I have in other pieces of writing after birth, mostly because I still can't refine the best description: disgust, frustration, pain? This is because while we read about feet and swollen feet in those end of pregnancy days, nobody really knows the feeling and, well, like with the **Tiny Letters** project itself, I fear I'll forget it all...*

My feet are one big and one massive. The toes look like red viennas; they always look more combustible, like ammunition. The foot itself is, I'm convinced, padded with cotton wool except that it's not soft. My foot looks soft, like a cloud, you might think, but it's not soft. It's sore to the touch. When I touch the top of it, it dents, and the skin stays like that for a few minutes. I watch the pressed in patch struggle to raise up to meet its podgy cell friends. I try to touch under the foot to see what that feels like. It's also hard. My heels, usually, tragically not in a good state because of all the barefoot walking I do, is even more cut up than usual. My kids ask if they are 'eina' before running to me with plasters. I don't think that the baby's arrival will solve the issue of my feet. Beyond my swollen feet and broken heels are gigantic ankles. The ankles are part of tree stump like legs; my knees have also been sacrificed and thankfully I don't need to describe the rest of the leg because it's covered and would reveal hips too large and too sprawled in mismatched direction, and they no longer fit in anything. The hips will keep the body from recoiling from old outfits and new... propelling me into a new identity both physically and emotionally, and reminding me she's gone, she's gone, she's gone... like an old love letter you read to remind you of who you once were and who once loved you.

This is the tone of [Tiny Letters](#).

This work draws on black feminist writing from Southern African and the diaspora because I am intrigued by questions of how we represent the black maternal world and the maternal more broadly, through playing close attention to the beauty of the quotidian. Christina Sharpe notes in an interview that a colleague, also a black feminist scholar, Saidiyah Hartman asked her, “What would a *Camera Lucida* of the Black maternal look like?” (<https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/christina-sharpe-interview/>) Sharpe’s most recent book, *Ordinary Notes*, inspires me to believe that it’s possible for us to read short, haptic notes that come from a deeply personal place and implore the reader to go to a different, often uncomfortable place. Its lack of uniformity and attention to narratives of the everyday remind me again of hooks and Hill Collins who theorise about the inherent knowledges and wisdoms of black women in particular which is often not considered important enough. I am often intrigued by how often the mother or the figure of a mother lurks just under the surface, sometimes visibly so, in the works of great feminist scholars. Often, I believe, these works are infused with the affects towards or about a mother that are formulated in these often dense and exquisite stories about the world around us. Our mothers, however joyful or fraught those relations may be, are often our compasses from which we move. My work is about saying that mothering work, global mothering, Black mothering, is indeed complex and fraught with texture and torment and joy. *What would Camera Lucida of the Black maternal from a Southern African perspective look like?*

Those early weeks are and were hard, every single time. Each time renders the tense I write in a new present. I know now at some point it will become past tense... but as I write, I’ve not yet parted from the presence of that hardness. The early weeks are harder after a caesarian. I recall the birth in one of the very early tiny letters. I describe it in messy and confusing detail because I don’t want to forget anything: the smell, the feelings, the sounds, the chatter in the room, the needles, the replay in my head – baby is ok, you’ll be ok. Baby cries, I cry. She must come out another way. *You’re ok. You’re ok. You’re ok.* And my husband’s face and his fear, so well masked, to ensure my heart was held. The looks on the children’s faces as we left the house, the drive to the birthing unit... I refuse to forget... so I write.

40 days post-partum:

A friend told me that in Islam women fulfill a 40-day period indoors after the birth of a baby. On further enquiry, I learned that women are allowed to leave the house... they do not have to fulfill certain duties like prayers and the end of the 40 days marks an important time for the family and there are certain rituals attached.

Later, beyond my own 40 days post-partum, I learned that other cultures and religions practice similar markers of 40 days.

I felt even more affirmed – women need rest and space and care after childbirth.

I also felt more concerned that this didn’t seem commonplace or ‘normal’. What seems normal is the opposite of rest. It is publicly celebrated and condoned and that seems ‘normal’.

Of course, a fair amount of this new age awareness (don’t bother the mother for the child, care for the mother too) and discourse is rife on social media platforms and there is a vast array of sites, platforms and spaces that speak about and make public the care for new mothers. But this is still not ‘normal’. Nobody wants to see a struggling mother beyond short, sweet and convenient gestures of tiredness. Of course, this is tiredness she can deal with... and she’s bouncing back. Nobody wants to know about frozen condoms in your freezer for your vaginal tears or the suppositories post Caesar for the pain. Nope, not that. Life after my third baby showed me how deeply incongruous having a child is and can be – there is a lot of job of course. There is also a lot of physical change, discomfort and pain and complication and that so much of what is promoted as ‘normal’ is not.

As a society, we still have very specific ideas about what post-partum is, even here in South Africa where there are so many cultures and ways of doing things. We have set assumptions about what labour and

childbirth looks like, what's permissible during it and, how long post-partum as a phase of life, lasts. Rarely do we centralise the mother. While I initially marked the blog as the first 40 days post-partum, I counted every single day of my writing and eventually this led to me changing its name to 40+ days post-partum. On this platform, readers enter the madness of my interiority in this early post-partum period. If they feel compelled to go down the rabbit hole of the new mother and continue reading the posts, they learn all kinds of things about my life but also about the kind of pace and structure of it and the complexity of the morphing from a family of 4 to a family of 5.

Tiny Letters is an ode of love to myself, in a state of shock, fear, confusion, trauma and pain. I needed to show up for myself in one way or another and this was it. Later in that year, I learned I was suffering with post-partum depression. I had become intrigued by the story of a mother who had committed infanticide the year before (in 2022) and I found the lines too quickly blurred by her story and mine. I have not let go of this research and I hope that something gentle and loving will come out of stories that are truly earth shattering and desperately sad. However, I feel that often the sadness is solely towards the children who die at the hands of their mothers and not enough at the sadness we should feel when we live in and watch a society that should support mothers more and genuinely care for them more. Instead, we throw around kind and sweet and sometimes misguided epithets and even wisdoms. Old mothers, I find, are sometimes the most dangerous – often they too want to be seen, want a feather in their caps, an acknowledgement that they did well and survived. Instead of that vulnerability, they sometimes belabour actions, points, and thoughts that many mothers with small children and zero control over their hormones and their bladders, simply cannot take on board. The result is that the young mothers feel they're 'wrong' in some way, the older mothers judge them as soft, incapable. Fathers hope that motherly instincts will kick in and when they don't, they too panic. Everyone is too afraid to say, 'Love, can we help and how?' The mother is often too afraid to say 'yes, please'.

I had a bad experience like this. And I will never forget it. In fact, it was so bad that it has influenced work since then and reminds me often that societies care very little for women indeed and even less when they're in their childbearing years – carrying and birthing children drains women and they're of little use to economies that thrive on outputs, lack of feelings and profits, whatever those profits might be.

2. The Babies and Us

In November of 2023 I met a woman who would become a friend and creative collaborator. We spoke about birth stories for hours and about the overwhelming dearth of emotions that come with becoming a mother. We spoke about **Tiny Letters** too. By that stage, nearly a year into my baby's life I had started apologizing for how dark it sounded. I was still writing it. I still am, sometimes... but it's not what it was. Lara Koseff and I started the **Tiny Letters** platform early in 2024. It is a collection of birth stories and the narratives of new mothers. We have been working on it collectively for over the year of 2024. and it continues to grow. It's what I wanted **Tiny Letters** to be... a letter of love to myself and other mothers in their first 40 days/ 6 weeks post-partum. The entire platform is a point of recognition on multiple fronts. It is intended as a community beacon of hope. It's no longer about me but now, I could be any of these women and any of them could be me. My continuous present tense is theirs and theirs mine.

Tiny Letters has become so much more than me and my story: my individual story of love and loss and desperation, of fear and anxiety and throwing up because I was afraid I'd lose my job and of streaming tears, because I thought I was never going to pack good enough lunches for my older kids again, because I couldn't get away from the baby and her need for skin to skin and boob to skin... **Tiny Letters** is an online digital archive of many mothers' stories of their first 40 days of their baby or babies' lives. It is a repository that invites women to tell their stories. It's a beautiful and soft space and also a hard and difficult one. Lara and I sift through the data by ourselves - we receive the information from a Google form. Lara then codes and puts it onto a website where, when you log on, you can filter the data based on things like race, class, location, type of birth. We are always looking for more submissions and trying to solicit the stories of more and more women who have birthed babies, especially to ensure that more and more women find each other through our platform.

The platform, like its information, is about seeing each other and sharing love and recognition across space and time and across facts and knowledge. It's a softness about knowing someone else is struggling, their baby was born on the same day as yours, they also had a footling breach and not a regular breach... that they also couldn't bring themselves to birth at home, or they did, and they're ok...

That partners sometimes are not what you need to prop you up even though they can be lovely. It's about building a community or an army of mothers... or whatever you want to call it. It's about remembering the value and messiness of a letter, simply telling another what you know now about your life and asking them about theirs. It's about reveling in that information and continuing, holding onto the information shared with you. Please feel free to contribute in any way that seems fitting. While **Tiny Letters** is a platform for mothers, I am aware of the multiple labours and experiences of care for fathers and welcome all feedback, discussion and dissent.

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Note:

A series of creative gatherings around the theme of '*women's work as artistic practice*' were held at the Origins Centre at University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in August/September 2023. While archiving and analysing the proceedings of these gatherings, a series of texts were commissioned from a group of distinguished writer-thinkers. These writers – Candice Allison, Laura de Harde, Tammy Hodgskiss Reynard, Anthea Buys, Sharlene Khan, and Dee Marco – each contribute a unique perspective to the themes of women's creative practice, the body, materiality, nurturing, and the traces we leave behind. These texts are designed to challenge, inspire, and expand our collective consciousness.

The living repository of the creative gatherings can be accessed here:
<https://womencreativesgathering.webflow.io>

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