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The Words We Carry by Stephanie Vessely



The Vessely family, like many families, had its own language, its own meanings for things. Words had their own definitions like sex, which meant bad or shame or forbidden or wrong unless it was between a man and his wife. Then it meant beautiful or love or sacred or holy. Other words didn't make themselves known for a long time, like gay or homosexual. That meant not right, as in wrong. They meant choice, as in a personal statement, as in the persona one chooses: like the Goth boys and girls I knew in high school, who chose to cloak themselves in the dark, to hide behind black hair, black lips, black eyes. Homosexuality was something that could be washed off at any moment, left behind, transformed. Lifestyle is the word my father used, implying that sexual orientation was akin to picking clothes and friends and hobbies, that sexuality was something we selected from the culture rather than something that came from within. Now my father says he doesn't care

what other people do as long as they don't call it marriage. For a long time, I did not know words like intolerance, ignorance, prejudice.

In *History: The Great American Lullaby*, Natalie Diaz writes, "Words carry within them the dark things we have done and the dark things those dark things continue to do. It is important that we know our words better than anybody else." *Every word*, she says. "And not just that word, also the word it was before. And the word that word was before it became the word you are using." When I read this the word that came to mind was *abortion*—the word that carries the dark things I have done, the word that was one thing before it became another thing. I hadn't thought of it like that before, as something I needed to get to know, as something that has evolved over time. Like many difficult things, I have at times ignored my word or pushed my word away. I have run from my word. I have been afraid to say my word. I still can't say it out loud without feeling infinitely raw, exposed, like flesh that is suddenly torn or sliced open.

I am not the only one who rarely says my word. Ernest Hemingway did not say it in *Hills Like White Elephants*. Debra Marquart did not say it in *Some Things About That Day*. Ben Folds Five did not say it in *Brick*. The Verve did not say it in *Freshman*. No one said it on *Scandal*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Sex, and the City*, *Beverly Hills 90210*. There are ways to talk around things. You can say, "I'm not going to have it," or "I'm not keeping it." You can say, "This isn't the right time," or "I can't be a mother right now." You can have entire conversations about it without ever saying the word. *Abortion*.

Sometimes we don't say certain words because they are taboo, because saying them is impolite or rude or inappropriate or offensive or demeaning. Like racial slurs. Like profanity. We don't say *fuck*, *shit*, *ass*, *cunt*, *bitch*, *damn* when we are in certain company, when we don't know who we are dealing with. Or at least I don't. I censor myself at work, with family, with new acquaintances, until I know it is safe to speak freely. Until I am sure I can say what I mean without offense. Other words we don't say because of what they conjure, because of what they bring up, because of what they mean. Or this is the answer I've come up with anyway. This is how I explain to myself why the subject of abortion is almost never handled realistically on television or in film. Because if we said the word, if we actually portrayed what it does and doesn't mean, we'd have to be uncomfortable. We'd have to have uncomfortable conversations. We'd have to pay more than lip service. We'd have to admit that abortion is more complex than the words *pro-choice*, *pro-life*. But we are a people conditioned to look away, to avoid, to pretend what's happening isn't happening.

Abortion, in my childhood and teenage years, meant *other*, as in something that belonged to other people. It was distant. It happened to bad people. Careless people. Reckless people. People without god. It was something I need not worry about. It was not something that could get me, like the things that could get anyone—like theft, like lying, like disobedience. Abortion only came for people who had sex when they weren't supposed to. I didn't realize at the time, that by people they meant women—women who didn't keep their legs closed, women who sullied themselves by not waiting until marriage to create union with man. Women for whom pregnancy was consequence, punishment, women for whom pregnancy was, *well, maybe she should have thought of that before she had sex*. From the beginning the word was a woman's word. In church, at the dinner table, and in Sunday school it was a deed created by women, for women. I cannot recall a single instance in which I heard the word *father*, in which *father* shared the burden of responsibility. It was always the mother who was facing the fires of hell, who was standing at the gates of the inferno.

*Abortion*, in the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy.” Sub-definitions use the words *expulsion*, *arrest*, but it's the word *deliberate* that sticks out, that carries with it the other definition of *abortion* from my childhood—*sin*.

Sin: “an immoral act considered to be a transgression against divine law.” Sin, wherein matters of intent reign. In the religion of my youth, it wasn't just the sin itself that mattered, but the thought that went into it. Killing someone in a car accident was a different offense than stabbing them with a knife. That was the difference between a venial sin (just apologize and all is forgiven) and a mortal sin (you're fucked you're spending eternity in hell). A mortal sin must meet three conditions: be a grave matter, be done with full knowledge, be done with deliberate consent. A venial sin is a sin that only meets one or two of these conditions. So *abortion*—grave, done willfully, done by choice—equals mortal sin equals eternal damnation.

There is a loophole of course. One can save themselves from the fire and brimstone with *contrition*, the act of repenting for one's sins. One can go to a priest and say, “Oh my God I am heartily sorry for having offended thee.” One can say “I detest my sins.” One can say, “I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more.” And one will be forgiven. One will be taken off the list for future residents of hell. That is, if one means it. If one isn't going to just commit the same sin again a year later. Once, you can maybe get away with, but twice—it's hard to believe you are heartily sorry if you do it again.



For some, *abortion* means *choice*, as in choosing one's life, as in choosing the best path to go with one's circumstances. In this respect maybe the better word is *freedom*, as in having the option to decide one's fate. Freedom, like sin, is also a matter of degree. Whether it is true depends on where one lives, how much money one has, whether one has support. Like with sin, meeting only some of the elements changes the outcome. Having access and money can get the job done, but lack of support can lock one in solitary confinement. Having access and support but no money can feel like being on the wrong side of a trap door. Having money and support but nowhere to go locks the door and throws away the key.

Before it was the word we use today, *abortion* meant other things. In the 1500s, for example, *abortion* meant "the expulsion of the fetus before it is viable." The difference is that this definition also encompassed miscarriages. The word meant deliberate as well as unintended expulsion. It came from the Latin *aboriri*. *Ab*, meaning "amiss," and *oriri*, meaning "appear, be born, arise." *Something being amiss with appearing, being born, arising*. *Amiss* seems like a much too kind word. It implies that there was a malfunction of some sort, that something was off, or not quite right. It's not entirely untrue. For me, things were amiss. Circumstances weren't quite right. But that has everything to do with what was happening outside of my body, not with what was happening inside. Inside everything looked good, everything was normal. Nothing was amiss until I made it so.

*Abortion* means *murder*. As in, *abortion stops a beating heart*. This is true. It does. But so does hunting. Factory farming. The death penalty. So do assault rifles. Defense missiles. In this respect *abortion* means *selective truth* or *hypocrisy*. It means *political tool*.

*Abortion* means *patriarchy*, as in rooms full of men deciding what a woman can and can't do with her body. Case in a point: a bill that would require a woman to get the father's permission before having the procedure. *Permission*. The first time I've heard the word *father* used in this conversation. *Permission*. The first time the father has ever been given any responsibility.

*Abortion* means *mine*, as in not the father's. The father does not bear any responsibility. As far as I know he does not carry any burden, any complex feelings about the word or the deed. There are no scars left inside his body. He does not hold the memory in his cell tissue—of carrying life, of destroying life. He does not know what it felt like, sounded like, smelled like.

Diaz says of words that, “Even if they are one part memory, they are also another part living.” This is what I’m trying to get at. That in my memory abortion used to mean sin, bad, murder, but now it means something else. It has evolved, grown. Now it is something that lives in my body. (In that respect it also means *irony*.) It is no longer something abstract, something other. It is a particular color, a particular shade that I now view the world through. It is something that got in and had its way with me. It is a part of me, like an inoperable tumor, or a scar. It won’t ever go away.

*Abortion* means secret. As in no one knows, as in well, some people know, but only safe people, only people with whom I do not share blood ties. *Secret*, from Latin *secretus* means set apart, separate, withdrawn. Which is how it sometimes feels—like if my family were an image they would be a group of bodies standing together and I would be one body standing apart from them. Separate. Withdrawn. For lots of reasons. Like the word *liberal*, like the word *agnostic*, like the words *single*, *childless*, *artist*. But those words don’t pin me down the way the word *abortion* would if I told them. Albert Camus said that “Liberty is the right not to lie.” If withholding the truth is considered a lie, then in this case *abortion* also means *prisoner*. As in trapped. As in unable to truly be one’s self. As in unable to truly be loved as one’s self.

What is the word for a woman who has had an abortion? What do we call her? The one who performs the procedure is called an *abortionist*. Does that make the woman an *abortionee*? An *abortioner*? Or should we stick with the words we’ve used so far? *Slut*, *whore*, *sinner*, *murderer*.

For many, maybe even most women, *abortion* is just a word. It holds the same gravity as *bad perm* or *shoulder pads*. It was something they did that they wish they didn’t have to do. It was something that happened in high school or college. It was unarguably the right choice because they were sixteen or nineteen or twenty-one because the father was a frat boy or a one-night stand or a guy they would never want to be the father of their child. Or they didn’t know who the father was.

Reasons and age ranges are actually numerous and complicated and the decision, I think, is almost never taken lightly. One might be twenty-nine, thirty, and in love with a man who would be a terrible father. One might already be a mother, and unable to support another child. One might never want to be a mother. To use terms like *pro-choice* does a disservice. I do not know any women who wants to make the choice.

But it seems most women do not carry the word the way I do. It is not chained to them, or part of them. And I don’t mean the word *guilt*. I do not mean any

crazy evangelical or religious *remorse* or *regret*. I mean the word is not just a word to me. And maybe it isn't to other women either, but I don't know because we don't say our word outside of political or religious context.

Diaz asks us to look at the words, to "listen to the things they have endured, the things they have done." This is all I'm trying to say. That *abortion* to me wasn't like a bad perm, or like my neon clothes phase. It wasn't something I did that one time (or that other time) that I hardly ever think about. Like the abyss that looks back when looked into, abortion was a thing I did that also did something to me.

But it is a different thing than what the religious people would say. I want to be clear about this. It is not what I was warned about in my youth. That religion would like to strike fear in you—of hell, yes—but also of a life lived in eternal regret. *Regret*, as in punishment, as in if you go through with it, for the rest of your life, you will wish you hadn't. *Regret*, as in you will never be happy, as in you will always be crying, as in you will live your days as if you are weighted down by five tons of bricks.

I don't wish I hadn't done it. I don't go through my days tortured and mourning. But that doesn't mean I haven't mourned. That I haven't felt the weight of my decisions. That I haven't been sad. And I just want to be able to use words like *sad*, like *sorrow*, without becoming a cautionary tale.

I want it to be okay to feel how I feel. I want to be able to talk about it out in the world in a real way. I want to be able to say I had two abortions, and it changed me forever. I want to be able to talk about it the way other people are able to talk about their wounds—openly, honestly. I want to be able to admit they are wounds without automatically being categorized or stigmatized. I want, like all words, to be heard, to resonate. I want to be allowed multiple definitions.

In Diaz's essay she tells us her people's word for *metal*—*anya kwa'oor*—and how it came to them as a prophecy, how the word, roughly translated, carries its story within it—of something with "no arms, no legs," as something "oval-shaped," as something that "will come across the ocean and land here." Diaz writes, "The metal that was prophesied was not the metal of pots or pans or rakes—it was a bullet." She says, "Anytime we speak of metal, we are speaking of the way it first came to us."

This is how I also speak of *abortion*—as the thing I first knew it as, which is to say, as *sin*, but also as all of the other definitions it has accrued along the way, all of the debris and dust it is now covered in. It is heavy with meanings. It

holds history—mine—but also the histories of all the women who came before me. Metal means something different to Diaz than it does to me. And abortion means something different to me than it does to you. All words, I think Diaz is saying, are like this. They all come to us and come from us with the weight of our definitions, associations, connotations. No wonder it is no small thing to be heard, to be understood.

What I want, what I have wanted for some time, is to find someone whose word—*abortion*—carries the same definition as my word—*abortion*. I have wanted to find a woman I can recognize, someone who closes the gulf between myself and others. But I see now that I won't find that woman, that I can't find that woman, or that if I do, it will not be quite right, or exactly the same. Some words, it seems, are ours alone. We must carry them. We must hold them. We must care for them with the same tenderness and attention we give to the most vulnerable among us. We must not be afraid of them or of the things they have done. We must own them even if in doing so we risk being torn open by them. We must say our words out loud, over and over, as a way of taming them. Of taking their power and harnessing it, of keeping it close in.

*Abortion.*

*Abortion.*

*Abortion.*

Or, at least, we must try. We must try, like alchemists, to transform our words. To take that which has been put upon us and reshape it, make it our own, so that one day, perhaps, a word like *metal* might become not a bullet, but the thing that stops the bullet. And words like *abortion* might be not a sin, not secret, not shame, but something else, like choice, like agency, like ownership.

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Escape from the human realization of earthly and bodily confinement has inspired greatness and savagery. My conflict often gives way to delight in each twist and turn of narrow cobbled streets despite my rejection of foundational narratives supporting the systemic oppression by the church and state. My experiences in Europe, living in Rome and extensive visits for work, leisure and exploration are the frame for my writing.

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