

## Petro-Mama: Mothering in a Crude World

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The fingers of my right hand freeze into a claw gripping the steering wheel. I'm only wearing one glove. I couldn't find the other in my rush to get him buckled into the backseat. The digital thermostat on the dash glows blue in the pitch black of the early morning and I read "-23 degrees Celsius: 6:53 a.m." Inside the car the eerie silence of the dark and frozen morning is interrupted only by the harsh and laboured sounds of his breathing. He's finally stopped panicking, which has only seemed to constrict his airways further. He's been shouting at me to help him.

"Mama, my neck hurts. I can't breathe."

"Breathe as deeply as you can. Calm down, bud. Screaming and crying only make it harder for your body to get oxygen. See. That's better. Breathe deeply."

Now that my four-year-old is so quiet, I listen anxiously to his rapid intakes of air, calling to him repeatedly so he'll answer me in his tiny little-boy voice so I reassure myself he hasn't passed out from lack of oxygen. I cannot see him in my rear-view mirror.

His cheruby little body, cloaked in a grey winter coat, is slumped over. In the darkness I search for his silhouette against the black leather seat. But his little figure has been absorbed into the dark cold morning behind me. The urgent need to get him to the doctor overwhelms me. I try to focus on what I can control and listen to the motor's hum and the groaning of the car's frozen metal body as its internal parts grind against one another. I put the car into gear and start backing down the driveway. Under the tires, I can hear the crunching of snow and the breaking apart of ice as it cracks and splits open. Inside the car, the indicator clicks rhythmically, only slightly faster than his breathing, as I turn onto a deserted roadway.

They are calling this cold snap the "Polar Vortex." Not that we aren't used to these frigid temperatures in Edmonton. The concern this time is that the cold is being caused by a shift in the jet streams. Arctic air is being pushed south. This phenomenon can create unexpected warm waves as well. These dramatic and unseasonal fluctuations in weather are, apparently, all going to be part of our new normal on an increasingly warm planet.

There are no cars on our quiet residential road at this time of the morning. I turn right. Right again. Then left. And now we are on Baseline Road, a major arterial route headed into the city. I join hundreds of commuters, but this morning I won't be going as far as them. I can faintly hear radios playing in the cars next to me. The darkness around me is broken up by the convoy of illuminated dashboards, myriad headlights and running lights. I share the road with small commuter cars, SUVs, mini-vans, and large pickup trucks. Despite the variety of makes that drivers use to indicate their class, income levels, and lifestyle—their level of cool, their brand-associated worldliness advertised by their gleaming hood ornaments—in the pre-dawn light, each vehicle looks identical when compared. Ahead of me, I notice several freight trucks slow down. I imagine they carry produce and other merchandise to the strip-mall shopping

complexes and low-rise office and industrial buildings banking the north side of the road. And I look in the rear-view mirror to glimpse my ill little boy.

The rattle of his laboured breathing inside the quiet of the car juxtaposes the roar of traffic outside. Each machine resonates at a different pitch against the frozen ground, sending reverberations and emissions to bounce off commercial buildings on the right, and the facing eight-foot sound barrier wall designed to protect neighbourhoods from the noise and hopefully the pollution, not to mention the associated impact on their residential property stickers. This road will only get busier in the next hour. But this morning I'm not only worried about the flow of traffic and any potential disruptions that might slow my progress to the doctor's office, I'm also intensely aware of what all these vehicles have in common. The acrid-smelling exhaust they spit from their tailpipes is sucked up by my own car, making it harder for my boy to breathe. I think about shutting off the heat to avoid drawing into the car any more of the chemical cocktail of polyaromatic hydrocarbons and polycyclic aromatics and benzene and arsenic and formaldehyde and nitrogen oxides and carbon dioxide. But it is too cold to do that. The bitter-cold air stings the inside of my nostrils, and the caustic heady smell of burned gasoline and diesel chafes my respiratory tract as the air moves into my healthy lungs. I feel choked. Suffocated. My chest is heavy. Is it empathy for my baby in the backseat or the oppression of the invisible particulates swirling around us in puffs of white and grey and darker-grey warmth, visible this morning only as they crystallize upon contact with the frozen black morning air outside their combustion engines, that cause me these visceral reactions?

"Are you ok Honey?" I ask.

Silence. ... but I can hear him rasping for air.

"Honey? Answer me! Honey! Are you ok?!"

I strain to see him in the review mirror. The air is choking him.

"I'm ok Mama."

He sounds quiet. And small and weak. This is what worries me: he is a robust boy who runs and dances and jokes and entertains everyone. Dashing from one spot to the next, giving quick hugs and stealing kisses from his little sister, and playing and fighting and playing some more with his older brothers. I usually have to tell him to slow down.

As we crawl toward the intersection where I'll eventually need to turn left to get to the doctor's, we are stopped at yet another light and I look off into the distance. I can see the incandescent acres of the Imperial Oil Strathcona and Suncor Energy refineries with their multiple looming red and white stacks out of which are being dissipated the flammable residues of over 320,000 barrels of refined crude a day. Huge flares go up into the morning sky. And in the foreground, squatting just on the other side of the highway, are the enormous round Enbridge tankers decorated with Canada geese flying in formation. Those tankers hold oil in various stages of refinement that will eventually be burned off into the atmosphere, here or elsewhere around the world. These industries flank my regular morning commute for about thirty city blocks, some backing up onto the once scenic North Saskatchewan River. All of this is just part of the Industrial Heartland project, where we try to carve out a life for ourselves and our kids.

"Are you ok sweetie?"

“Yes Mama,” he murmurs.

Left. Right. Right again. Now I’m in a commercial district of our suburb, vacant at this early hour. The quiet of the morning is a contrast to my urgency. I turn into an almost barren parking lot. It is covered in frozen snow that twinkles under the streetlights. I pull up in front of the doctor’s office that opened three minutes ago. Another woman rushes from the only other car in the parking lot to the warmly lit glass-fronted doctor’s office. She shields herself against the blowing wind by pulling up her hood and bending forward; she half runs, half walks, outstretched arm grabbing the metal door handle. She whips into the foyer. The sound of the door-chimes is quickly smothered by the gales blowing in from the northwest over Refinery Row. My son and I are more cumbersome in our pursuit. I’m not sure whether I should carry him or have him walk. He is limp from the lack of oxygen and tired from the effort of trying to breathe. In the end, I help him out of the car and we walk together slowly, hand-in-hand, in the -35 wind-chill. The quiet from outside has followed us into the warm enclave of the waiting room, and the sound of my son’s wheezing is unmistakable. The other woman says, “Poor baby” and I briefly explain.

“Some kind of asthma attack, I think.”

She smiles at him and he returns her attention with an impish look and a flirtatious grin. A glimpse of his vibrant personality peeks out, despite how terrible he feels and how hard he labours to breathe. A moment later, he crumples onto the floor of the waiting room and puts his head on the chair, meekly crying. I try to soothe him by rubbing his back and he crawls onto my knee. There is a sign on the wall that reads *A Place of Happiness*.

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Inside the doctor’s office, I apologize.

“Sorry to come without an appointment.”

The doctor smiles kindly at my comment. Distracted as he places his chilly stethoscope onto my son’s warm chubby chest, a few inches below the soft spot in the centre of his collarbone. I watch my little boy’s flesh pulse every time he takes a breath. I’m still tired from a sleepless night worrying and waiting. I’m also listening to his breathing to try to determine whether it has gotten better or worse since the middle of the night. I’m listening for some hope that it has, at best, and for something to alert the doctor to, at worst. Suddenly, the doctor is giving me a lot of information and instructions that I find overwhelming:

“This is a typical asthmatic wheeze ... you did the right thing ... the next two hours are critical ... we need to treat aggressively ... the triggers are five-fold: infection, allergies, cold, exercise, smoking ... we’ll need to treat aggressively so that he won’t have to be on bronchodilators for his whole life ... studies show that this is very effective ... a series of oral steroids and inhaled steroids ... did you get that? Two weeks for the one, four days for the other, as needed for the third.”

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that again?”

He does.

“I’m sorry, there are two medications, or three?”

“Three. The two steroids—one oral and one inhaled—and the bronchodilator to be administered as needed. Got it?”

“Yes,” I say and apologize again. “This is all just a bit overwhelming and I haven’t had much sleep, and I couldn’t decide whether to take him to the emergency room last night or not and ...” my voice trails off.

The doctor demonstrates how to use the diffuser, placing the little mask over my child’s nose and mouth: “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.” This isn’t how I thought my little guy would master his numbers: counting his own breaths.

“London Drugs is open. Go there immediately. If he isn’t breathing more easily in two hours take him to Emergency at the Stollery Children’s Hospital.”

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I bundle my son up and we head out into the cold again, bracing ourselves against the chill. His breathing has improved after the dose of bronchodilator. I buckle him into his car seat. His colour is better.

“Where are we going now Mama?”

“To get your medicine,” I smile.

I’m relieved he seems to be taking an avid interest in the world around him. I feel I can stop listening so keenly to his breaths. I relax slightly and turn on the radio. A CBC interviewer is discussing the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline hearings and the discontent many people have expressed about the consultation process. A lawyer for resource companies including Enbridge is talking: “Certainly from my vantage point I don’t see an inherent weakness in that process . . . What the courts have actually said, very clearly, is that the balancing act between societal interests, on the one hand, and Aboriginal interests, on other, are to be decided by government.”<sup>1</sup>

*Societal versus Aboriginal? Typical!* I think to myself. *Could someone please explain to me where the interests of ‘society’ end and where other interests begin?* Before I can hear much more about the lawyer’s vision of our society that doesn’t include Indigenous interests, or even my own, a phone call comes through over the car’s Bluetooth, interrupting the broadcast as one concerned caller after another checks in with us. It turns out that London Drugs is, in fact, still closed, and as I drive around from pharmacy to pharmacy, trying to find one that is open, my son and I both provide updates and chat with his father, his grandparents, and with a close auntie-friend with severe asthma who can empathize. A cacophony of loving voices asks pointed questions, gives advice, and expresses concern.

“No one in the family has asthma. Why would he have asthma?”

“Is it an allergic reaction? Something he ate?”

“You should keep buying as much organic food as possible, and avoid pesticides and other chemicals.”

“Have you been avoiding dairy and sugar and wheat?”

“Vitamins? Have you been giving them regularly? ”

“I’ve heard that if you give your child too much Tylenol, they can develop asthma. Have you given him a lot of Tylenol?”

“It might not be a good idea to give him the steroids. They can’t be good for him.”

“Infant exposure to common house dust can cause asthma. But your house was always quite clean when he was a baby and you didn’t have carpet in that place.”

“Of course, don’t over-sanitize or a child’s immune system doesn’t develop properly.”

“I sent you a website that gives you a list of things you can do to help control your child’s asthma.”

“This can be very serious. He should always have a puffer with him. Apparently several hundred people die of asthma in Canada every year.”

“I read on the Asthma Society of Canada facts and statistics pamphlet that experts are struggling to understand why prevalence rates world-wide are, on average, rising by fifty percent every decade.”

Finally, we pull into the parking lot of a pharmacy that is open at this early hour.

“Is this the breathing store Mama?”

Again, I smile, trying to be reassuring. “It is the pharmacy. There isn’t any such thing as a breathing store, Love.”

“Are they going to help me breathe better?” my four-year-old asks earnestly.

“We’ll get you some medicine here and we’ll hope that it opens your airways. But we all just have to breathe the oxygen that is in the atmosphere. It is invisible but all around us.”

“Too bad they don’t have a breathing store Mama.”

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Newly equipped with a bagful of pharmaceuticals sitting in the passenger seat, some of which I’ve already administered to my son right inside the pharmacy, I wait to merge onto Baseline. I shoulder-check left in the northwesterly direction of the city. The rising sun in the east lights up distant fields of snow interrupted by the crisscrossing of Anthony Henday Drive and Baseline Road, eventually meeting up with Yellowhead Trail and the Trans-Canada Highway speeding towards hundreds of thousands of kilometers of networks. Over the black ribbon of asphalt, lined by newly erected transformer towers in the recently installed power-corridor, I can see the smoke stacks belching the stink of waste left over after extracting and refining that precious black-gold that drives our luxurious standard of living, that drives up the property values in our neighbourhoods, and that drives our false sense of power over the world and ourselves. There is no mistaking that we are having an effect, but it is not an impact we seem able to navigate.

I’d like to think that if I follow all the advice that I’ve been given this morning that I will be able to manage my son’s asthma for him. I desperately want to believe that if he takes the steroids, he’ll outgrow this malady. But this morning the cold air seems to be forming a blanket over the city. Far from comforting us, this ice fog is trapping

particulates so they cannot rise into the atmosphere. And, as I look into the dawn, I realize that there are influences penetrating and infiltrating and dissipating and diffusing and seeping into my son's life that are far beyond my control. Despite social constructions of me as his mother, which suggest that I'm either to blame for his health or that I can manage it—by labouring to achieve increasingly high standards of domestic hygiene and by making appropriate consumer choices—I know that scouring our home and feeding him the best organic nutrient-dense foods available for consumption are feeble attempts to mitigate the fallout of what is really feeding our current political-economy. And I know that it is not only my son, but all of us, who are suffocating.

For the second time this morning, my fingers claw the steering wheel and I feel an empathetic heaviness in my chest. As my heart rate rises and finally syncs with the frantic clicking of the indicator, I merge into the steady flow of traffic. I take a deep breath to calm myself. If all goes well, tomorrow the skies will clear and the winds will shift, blowing in new directions.

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<sup>1</sup> *The 180 with Jim Brown*. CBC. Radio One, Calgary. 31 Jan. 2014. Radio. ([http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/podcasts/the180\\_20140131\\_97908.mp3](http://podcast.cbc.ca/mp3/podcasts/the180_20140131_97908.mp3)). For more details about this podcast in the context of larger media-issues, see Wilson, Sheena. "Petro-Intersectionalities: Oil, Race, Gender & Class." *Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics*. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger, eds. NY: Fordham UP, forthcoming 2015.