

CALL YOUR MOTHER

Eirinie Carson. *Bloodfire, Baby*. Dutton, 2026.

Maggie Wu

I was a difficult baby: stubborn, colicky, a howler. For the first thirteen months, I could not sleep through the night; I woke every hour. When my mother returned to work, I refused formula, starving myself until she came home. Perhaps this was why my parents never had another child. I had thoroughly tired them out.

Whenever I'm told stories about myself as an infant, I have the uncanny feeling of hearing about someone who is myself but whom I have no recollection of being. It is like watching an old home video; I do not recognize the person on screen as me, but someone else entirely, an actor from an earlier time. Such removal from the self and discontinuity from the past are the primary affects that shade Eirinie Carson's *Bloodfire, Baby*, a contemporary Gothic novel on the horrors of new motherhood. Told in a lyrical, breathless first-person, we delve into the postpartum delirium of our protagonist, Sofia, who feels as if she is "playing pretend" at the dual roles of doting mother, pretty wife (66). Added dimensions of race and class fuel Sofia's alienation as she strolls the quiet streets of her Marin County suburb: as a Black woman with Jamaican ancestry from a "once-overlooked" (49), now-gentrified, part of the Bay Area, she is branded as Other by her sheltered white neighbors, whose racism ranges from precise incisions to exaggerated satire. Constantly, Sofia must render herself legible and "definable" to a white gaze (51) to prove that she belongs. She makes herself palatable as possible through tight-lipped smiles, happy-go-lucky remarks, a certain way of carrying herself. She is also aided by her dreamboat husband, Emil, whose presence "explains me, gives me an air of legitimacy" (108). Without him around, she feels like a "vagrant" (Ibid.). But this is just farce, a performance of who Sofia thinks the perfect upper-class wife ought to be. Try as she might, Sofia cannot cram herself into the narrow confines of this image. She overflows with generational memory, on the run from a depression fueled by a cold childhood among Jehovah's Witnesses and a traumatic ancestral history. Her unloving mother's incessant phone calls build dramatic tension—as her voicemailbox accumulates, it is only a matter of time before her cocoon of luxurious coats unravel, and also her mind. Playing a role that is so foreign to her past, she becomes someone she does not recognize, "an actor going through the motions" (109).

But postpartum madness is hardly new to the cultural imagination. Some have even argued that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, one of the cornerstones of the Gothic genre, resonates with themes of postpartum depression, (indeed, Ellen Moers writes about this in her essay, "Femail Gothic: The Monster's Mother.") Contemporary manifestations are also having a moment: in the past year, Hollywood has funded many stories of maternal anger to critical acclaim: *Die, My Love* and *If I Had Legs, I'd Kick You* are some. Novels such as Julia Fine's *The Upstairs House*, Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch*, and Ayşegül Savaş' *The Wilderness*, work with similar feelings of suffocation and unfettered rage. But there is something singular about *Bloodfire, Baby*, and its ability to depict the contemporary consciousness. Perhaps it is the constant presence of the phone: confined to her home, Sofia spends her waking hours scrolling through social media, posting on Instagram, and sending texts. While some may find the focus on digital life unnecessary or garish, the phone's presence is more than interference but an important theme and aesthetic choice. This is modern motherhood in our hypertransparent age, where a flock of mommy influencers coo through our feeds in impossibly impeccable plumages. (Such is the subject of *Second Life* by Amanda Hess.) Though Carson never describes them by name, I think of Hannah Neeleman (also called Ballerina Farm), Nara Smith, and Jessica Reed Kraus. They whisper through my screen in a libidinal maternal cosplay, serving dinner in designer dresses. I find myself wondering if their voices are supposed to be sultry or nurturing, sexy or maternal. Most likely both. What strikes me about all of these women is that they are so clean, so pristine, not a hair is ever out of place. It is an impossible ideal that obstructs the true mess of motherhood, and Sofia enters postpartum with an unrealistic set of expectations based on these Internet projections. And yet, she herself snaps photos, posts to Instagram, and projects the same serene avatar of an ideal mother.

Sofia's obsession with social media recalls the philosopher Byung Chul-Han's *The Transparency Society*, in which he argues that transparency has become the chief virtue in our global culture: everything must be seen, shared, and enforced with a "like." This is a world of total positivity, where any room for doubt, mystery, and privacy is forfeited. Interpersonally, negativity is discouraged, we must be happy all of the time and "like" everything. We demand definition and brightness. Everyone must be known and legible. There is no longer room for ambiguity, for the darkness of the past. Though the image we present online is often false, we believe it to be true because it looks like we have glimpsed into the private lives of others. So when Sofia looks through social media, she does not realize that the photos she sees are just as staged as her own. Everyone is playing house.

Yet, even more than the online world, Sofia lives in a neighborhood that demands utter transparency. Her unreconciled trauma and unexplainable presence in an elite suburb demands legibility from her neighbors. They seek to know as much about her as possible; throughout the novel, some even openly spy on her, monitoring her whereabouts, asking her to explain her late bedtimes as she descends into madness. This surveillance becomes even more explicit with Emil, who is away on a business trip for almost the entirety of the novel. When he is around, he “overly surveils” Sofia (34) and snaps photos of her without asking (40). When he is away, he decides to install a security camera system in the house and asks his mother to stay with his wife. Here, we watch as early motherhood, a time that requires privacy, become a show for social media and new husbands. It is no wonder that Sofia begins to feel watched, because she lives in our current hypervisible society.

Soon, Carson makes surveillance more than an atmospheric feeling: there *is* a dark shadow watching her, lurking in the corners. In a particular memorable scene, Sofia looks down and finds this shadow occupying her vagina, and it tells her to “listen.” To what? And to whom? We then discover that it is her mother’s voice, and Sofia must finally hear the stories of her ancestors. Here, narrative is presented as an important resolution, a bloody but effective reconciliation. But Carson is clear that narrative is not something that is neat and easily defined. She is a writer who is unafraid to color outside of the lines. Her book emphasizes a lack of containment in its form: Carson’s sentences mix metaphors and string together image upon image, the main narrative is undercut with italicized chapters of Sofia’s ancestral history, and numerical chapter titles give way to emojis by the end. John Steinbeck, the granddaddy of all Northern Californian novelists (and Carson is one), famously referred to his novels as “containers.” Carson breaks that notion for something truly contemporary, leaning against our expectations of drab, conventional decorum to let the light in. The result is a depiction of new motherhood in all its kaleidoscopic emotion. Carson’s prose shines when she pairs playful imagery with frank descriptions of the body. For instance:

What if the act of pushing out a child, of physically pushing, started this whole thing, started it with blood and guts and shit and screamed retractions? A sling-shot into a grim carousel of green baby poop and crusted nipples, hair matted, eyes black, nails brittle and bitten, leg hair like overgrown grass on a neglected lawn, wild and tall, nothing left of me. I’m just a tunnel. I’m just a portal for this child and then what becomes of me, this rattling shell, the last bullet in a cylinder, a game of Russian roulette, while the shadows twist up the walls with

a dancer's grace, whispers in the night, long-forgotten bedtime stories my mind is crowded and I clean the child clean her and and clean her, the baby, always dressed in fresh laundered clothes, fed from my own stinking body, milky like afterbirth (235).

Here, Carson first anchors us in the striking materiality of the body, with images like “green baby poop,” “crusted nipples”, and “screamed retractions.” Then, as her consciousness drifts into more frantic territory, her sentences become sweeping and dreamlike, and by the end, even punctuation is too much of an obstacle—the words just flow with “I clean the child clean her and clean her.” The passage emulates the urgent, swirling consciousness of a new mother well as she crescendoes into anger at her new identity as a “tunnel.” In many ways, this is the crux of Sofia's journey: she must come to terms with her new identity as a mother, a label that feels more like a costume. It is a point of rupture that triggers the loss of her past self, but in doing so she realizes that she was also estranged from who she was then.

At the novel's conclusion, Sofia discovers, by way of her husband's surveillance cameras, that the shadowy presence in the house was just herself after all. This shadow self that she has tried to evade is the mess and dirt of being a mother and in turn being human. It is here that we realize the mandate of transparency does not just come from society, but it has been so enforced by our own consciousnesses. Only when Sofia recognizes that she has been living at a distance, estranged from her true self, can she begin to latch onto her baby and name it in the novel's final breath. It is a move that demonstrates her willingness to become a mother.

It was Kafka who wrote, “We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.” *Bloodfire, Baby* is a novel that encapsulates this paradox: Sofia's projection of herself into images drives out the parts of herself she does not want to see, but such is an impossibility that returns to haunt her. The hidden, untold story literally prevents Sofia from shutting her eyes and getting a good night's sleep. When I finished *Bloodfire, Baby*, I was left with a feeling of awe at the resilience of mothers and the strength of their bodies. Then I called my mom. I asked her to tell me my story.