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# SEEKING RESEMBLANCE

*An adoptive family finds kinship  
in the natural world*

PAINTINGS BY FIRELEI BÁEZ

WHEN I TAKE THE DOG OUT to do her business, my one-year-old son points to our barn, which houses an antique tractor, and repeats in a soprano voice, rolling the *r* as if this is the only way he can squeak it out, “Carr! Carr! Carr!” It is his first word, a general term he uses for anything with wheels (a hose reel, the high chair) and anything that sounds like a car (an airplane, a strong wind). I’d hoped for something more natural—“tree” or “sun” or “flower”—or, of course, “momma,” having waited years for the role, my husband and I finally choosing to adopt in our late thirties. But “car” it is. I carry him toward the barn.

Walking through my flat central Wisconsin backyard always, somehow, transports me to the land I grew up in: the more hilly terrain of central Maryland. Our view of a ridge made up of glacial till, pocked with kames and kettles concealed by trees, makes me think—sometimes out loud—*That could be an Appalachian foothill*. At least it seems so, its upper half lit with the setting sun’s horizontal rays. I think this too when I turn my car off the route that runs along the ridge and descend on the curvy road that leads to my house: *This could be an Appalachian valley*. Sitting on the porch in my front yard I can see a second ridge,

one of a series formed from the glacier’s recession—its edge melting and depositing, refreezing, then melting and depositing again. Though created entirely differently, it makes the general vicinity seem not so unlike Maryland’s ridge-and-valley region. And when I pull out of my driveway and turn east, a drumlin covered in deciduous forest reminds me of Maryland’s rolling hills, albeit solo. I can see now, after ten years, why I settled here—not in this state, but in this spot: it looks like where I came from. *It could almost be where I came from*. It isn’t. Maryland was never glaciated, a topic I have written about to exhaustion, especially with regard to how the landscape of my adulthood differs from that of my childhood. Nevertheless, I see here a familiar geography.

In the barn I sit my son on the cobwebbed seat of the tractor, an act that silences him, as if he had no idea that words, beyond naming things, could command action.

“Tractor,” I say. “Has wheels, like a car.” I pat the cracked tires, caressing the deep treads. At this point, though, approximations will do; he has no concern for exactness. And neither do I: through the open barn door, the foothill—er, drumlin—pleasantly obscures my view of the horizon.

"I KNOW THIS IS SILLY," my husband's aunt says one day as she watches our son pull up and cruise around the coffee table in my in-laws' living room, "but he looks like you, Tom."

It isn't the first time we have heard this. Aunts, colleagues, nieces, a brother's mother-in-law have all said—and keep saying—the same thing: "This doesn't make sense, but he looks just like you."

As adoptive parents, my husband and I were totally unprepared for others' continuous insistence that our son looks just like us—or, at least, just like my husband. After ten years of infertility (i.e., 3,560 days to concede there would never be a child that looked just like us) and several months of conscientious self-education about adoptive parenting (including preparation for transracial parenting, a factor in 28 percent of domestic adoptions), we seem to have developed a very different lens than that of our friends and relatives through which to view our family. We don't need physical resemblance to bind us together. We see ourselves as what we are: an adoptive family, nothing less and nothing more than any other family.

Perhaps our straightforwardness about being an adoptive family is due to the fact that our son's adoption is open. Close to 95 percent of domestic US adoptions today have some level of openness, a number that has steadily increased since the mid-twentieth century, when social mores still shrouded the majority of adoptions in secrecy. In most states, open adoption basically involves nonbinding agreements not enforceable by law, and can mean anything from occasional letters and phone calls to visits between adoptive families and birth parents. For us it meant that a few days after we picked up our son, his birth parents friended us on Facebook. We don't use Facebook for much other than posting pictures of intriguing nature finds and keeping up with family (which they now were), so we figured it would be an easy way to share photos and to message with them privately to plan visits.

Some researchers suggest that open adoption undermines adoption's typical attempt historically to mimic blood relations; open adoption changes what it means to be a family, what it means to be related. Yet despite our open adoption, it seems some of our friends and family members can't help but see us as a biological family. I suppose that the resemblance they comment on is true at some level: as it turns out, my husband and son both have pale skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. But when I look at my son, I see Facebook news feed pictures of his birth father. Likewise, the names my husband and I throw around at home regarding our son's looks are not ours, but the names of his birth parents (I'll call them Sam and Moira). We did not know them until the day after our son's birth, but we have visited with them now a handful of times. "I

feel like I'm carrying around a mini-Sam!" I'll sometimes say, or, "With that hat on and expression, he looks just like Moira!" And Tom, smiling and shaking his head in wonder, no less so than his aunt that day in his parents' living room, will respond, "I know!"

The belief that human infants closely resemble their fathers—even more so than their mothers—is common. Cross-culturally, family members of newborns, from both sides, have been found to make this claim. A 1995 study in the journal *Nature* found that subjects could more easily match photos of twelve-month-old babies with photos of their fathers than with photos of their mothers. Evolutionary psychology would predict as much. While a mother can be certain an infant is hers, a father can't. Therefore, an infant who signals paternity by looking like his father might reap greater parenting benefits from his father and his father's family.

But later research failed to replicate these results. As a 2002 article in the scientific journal *Acta Ethologica* pointed out, the equation might not be so simple. Sometimes a baby's father is not a woman's monogamous mate. Thus, it may be more adaptive for a baby, at least at first, to look anonymous. Women, who need their mates' investment in parenting, *claim* their babies look like their mates—and men, who do not wish to be cuckolded, believe them. Family members from both sides of the union, sharing the same wishes (all subconsciously, of course) reiterate the claims. Perhaps this explains the words my husband and I so often hear regarding our son's looks—and our own words when we comment that he looks like Sam: they are simply an evolved response to the illusionist that is every baby.

EVEN THOUGH MY HUSBAND, a Wisconsin native, is weary of my comparisons of the geography of the upper Midwest to that of the Mid-Atlantic, in which the Midwest—in my eyes—nearly always falls short, I must repeat here a statistic I have written about ad nauseam since I moved here: Wisconsin has thirteen thousand natural lakes; Maryland has none. It would seem that in this respect Wisconsin has the upper hand with regard to natural beauty; but I am a lover of *moving* water. Streams cannot be as easily counted as lakes because of how they join continuously into larger and larger rivers—a sort of reverse genealogy—on their journeys to the sea, which is both destination and place of origin. So I have no neat quantitative comparison for streams in Wisconsin versus streams in Maryland. But I can tell you that where I grew up, every valley had a stream; not so, here. In the glaciated portion of Wisconsin, there aren't many valleys to move streams along.

Notwithstanding what I know about this landscape, for my first five years after moving to Wisconsin I searched for streams



*Sans-Souci (This threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body)*, 2015.  
Acrylic and ink on linen, 108 x 74 inches.

in the small ripples of the state's terra firma. Even today, the place I hike to most often with my son is a brook. Really it's the tiny outlet of one lake and inlet of another—a tenth of a mile or so of running water. But it babbles to me like a long-lost relative.

"Car, car, car," my son says, pointing to each tree as we walk to the brook, even though I know he can make the *t* sound and also that he knows full well these are not cars, nor have anything in

common with them. He has learned that "car" is an opening for conversation, that it elicits a response, always, from my husband and me. It's an easy way for him to ask a question.

"Birch," I say and lean close to one, so that he can touch the smooth, white bark from his seat in the infant carrier strapped to my waist and shoulders. "Lenticels," I say, pointing to the dark, rougher, horizontal strips that cut across it.



*Those who would douse it*, 2015. Acrylic and ink on panel, 115 x 68 inches.

We arrive at the brook and my dog, Betsy, wades in for a drink. I lift my son out of the carrier, remove his shoes, roll up his pants, and plop him down on a rock in the center, his feet in the cool water. He splashes happily, teetering a bit, and begins a small rock collection, picking up stones from the bottom and examining them before—thankfully—putting them on the rock next to him rather than in his mouth. Betsy moves in and out of the water.

I watch the two of them. It seems silly, but a popular stereotype holds that people look like their dogs, and research has actually supported this stereotype. In a Japanese study oddly similar to the one in which subjects matched pictures of infants to their fathers, a psychologist demonstrated that people were able to correctly pair pictures of dogs with their owners 80 percent of the time. How could such a resemblance come to be? Probably

only because like picks like. I'm not sure Betsy looks like me, but family and friends have jokingly said we're alike in nature: both of us wallflowers in the house and always longing to be on a trail somewhere.

SOMETIMES, when I can't sleep at night, I pick a trail I've known at some point in my life and hike it in my mind, putting one foot down and then the next, passing every root and rock I remember until sleep comes. Now I often mentally travel the path to my son: failing to get pregnant; considering adoption; resigning to just wait and see and live life as a family of two, traveling and getting degrees and saving money and sleeping in and reading and nurturing our hobbies; suddenly realizing we still wanted to be parents; reconsidering adoption; and then, just three weeks post-home study, receiving a call for an emergency placement. A baby had been born; we had been chosen by his birth parents; we needed to buy a car seat and come to the hospital to pick up our son.

Our son. When did we first begin to conceive of him this way? To regard ourselves as parents? Anthropologist Signe Howell coined the term *kinning* to describe the process by which any new person—adult or child, adopted or biological—“is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom.” She proclaims kinning a “universal process,” meaning all societies engage in it—like language or funeral rites.

## Our son. When did we first begin to conceive of him this way? To regard ourselves as parents?

Kinning involves both nature and nurture. A 1995 article in *American Ethnologist*, for example, describes how, in one indigenous Ecuadorean community, “a child can be physically made one's own by eating the same food over time, by sharing emotional states, and by being in close physical proximity to people and objects.” This contrasts sharply with beliefs about kinship in Western cultures, which tend to define kinship by biology—shared characteristics passed along through DNA. So how do adoptive families residing in genetic-essentialist cultures manage to kin their biologically unconnected children?

Surprisingly enough, they do it, Howell observes, with relative ease, sometimes holding their children's characteristics in the foreground and sometimes in the background, depending on the context. Howell's extensive research about the process of kinning mostly focuses on transnational adoption, where the physical appearance of the child often presents a strong visual message regarding biological relatedness within the adoptive family. But

as the mother of a domestically adopted child who can see my son's birth parents' features—but not my own—in my son's face, I think Howell's observations about kinning apply here, too. While it is always assumed that adopted children look most like their biological parents, Howell observes that adopted children and their adoptive parents begin a “quest for resemblances”—for example, in physique or personality. And though it is understood that the adopted child could have been placed with other adoptive parents and vice versa, most adoptive families create backstories that imply fate was a factor in their placements.

Howell likens the process of kinning to transubstantiation, the changing of one substance into another. It is, quite fittingly, a kind of communion, an important ritual. When someone is kinned, though their appearance stays the same, a fundamental change takes place.

“GOOD FOR YOU!” a woman commented when I passed her last winter about two miles in on Wisconsin's Ice Age Trail, snowshoes buckled to my feet, baby strapped to my belly. He was heavy—eighteen pounds at four months—and I sometimes thought about the weight as we walked, tried to imagine he was under my skin and not just under my coat, mused about how long it would take me to equal, in hikes like these, nine months of carrying him. But pregnancy was—and always will be—beyond me. I can't imagine it. And the truth is, it doesn't matter.

What matters is that I was in the woods with my son. And

gradually on these walks he began to sleep less and observe more. I sat him down on frozen ponds for photo shoots next to snow-covered mounds wherein warm muskrats slept. We unearthed blue-spotted salamanders from beneath decomposing logs and looked at each other in matched amazement, me saying, “Yes, isn't this an unbelievable planet we live on?” It has been these shared walks through the woods, these moments of discovery, of wonder, that have made us mother and son.

ADOPTION IS A LEGAL FICTION; this is, according to the law, how it is categorized. Just like corporate “personhood,” it is an assertion accepted as true in order to achieve a particular goal in a legal matter. Corporations, though they are not persons, can have residences, nationalities, and even enemies. And through adoption, infertile couples can have children.

In Wisconsin, after the thirty-day period in which birth parents may reconsider their choice of adoption, adoptive parents

wait six months before, in a court hearing, the child legally becomes theirs. Usually, a new birth certificate is issued along with the adoption decree. During our hearing, although I had schooled myself in the legal proceedings, I was surprised at the judge's words: "Do you understand that we will be amending the birth certificate 'as if he was born to you?'"

I nodded, but inside I felt shocked: this wasn't what I wanted at all. Yes, I wanted our son to have our last name; I wanted the legal document that says we are his parents, that protects our ability to be a family; I wanted the whole process to be over. But I did not want to erase my son's origin story. In my mind, his birth certificate should be more like a marriage certificate, with the names of his birth parents and his adoptive parents. *Born to . . . and son of . . .* I had imagined it might say, though I must have known this wouldn't be the case.

Over the course of the next year, I watched my son's birth parents through the curious window that Facebook provides. They posted picture after picture that I could have posted myself: camping, sunsets, shorelines, links to news articles on social and political issues that I completely agreed with. I know Facebook does not reveal a completely accurate picture of anyone's life, but in this case, it seems, like did pick like.

One night they texted us photos of the two of them when they were little. My husband and I could see the resemblances already, and hoped they would continue—a promise of lopsided golden curls falling off the top and sides of his head.

## It has been these shared walks through the woods, these moments of discovery, of wonder, that have made us mother and son.

We showed the pictures to my husband's mother, but she only frowned a little, without much of a response. My best friend refused to look at them. I decided not to even mention them to my own family.

One day our son's birth father invited us to meet his parents at their family's lake house. Moira made brunch, and as we sat around the table, Sam's mother mentioned how my husband, Tom, and her son, Sam, kind of look like each other. To lay this out more clearly, this was our son's birth grandmother pointing out that her grandchild's adoptive father resembles her son. For a moment, we all stared at the two of them.

There was no mention of any resemblance between Moira and me. Maybe we really don't look alike. Maybe we don't expect little boys to resemble adult females. Or was it because there is absolute proof which one of us mothered this little boy for the first nine months of his life? No need, and therefore no evolved mechanism, for discussing how much a baby looks like its mother?

We spent the rest of the morning outside, letting our son explore the yard and the shoreline of the lake. Someone pointed to a patch of long-stemmed, fiery-orange dandelion-like flowers in a soggy corner of the lawn. Moira called them the name of something not found in this region, a popular western species that looks similar—in fact, I had misidentified them that same way myself at one point. I knew what they really were, but held back. It wasn't my place, I felt, to be saying what was what. And what does it matter what you call something, its true species, genus, and family? The greater truth is that the flower is gorgeous; we all loved it. Instead, I told them how it also grows on our lawn, and I, too, mow around it.

Sam and his dad pulled a little ride-on car out of the shed, which one of my son's birth cousins had outgrown. They told us to keep it, and we thanked them. Later, as we unpacked the car, we found a cone of red pine that Sam had also placed in our trunk. I set it in front of the picture of Sam and Moira that we have in our son's room.

AFTER A DECADE of living in Wisconsin, I have begun to acclimate to its thirteen thousand lakes, or, at least, to one of them: Sunset Lake, a deep, clear, glacial lake with a public beach, a few miles from our house. All summer long I take my son there and put him in one of those inner tubes for babies that have the little underwear-like seat with leg holes and set him in the water where, at the right depth, he can walk! His first hike is in a lake.

On Labor Day, it unexpectedly becomes seriously hot, hot enough to propel me to the lake despite the fact that it's a holiday and I know it will be crowded. It's a late-afternoon, spur-of-the-moment decision and I don't even put a shirt on over my halter-style swim top. On my feet is a pair of plastic, bejeweled flip-flops I've put on just for the short jaunt from car to beach and back again. I've put my son in a swim shirt and swim trunks, and rather than squeeze him into a thick, uncomfortable swim diaper, for the first time I've left him dangerously diaperless. But when we arrive at the lake what I feared is true: it's too crowded. There is no place to park and no space to swim either.

We're not dressed for hiking, but I'm itching to be outdoors. I make a quick decision and drive past the lake to the Ice Age trailhead. This is the first time I've hiked with my son without aid of a carrier, and, swim tops slipping, we sweat against one another skin on skin as I grunt up the hills in the heat. I gingerly navigate

my steps, my toes threatening to slip off the edge of my flip-flops.

At the bottom of a hill, where a short boardwalk crosses a shimmering wetland, I pause to catch my breath, slide my son down my sweaty leg, and place him between my feet. Several frogs jump, squeaking, into the water. Agrimony, a tall yellow wildflower, blooms nearby. I point these things out, gems of the forest, but my son is totally absorbed by some other object. My flip-flop.

“We didn’t come here to examine the fake plastic jewels on my flip-flops,” I tell him, then smile. Maybe we did. It’s like our first trip to the zoo, where I was hard-pressed to get him, at nine months, to notice a giraffe, elephant, or ostrich. But he was fascinated by the fences and the young *Homo sapiens*. This is the beauty of his age, a little bit of which I wish we all could keep: our alien-on-a-new-planet perspective, our un-enculturation. He knows nothing of relevance—or of relatives, for that matter. At his age, anything is possible, anything could be normal, even having two parents biologically unrelated to him.

MY SON’S SECOND WORD is “daddy.” He says it one evening when we are stepping out of the car, all three of us, from some errand. After months of multisyllabic “dada’s” he looks at my husband and smiles and says “daddeee,” not as if it is the first time, but as if they are being reunited after a long absence. “Daddeee, daddeee,” we get for weeks. Occasionally he will call me “daddeee,” too.

The seasons change and the ground freezes. My son weighs thirty pounds and I can no longer carry him very far on my front, so my husband helps me position him in the carrier on my back, and then the two of us—just my son and I—walk through the yard past the barn and over the frozen furrows of the cornfield, through a narrow pine plantation, and up to the top of the steep, round kame that from our house still reminds me of an Appalachian foothill.

Even though it’s been a year since we adopted our son, family and friends continue to elaborate on how much my husband and son look alike. The physical comparisons no longer surprise me, or bother me. If making mountains out of moraines and making brooks out of lake inlets has helped me to adjust to the Midwestern landscape, how can I mind when other people liken my husband to my son in order to view us as his parents? Transubstantiation is hard. When I look at my son, what is appearance and what is reality flip back and forth in my mind until I can’t figure out where the sleight of hand is. I don’t know how else to say this, other than that my son is both my son and someone else’s. For me, it amounts to a sort of reverse communion, a new riff on an old adage: blood is thicker than water, yes, but blood is also *mostly* water. Over 80 percent. This is the bigger picture. The relatedness of the people in the photo really depends on the frame of reference.

Howell, quoting anthropologist Sidsel Roalkvam, has said that kinship “creates continuity over time, and gives people a sense of ‘belonging to a life,’ to something bigger than the individual.” That is how I feel when I look at my son—as if I am looking to the edge of the universe, back in time, at some curve of cheek or nose bridge or raised eyebrow that has survived through all the myriad individuals sexual reproduction allows. In my son’s resemblance to his birth parents lies something I admire: a certain staying power—not my own or anybody’s in particular—just the beauty of what gets passed down and sticks around. That this happens at all gives me solace.

To get home from our hike, I lift my son from my back and carry him carefully halfway down the steepest part of the kame, then sit him on his butt, and he slides the rest of the way on his own, laughing, and pointing at the dog and saying her nickname, “Bubbles”—his third word—over and over. Then, for the last little part of our journey, I strap him over my belly and carry him home. 🐾

## Bivalves Feeding at New Smyrna Beach

I love the tiny bivalves,  
how with each incoming wave  
their cabochon bodies rise from the sand  
lavender amber lemon-citrine,  
rusty beards of cilia stretching  
to take the ocean’s richness  
inside themselves—

how those unburied bodies  
if cast too far from water  
will die, and aren’t these the dangers  
of sunlight and blind faith,  
the promise of harvest  
after harvest to fill the soul  
as if the next wave won’t kill us?

—Ilyse Kusnetz