

ON IMMUNITY

An Inoculation

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This book is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease. It is an inoculation only against maladies of a metaphorical nature.

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Achilles Dipped into the River Styx, ca. 1630–35 (detail).
Oil on panel, 43¹/₁₆ x 35⁵/₁₆ inches, SN 221.
Collection of the John and Mable Ringling Museum
of Art, the State Museum of Florida, Florida State
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IN THE FIRST FEW WEEKS AFTER MY SON WAS BORN a March wind blew off the lake and through our apartment, where I sat for hours each night in a stiff wooden rocking chair, rocking my restless baby and staring at the windows through which I could barely see the shadows of tree limbs flailing in the wind. The chair creaked and the wind moaned and I heard a tapping at the glass and a flapping around the sill and I knew a vampire was there, trying to get in. By daylight I would be reminded that a flagpole was near that window, with a flapping flag and a tapping line, but in the moment I felt terror. I was calmed only by my belief, instilled by a recent vampire movie, that the vampire could not enter without my permission.

I avoided mirrors in the dark, when I slept I woke from bloody nightmares, and I saw things moving that were not moving. During the day, I began to think the lake was singing to me. It was a single, low tone that only I could hear. I was as disquieted by this as I was comforted. I kept two tall glass liter jars of drinking water on the table next to my rocking chair. Staring at the jars as I nursed the baby I recalled being told in the hospital that I had lost two liters of blood. It remained a mystery to me how anyone could have known how much blood I lost because it went all over the floor. My husband would describe to me much later the sound it made, the lapping of small waves as the blood puddled and nurses pushed at the edges of

the pool with towels. But I never saw any of it, never even heard the lapping sound, so those two glass liter jars were my only measure of what I had lost.

Vampires were in the air then. *True Blood* was a new television series and *The Vampire Diaries* was about to premiere, while the *Twilight* saga played out in a series of books I did not read followed by movies I did not see. A car parked on my block had a bumper sticker that read *Blood Is the New Black* and on my first visit to the bookstore after giving birth I noticed a new section devoted exclusively to vampire novels for teenagers. Vampires were part of the cultural moment, but as a new mother I became fixated on them in part because they were a way for me to think about something else. The vampire was a metaphor, though it is hard to say whether it was a metaphor for my baby or for myself. My baby slept by day and woke at night to feed from me, sometimes drawing blood with his toothless jaws. He grew more vigorous each day, even as I remained weak and pale. But I was living off blood that was not mine.

Immediately after my son's birth, in an otherwise uncomplicated delivery, my uterus inverted, bursting capillaries and spilling blood. After giving birth without any medical intervention, without painkillers or an IV in place, I was rushed to surgery and put under general anesthesia. I woke up disoriented, shivering violently under a pile of heated blankets. "That happens to everyone who comes down here," my midwife observed from a bright and hazy place above me, inadvertently reinforcing my sense that I had, indeed, gone down to the banks of the River Styx. *Where is down here?* I kept wondering. I was too weak to move much, but when I tried I discovered that my body was lashed with tubes and wires—I had an IV in each arm, a catheter down my leg, monitors on my chest, and an oxygen mask on my face.

Alone in the recovery room, I slipped into sleep, waking with the unnerving sensation that I had stopped breathing. Machines were beeping around me. A nurse fiddled with the machines, mentioning that she thought they might be malfunctioning because they seemed to be indicating that I had stopped breathing. I coughed and could not catch my breath, struggling to say "help" before I passed out. A doctor was standing at the foot of my bed when I came to and it was decided that I would receive a transfusion. This excited the nurse, who told me that transfusions are like magic. She had seen the color come back into gray people after they had received transfusions, she said, she had seen people who could not move sit up and ask for food. Without using the words *life* or *death*, she let me know that she had seen the dead come back to life.

I did not feel like I was coming back to life as the refrigerated blood entered my veins. I felt an ominous cold ache spreading from my arm toward my chest. "People aren't usually awake for this," the doctor said when I mentioned the temperature of the blood. He was standing precariously on a stool with wheels, improvising a rig that would hold the bag of blood closer to the ceiling so that gravity would pull it into my body more quickly. By hospital policy my baby could not be in the recovery room with me and the doctor could not change that, but he could try to devise a way to get the blood into me faster so that I could leave the recovery room sooner. My vision began to blacken around the edges, my stomach turned, and the room spun around me. This was all normal, the doctor told me. "Remember," he said, "it's not your blood."

There are many explanations for the extreme fearfulness I felt in the weeks after my son's birth—I was a new mother, I was far from my family, I was anemic, I was delirious with fatigue.

But the true source of my fear eluded me until months later, when I went out on Lake Michigan in my little canoe made of bent wood covered with a transparent canvas. I had been on the lake many times before in that boat and I had never been afraid, but this time my blood was pounding in my ears. I was newly aware of the immensity of the water under me, its vast cold depths, and I was painfully aware of the fragility of my boat. *Oh*, I thought to myself, with some disappointment, *I'm afraid of death.*

Vampires are immortal, but they are not exactly alive. *Undead* was the term Bram Stoker used for Dracula. Frankenstein and zombies and any number of animated corpses are all *undead*, rather than immortal in the manner of Greek gods. The term *undead* amused me in the months when I was recovering from my son's birth, a time when I frequently found reason to think of it. I was alive, and gratefully so, but I felt entirely *undead*.

Nitroglycerine was injected into me during the surgery that repaired my uterus. "The same thing that's used in bombs," my midwife reported. I wanted the IV lines out of my arms as soon as I left the recovery room so that I could hold my son comfortably, but the midwife explained that I needed intravenous antibiotics to prevent infection. "You've had a lot of people's hands in you," she said frankly. Some of the hands were hers, in me to help deliver the baby and the placenta, but then there was also my surgery, which was performed exclusively with human hands, leaving no incisions. When I learned this, it struck me as both magical and mundane that the technology that had saved me was simply hands. Of course, our technology is us.

You've had a lot of people's hands in you was a phrase I would hear in my mind for a long time after that surgery, along with *Remember, it's not your blood*. My pregnancy, like every

pregnancy, had primed me for the understanding that my body was not mine alone and that its boundaries were more porous than I had ever been led to believe. It was not an idea that came easily, and I was dismayed by how many of the metaphors that occurred to me when I was pregnant were metaphors of political violence—invasion, occupation, and colonization. But during the birth, when the violence to my body was greatest, I was most aware not of the ugliness of a body's dependence on other bodies, but of the beauty of it. Everything that happened to me in the hospital after my son's delivery, even things I understand now as cold or brutal, I experienced at that time as aglow with humanity. Alarms were sounded for me, doctors rushed to me, bags of blood were rigged for me, ice chips were held to my lips. Human hands were in me and in everything that touched me—in the nitroglycerine, in the machines that monitored my breathing, in the blood that wasn't mine.

"If you want to understand any moment in time, or any cultural moment, just look at their vampires," says Eric Nuzum, author of *The Dead Travel Fast*. Our vampires are not like the remorseless Victorian vampires, who had a taste for the blood of babies and did not seem to feel badly about it. Our vampires are conflicted. Some of them go hungry rather than feed on humans, and some of them drink synthetic blood. "Almost all of these current vampires are struggling to be *moral*," the journalist Margot Adler observed after immersing herself in vampire novels and vampire television for months after her husband's death. "It's conventional to talk about vampires as sexual, with their hypnotic powers and their intimate penetrations and their blood-drinking and so forth," she reported. "But most of these modern vampires are not talking as much about sex as they are about power."

Power, of course, is vampiric. We enjoy it only because

someone else does not. Power is what philosophers would call a positional good, meaning that its value is determined by how much of it one has in comparison to other people. Privilege, too, is a positional good, and some have argued that health is as well.

Our vampires, whatever else they are, remain a reminder that our bodies are penetrable. A reminder that we feed off of each other, that we need each other to live. Our vampires reflect both our terrible appetites and our agonized restraint. When our vampires struggle with their need for blood, they give us a way of thinking about what we ask of each other in order to live.