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## Soft Bellies Made of Flesh and Stone and Oodles of Love

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# Soft Bellies Made of Flesh and Stone and Oodles of Love

Christian Riley

Our first child we named Hazel. She is sweet as clay, and when she cries I hear the sound of distant thunder followed by the displacement of moist gravel. She cannot walk yet, but already she has learned to explore the world with her hands, and possibly her mind. I sense this in her actions, such as when she moves her body toward the east, as the morning sun rises. Or when she laughs, while playfully throwing sand and pebbles high into the air. Her skin has the feel of chipped granite, with the exception of her stomach, which is soft as soapstone. This lovely child preceded our second and last child, Milo. In every way he is identical to his sister, excluding his cry, which is almost always sudden and distressing. It's as if Milo knows he is in constant threat of being crushed under the weight of the world. Or under the weight of his own making.

Both of my children were born faceless, save for a mouth. They have no eyes, or nose, or even ears, for that matter. Nor do they have any hair. Their bodies are clean slates of stone, with soft, fleshy stomachs—a single characteristic that I still find puzzling. But what would life be without something to ponder? I tell myself this every day as I blindly brush my cheek against their soft bellies, and feel the warmth in their pulsing lives.



I have come to learn that there is much to see when one's eyes have been sewn shut. Before my thirtieth birthday I voluntarily did this. I used a fishbone needle and catgut thread, and I closed them up. I was tired of seeing the world spin around me, with me somehow in the center—the center of the universe, for all that that did not matter. I found the vertigo of my life impossible to bear. It was stifling. I couldn't breathe. Watching the world spin through the motions of its expectations kept me feeling suffocated and nauseous. So what else was I to do?

I put an end to the madness, that's what I did.  
And only then did I find the beat to my heart.

So then, does it really matter—how we made our  
children?

I am asked the same thing over and over, “How is it that  
you...made babies with that?” They are words never left unsaid.  
Insufferable words with insufferable tones, quick to make my ears  
bleed.

*Does it matter?* I would reply.

And then, somewhere, an echo in the clouds, perhaps—DOES IT?

Does anything matter when a bond is sealed by unadulterated affection?  
Does it matter, when there is love between two separate, yet consenting  
species? A love that is pressed together and cemented through the fissure of  
flesh and stone—of dust and blood.



I had to learn how to walk again, blind and all. It's true what they say, your  
other senses picking up the slack where your eyes had left off. I got real good  
with using my hands, my sense of touch. I *felt* my way into this world now, my  
fingers and elbows and shoulders pushing and gliding a path through obstacles.  
The world feels different, somehow. It has always felt this way, I suppose, but  
one never knows how anything truly feels when their eyes are holding them  
up, crutch-like. It's a strange sensation—a true perspective—when you have  
to rely on your feelings. And your feelings—well, they draw a path straight to  
your heart. Sure, I have my other senses. But stone doesn't have much of an  
odor, and you certainly can't hear it. You can feel it, though. And you can taste  
it. *Is it an acquired taste?* one might ask. I wouldn't know. I've been in love with  
the flavor since the moment I pressed my tongue onto it.

But the world, it is different now from anything I have discovered, of this,  
I am certain. And with this knowledge now buried under my skin, every day  
that passes is a blessed reassurance, a confirmation of the day in which I closed  
the world up. I will never go back, content as I am.

That said, there is a bitter agony that plays onto my mind's eye, and  
this agony is called “memory”. Memory, in this case, is the jaded images that  
my eyes have left me with. These orbs are relentless, so it seems. While left  
incapacitated, they still see. They have left their mark on me a thousand times  
over, and it is an endless war to defeat the impressions burned into my mind.  
Because of this, I almost let slip by all that is beautiful.

My hands were the first to discover him, and I am thankful for that.  
Through my other senses, I had already gathered a clear understanding of  
the surrounding atmosphere. I heard the chorus of song birds acquainted  
only with the quiet breast of solitude. I smelled a labyrinth of pine trees.  
With my skin, I felt the rawness of land. I was on the outskirts perhaps, or

maybe deep in the wilderness. (Does it matter?) And when, perchance, my hands brushed across his chest—chiseled muscles and the rough texture of such flesh—I became enthralled. With fingers I found his face, discovered its impressions and features, and his everlasting expression. With body, I explored his angles and curves. I sensed his loneliness too, and I immediately understood this as our first form of cohesion.

There have never been any words spoken between us, such beauty therein lies. And I refrained from hauling this stone masterpiece home with me, more out of respect than as a statement of complication. He does not even have a name. But every day I am with this piece of earth. And every day they come, and watch, as we admire our creations.



Nothing about any of this has been simple, despite my sometimes euphoric tone. It is not easy to seal away one's vision. And it is more difficult to transpire among a world while left sightless. Even worse is the effort to overcome the inherent stigmas that have risen against my bold actions. Apparently, not one soul has understood my choice to close my eyes against the world. And, as of yet, so it seems, no one has embraced a marriage between the animate and inanimate. Most of the world remains perplexed, roaming with their deceitful eyes, speechless, albeit curious over the oddities of my life.

The irony is that those who have been closest to me are the ones who accept my choices the least. Strangers, who are quick to lay out such wide distances, at once become symbolic to the acknowledgment of my marriage—for better, or for worse. But my family calls me a freak. They announce my relationship as an act of blasphemy. Our children—abominations.

*How can you treat me this way? I had once asked. How can you treat them like this?*

*Does it matter—now that you are dead to us? was their reply. As dead as that rock you profess to love. As dead as those lumps of mud you hold dearly.*

*Does it matter...?*

At first, I tried to change their minds. I tried to make them understand. I said, "Listen to their small voices. Listen to them cry." And then I tried to make them feel. I pushed my children into their arms and said, *Here, hold them. Hold your family against your chest, feel their heartbeats. Feel their soft stomachs, which lift and drop the same as yours. Feel them—feel their lives.*

At first, I tried.

But eventually their rejections brought pain onto my children. Around such family, Hazel would become stiff as her father. Immobilized for want of self-preservation, perhaps. I would hold her, and she would sit in my lap and wait, her body positioned outward, as if she could see, and hear, and even

smell the anger working the air around her. But I knew she could feel it. And then Milo, he would just cry. His panicked whimper would grow louder, more piercing, until it became a rift of thunder into my ears, tearing at the fabric of space.

It was painful to hear and feel my children in this state. When I began to understand how they reacted to such hatred—to the words spoken between adults—I was at once reminded of why I closed my eyes against the world. And, like I had done before, with ritualistic fervor I took Desperate Measure into my hands and I smeared its yellow entrails over my face and across my chest, into my mouth and ears, and then I murdered my family, the same as they did to me.

It might be true that the most staggering form of punishment is to withhold one's love. Especially when the subject of this punishment is accustomed to such reward. This was the poison I used to kill my family, and theirs was a slow and agonizing death. I will not say that this brought joy to my life, only that it was instrumental at lifting away so much weight. Killing them worked. I achieved my objective, and for now, my children are safe. For now, Hazel laughs much like she ever did, and Milo's cries are less painful to hear.

But under this volume of silence which always succeeds death, I am again reminded of those insufferable words I still hear every day. And, like always, I answer the same question with another—*Does it matter?*

#### *DOES IT?*

The truth of it is that no, it doesn't matter. None of anything matters, now that I've reached this final, resonating point in life: the nadir of my existence, as others might suggest; or, the pinnacle of triumph, as I proudly declare. And that pride is what the people shall see, what they *do* see, I so convincingly tell myself, as I press my children deep against my bosom, wrap them tightly with cloth, then blindly fold my arms around our stone pillar, and hold our world closely until we can at last embrace the impending warmth of darkness.

End