View from the Lactataion Room at the White House

E.A. Farro

We make fast friends—we're both lost in front of our destination, but it's so giant we don't know how or where to enter. The Eisenhower Executive Office Building, housing the executive offices of the White House, takes up four city blocks. It looks like a cross between a castle and a spaceship, a style called Second Empire architecture.

"Women's Energy Summit?" I ask, taking a guess.

We fall into step together, both anxious not to be late.

In DC, I talk to strangers everywhere: to find out why the train is delayed, because I like their scarf, without reason. This is a city of transients and compulsive networkers; people are as open to meeting as if we were all on a study abroad program. A colleague told me that every conversation should be treated as a job interview, but for me it's curiosity—I talk to strangers because I can.

My new friend, Jessie, is ten years older than me, and far more elegant. She is shy; smiles flicker across her face and disappear. Her suit has a metallic sheen; it fits perfectly over her thin frame. Runner's legs float inches off the ground on snakeskin heels. Her perfection is made human only by wild red curly hair moving in all directions.

My hair is similarly wild, but in contrast to her feminine sleekness, I still look pregnant. My suit is too tight on the bottom and too big on top—my breasts are oversized canteens of milk. I wear black flats, and my shoulders tilt with the unequal weight of the purse with notebook and business cards on one side and on the other a weekend travel bag with breast pump and all its paraphernalia smashed in.

I treat every conference like the apocalypse has happened and I'm forging a new life. Whether it's a day or a week long, I build a social network as if this event will last forever and I need a posse to survive. It's as if I can't conceive of the ephemeral nature of the folding chairs and scheduled keynote.

Like Dorothy, I have three key characters in my post-apocalyptic conference world. First, a confidant, the person to sneak out with and go sit in the sun. Second, a Madonna/mother figure, someone who will save me a seat and look out for me (and vice versa). Third, a homeland connection, someone with a tie to the outside world who offers a reality check.

For this one-day event, my confidant will be Joe, a twenty-four-year old man interning at the White House who I was told would have the key to the lactation room. My Madonna, Jessie with the red hair, will be the one to bring me into conversations with her large smile. My homeland connection will be another female scientist, new to DC, who like me has no idea how we were invited to this. While I'll never see the first two again, I will stay in touch with the last; we'll share a Passover Seder and swap emails over the next several years as we navigate ourselves out of DC and into more permanent lives.

The invitation to the White House is a needed beacon of hope. A signal that I'm going in the right direction. Up until eight months ago I was on a different path. For the last decade I've been a field scientist. I'm now a staffer in the US Senate. This was the third way, not going into oil in the face of climate change and not crossing my fingers for the next academic gig that wouldn't pay enough to bridge any future gap in funding. The parting words of congratulations from my postdoctoral mentor were "You know if you leave, you can never come back."

In field science, dressing up was wearing yoga clothes, or outdoor clothes—pretty much anything from REI. I never owned a purse and felt like a child who'd stolen her mother's makeup when I tried to paint my face or nails. In DC, everyone looks professional. This is the only place I've ever been where it doesn't undermine women to look sexy—it doesn't decrease how seriously people take them. These are the powerful, and no one is fucking around.

In contrast to the sterile, slow, and silent isolation of science labs, policy is fast, a jazzy intellectual challenge of intensity and improvisation. I'm armed only with my background in botany and chemistry, the ability to read geologic maps, and personality. I learn in the first week to run in heels, keep a poker face when a lobbyist threatens me, and politely listen without committing to the idealistic and impossible pleas of advocates.

Aside from being a scientist with no fashion sense, I interviewed for my position six months pregnant with my second child. Another jump into the unknown. While everyone in DC, on any side of any aisle, is working to protect American families, many don't have a family. DC is young and workaholic. People have kids in their late thirties, forties, fifties. I often take Byrd, my three-year-old, to play with a friend at the park, where his friend's dad and I hang out. His friend's dad is sixty-five.

Being pregnant elicits questions in DC: "You're only thirty-two, and this is your second child?" And then the follow-up: "Are you religious?" A colleague expresses her concern: "If you don't go to happy hours, how will you ever get jobs?" I don't bother telling her that at toddler birthday parties we also exchange business cards.

In my first job interview on the Hill I bring up being pregnant, realizing my interviewee, a male in his late twenties, might not notice. The spark of connection goes out with him saying, "Yeah, well, you know, come January, I'm really gonna need someone up and running."

I'm advised by some to work for Guam or another non-voting territory. Instead, I go full steam ahead, and I don't bring up the pregnancy again.

I get offers, lots of offers. In many interviews, and with the office I go work for, I meet a new breed, those who believe working mothers are exactly the same as everyone else. I'll waver back and forth about this for my entire tenure in the Senate. I'm shocked each time I slam into a physical boundary I've never experienced before—exhaustion, fatigue, hunger. Hunger without warning sometimes throws me off a cliff and leaves me shaky and confused. But these are obstacles that require acceptance and planning, not something that should prevent my being hired. Only I know what I'm up for and what is too much—and the answer to that is not the same for any other woman.

The red-haired Madonna and I find the security line to enter the White House. "Well, my husband and [Very Famous Politician] were roommates, so we are very close with him," she says. We've both worked in Africa on climate change, she in development, me collecting field samples. My fieldwork experiences are always my reliable connection to others.

The beep beep of a text message interrupts our conversation. I peek at my phone: "Just wanted to give you a heads up, daycare has a sign up that several kids in Byrd's room have lice." I shove the phone back into my purse and feel a flush of heat across the back of my neck. Steve's home with the baby, Cluck, for three months now following on my maternity leave. Byrd still goes to daycare, living at a pace too fast for the sleepy quiet days of a new baby. I immediately feel itchiness in my hair and imagine lice jumping on my curls like trampolines.

We show our IDs to a man in uniform with a gun in a small guardhouse. "You cannot leave now that you're in," he explains. "Your clearance is just for the one entry." He sends us through a turnstile and we wait in line on marble steps.

My phone beeps again. "You forgot a piece of your pump, should I bring it to you?" My stomach twists and I squeeze my toes and fists to remind myself to stay present.

We go through another security check where they open our bags and we walk through metal detectors. Of all the possible evils the scanner can detect, none can expose that I may be bringing lice into the White House.

A hundred women are packed into ten rows of wooden chairs so tight our shoulders and legs touch. The room has several windows with white molding above and thick maroon curtains that block natural light from shining through. I imagine the lice, no bigger than sesame seeds, jumping from head to head. I consider that it might be reasonable to not want new mothers around. I cry more easily, I leak milk and smell like yogurt, I leave to pick up my kids, and now I carry lice.

My husband texts, "Got pump parts, I'm outside. Guard says I can't go in. Light rain, but able to keep Cluck dry." It's 10:30 a.m., and my breasts are filled with wet concrete. "I can't leave and come back in," I text. I need the intern with the key and I need my pump part.

Community activists are speaking at 11:45 a.m. on the agenda, and I know I must pump before that. My breasts are the new frontier of my emotions. My own hot dampness catches me by surprise. My shirt soaked through by a tornado in Oklahoma. Tragedy that before would have felt like a dagger to the heart now actually shoots pain from collar bone to nipple, leaving me breathless.

The new Secretary of Energy, Ernest Moniz, speaks to us. It's his third day on the job. He's had a fresh haircut since I saw him at his confirmation hearing. I'd sat through a wedgie for over an hour, packed tight in a row of staffers behind the senators. Now I'm in a small room with the Secretary and, just as at his hearing, all I think about is the need to pump.

I step out just as a lady astronaut is about to speak. She is the head of an organization I'd like to work for. I find the intern with the key, Joe; he is mid-twenties, a graduate student at Duke. His smile is a smirk, and he has tight curly brown hair, but he doesn't have the key. He has to go get it. I show him a picture of Steve and explain the forgotten pump parts. He skips down the stairs promising to be back.

"Hand off complete," my husband texts five minutes later.

I wait for Joe to reappear.

I talk farm bill in the hall with a tall thin man who is also an intern at the White House, also a male staffing this celebration of women in STEM policy. We talk USDA. I ask where the lactation room key is kept, how long might it be. He shrugs.

This is the first time I've had to talk to a man other than family or a medical provider about breastfeeding. In the Senate, I've never had to explain my lactation needs. Other people get coffee, walk dogs, eat ice cream, talk to their brother on the phone, shop for sneakers online, and they don't sit their supervisor down to explain themselves. It's assumed that they, like me, take natural breaks in an intense workday. And the Senate is set up to accommodate pumping. A system is in place so I'm not asking for what feels like a favor on a case-by-case basis. The Senate not only accommodates staff but also the general public. A nursing mom can come lobby their senator and have a clean place to pump. The system assumes that lactating postpartum moms are part of the institution.

It took me eight months before I realized how many moms were part of the institution. I heard about the Senate Mom Group from a chance encounter; the meetings are advertised by word of mouth. The first time I went, we gathered in the conference room of a senator from the extreme other end of the aisle from my office. But for this hour, policy didn't matter. Like fish gasping for air, we talked quickly. Women jumped from composure to tears without hesitation. I said little. I was overwhelmed by the fact that I wasn't alone, and that I recognized moms in the room who I hadn't realized were also moms. They talked about a husband with cancer, being in the groove of balancing everything, in-law complaints, in-law praises, taking cookware to a restaurant and paying for the Thanksgiving sides to be packaged as if they were homemade.

Twenty more minutes go by. I peek into the Summit. I come back into the hall. Sweat soaks through my suit coat, and my breasts are harder than the marble walls. I'm still shocked at their size, my body as new and as unknown as during puberty.

Joe hasn't returned. It's been an hour. I watch the end of the panel from the doorway, one foot in the room, one in the hallway as I also watch for him.

I try to imagine where in the ten acres of this office building is the magical mothers' room. And unlike the Senate, I've been told it is just an empty room: no sink to wash hands and equipment, no fridge to keep the milk cold, no hospital-grade pump to save lugging equipment around.

Finally, Joe. He's walking down the hall, smoothie in hand. "I can take you now."

I follow him along the black-and-white diamond floor tiles. We skirt around a large crowd of men in dark suits. The ceilings are seventeen feet high, with light fixtures hanging down that look like they belong in the dining room of a Victorian mansion. The hallway is long with white walls and evenly spaced doors. White pillars stand guard on either side of each door.

We take a turn and another turn and come back to where we started. Joe is starting to sweat now too. He tosses his cup into a trashcan.

We take a different hall. "I think we go up these stairs," he says. He leads me up stairs that spiral like a snail shell. Above the stairs is a dome with a twenty-foot-long stained-glass skylight of red, white, and mostly blue. Ornate gold-plated molding slides along the curve from skylight to wall. The natural light is bright and joyful, but I am shaky with the poison of milk sitting too long in my body. Milk held in is like unexpressed anger; it can make you sick. I've had mastitis that started with the random thought of throwing up, and fifteen minutes later I was too sick to stand. Breasts aren't designed as long-term holding tanks. Especially in the early months after having a baby.

"Wait here!" Joe says, and he runs down the hall, a flash of black suit.

In a breastfeeding class someone asked about where to pump if your job requires driving. "Church parking lots," the teacher told us. "They are a sanctuary, after all."

He runs back. "Found it."

I follow him through a small door and into a secret gnome hallway. While the hallway floors in the main parts of the building were made up of seven black diamonds elbow-to-elbow, here there are just two. If I reach my arms out, I can touch both walls at once or touch the ceiling. The narrow galley bends and turns every ten to twenty feet.

Joe stops in front of a closed door. "Do you want me to wait outside for you?"

I feel the discomfort of a woman alone with an unfamiliar male in an alleyway. This isn't a part of the building with people moving and planning and making the country run. This is where the furnace is kept and probably where servants once lived.

"No thank you." I slam the door, unable to ask the obvious. Why after having set things up ahead was it such on ordeal to get here. And why at a women's conference do they have a man staffing the lactation room?

I finally enter my sanctuary. The critical link that connects all my education and work experience to all the potential I have to offer the world into the future. Lactation rooms are what keep me from falling off the sheer drop on either side of a steep path.

If I don't pump during the day, the flow will dry up. While there are health benefits to breast milk, babies who drink formula also grow up bright, brilliant, and beloved. My commitment to breastfeed is based only on the physical experience of having a river of life flowing through me. To give that up would be a kind of spiritual death. Not rational, purely animal.

I enter the room so relieved I could barf. I might actually need to barf. But I don't think these thoughts at the moment I enter. Instead, I'm struck by the view. I'm transformed into a tourist.

The view from the lactation room at the White House is of the Washington Monument and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, the Tidal Basin, and god's clouds dark and fast across the blue sky.

It's just a small attic window, no decorative molding, a semicircle above a square of glass. But the curtains are open, and from up here DC is ribbons of forest weaving around expanses of prairie. Aside from the parked cars, it's a timeless view. Nothing of the overcrowded streets and traffic. I push the window open and a cool breeze glides into the room.

I throw my bag down on the gold-brown wall-to-wall carpet and lay out my supplies on a small table. I attach plastic flanges to bottles, tubes to pump, pump to electric outlet. The set-up of the pump is done with the muscle memory of setting up a science experiment in the laboratory. The results come with similar satisfaction, two or three or four ounces, measurable results. The pump runs, milk flows, and I close my eyes. I feel the sun and breeze, and finally I relax.

Lactation rooms are the rare place where I will form memories in this year. They are my "cigarette break." While I often run on adrenaline, as if the whole of DC were a pool that was electrocuted, during my pumping breaks I slow down. It's work to balance the electric-alive city with the soft skin and warm smell of a baby. It's art to enjoy either of these on their own—let alone both together. The pumping room is a room to myself, a room with a view in the middle of the day, a space where I can think about my baby, read celebrity gossip, learn about lice, plot out bills, or draft a speech for the Senator.

Back in the Summit, I clap for the panel I missed. I sit next to the Madonna—she has saved me a seat in a discussion group. Her hair tickles my cheek. I imagine a news story about her famous family friend scratching his head the next time he delivers a speech, and the rumors that follow. How only I will know it actually started with a hug between my son and me and then the quick leap of bugs from one curly head to another.

Later that night, my husband runs a metal nit comb through my hair. When he doesn't see jumping throngs of lice I make him look again. At work the next day I scratch my head in a bathroom stall and clasp my hands to avoid scratching during meetings. I make my husband look again. We shave our son's mop of curls. Everyone thinks we are preparing for the hot DC summer.

"You don't have lice," my husband tells me yet again. I glare at him, too afraid to let down my guard.

It takes a couple days for the phantom itches to stop, for me to realize we are lice-free. We always were. I go into the daycare main office and ask about the lice.

"Lice?" the director asks. "We put those signs up two months ago. You only noticed them now?"

E. A. Farro

E. A. Farro is a scientist and artist along the Mississippi River in Minnesota. She has a PhD in geology and has spent a lot of time living in the wilderness. She is working on a novel and a weekly online collaboration, *Science Love Letters*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Common, The Seneca Review, Water~Stone Review, Eckleburg Review, Rumpus, The Normal School, The Bellingham Review,* and *The Kenyon Review Online*. She won a Loft Literary Mentor Series Award in 2010.

Zachary Gerberick

Zachary Gerberick is a MFA candidate in creative writing at Florida State University. He received his bachelor's degree in electronic media from the University of Cincinnati and enjoys crossing genres with his work, specifically regarding video and writing. He currently resides in Tallahassee, where he enjoys hiking and skateboarding in his free time.

Lauren Hobson

Lauren Hobson is a graduate of Tulane University. She lives, works, and writes in Portland, Oregon.

Thomas Larson

Thomas Larson is a journalist, critic, and memoirist. He is the author of three books: *The Sanctuary of Illness: A Memoir of Heart Disease, The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings,"* and *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative.* A longtime staff writer for the *San Diego Reader,* Larson is Book Reviews editor for *River Teeth.* His website is www.thomaslarson.com.

Brenda Miller

Brenda Miller is the author of *An Earlier Life, Who You Will Become, Listening Against the Stone: Selected Essays, Blessing of the Animals,* and *Season of the Body.* She co-authored, with poet Holly J. Hughes, *The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World* and *Tell it Slant:*