

Inside the cover of the album of my baby photos, my mother pasted a poem, 'At First, My Daughter', by the little-known Scottish poet, Elma Mitchell. 'She is world without understanding,' it begins. 'She is made of sound. She drinks me.' I don't think I read it until after my mother died, when I was home from university, going through her things. I thought of Mum, in one of her sprigged Laura Ashley smocks of the 1970s, marvelling at her first-born, carefully cutting out these words that spoke of her astonishment at this fierce new love. I thought about how her baby, too, had given the crook of her arm the same 'weight of delight'. These were words Mum had wanted me to read in the future, when I had a daughter of my own.

At this, I put the album down, laid my head against her pillow, still with the faint memory of the scent she wore, and wept. I wept for the grandchildren she would never hold, for every milestone she would miss, a wedding I would one day plan alone, the enormity of my loss.

Snatches of that poem came back to me last year as I sat pressed against the incubator containing my own baby girl. My much-longed-for daughter, born four years after our two boys, lay in an induced coma in a neonatal intensive-care unit, heavily sedated to quell the seizures convulsing her brain.

The poem my mother loved so much celebrates 'The first and last moments/Of being together and separate/Indissoluble'. I was denied those moments with Romy, never felt the 'weight of delight' as my hot, startled bundle was placed on my chest in the delivery-room. She was spirited away before I came round from the anaesthetic.

Sometimes, overwhelmed, I would step out of the NICU, shut myself in the stairwell and scream her name in helpless, impotent confusion. Romy, Romy...

Once, on a day when I couldn't go on, couldn't pick myself up again and go home feigning cheerfulness for my sons, the name I shouted for

changed. It took me by surprise, this primal, atavistic cry.

'Mum,' I screamed, over and over. Then, 'Mummy,' I sobbed, reverting to the comforting childhood name, the one my sons call out in the night when they wake flushed from a nightmare or fever, needing cuddles and Calpol.

After a month of this strange new existence, Romy came home. I kept her close. 'You're inseparable,' said the physiotherapist who showed me how to unfurl the crooked limbs, help restore the neural pathways disrupted by the stroke my daughter had suffered in utero.

Romy thrived; my anxiety about the extent of her disability began to dissipate. Life resumed its regular cadences. I looked forward to the weekend we'd spend in Suffolk in the spring when I'd take my children to lay flowers at Mum's grave on the 20th anniversary of her death.

That date passed, unmarked (outwardly, at least), as my fragile family tried to adjust to lockdown and yet another peculiar way of being. This time, I didn't cry out for my mother. With the birth of each baby I had mourned her anew. Now – sharpening pencils at the kitchen table, trying to focus the attention of my quicksilver sons on number bonds and apostrophes – I was in mourning for the blissful, peaceful first year I had planned with my last child.

Grief, I had learnt, as I leaked milk and tears with each new life, is a shape-shifter. Grief has its own unpredictable trajectory. When Mum died, I had thought it was something finite, to be wrestled with and packed away. But with the birth of my children – and again, with the interminable lockdown – it broke out of the box. It blindsided me once more.

And yet, as each amorphous day of quarantine went by, odd things, magical things began to happen. With the clinics closed, I took on Romy's therapy, the business of rewiring her damaged brain myself; rolling her backwards and forwards, reading, singing, playing pat-a-cake.

I had never been good at just 'being' around my babies; always squirming from the tedium of very young children to snatch glances at my phone. Now, shut away from the world, new connections forged within my own brain, as well as my infant daughter's. I tried to stay as wonderfully present with her as Mum had been with me.

She was with me when Romy clapped for the first time – a month earlier than her able-bodied brothers – when she fed herself from a spoon, clasped a pencil with her damaged hand. Mum was there when Romy's brothers joined in, encouraging her to pick up toys with her weaker hand. Damaged neurons fired and reconnected before our eyes; Romy fizzed with an extraordinary enthusiasm and energy.

'Amazing,' pronounced the consultant when we finally managed to connect via Zoom. 'The scans and the baby I see before me – it's as if they are two different children.'

Before Romy and her brothers were born, my memories of Mum had begun to fade about the edges, like so many Polaroids in the album she had made. Becoming a mother, mothering during these strange times, has brought them back into sharp relief. I look from my baby to the photograph on my desk; the same dark hair and broad cheekbones Mum's grandparents brought from the Russian steppe. We are, for ever, both together and separate, we are indissoluble. My mother, my daughter. Myself.

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FLORA
WATKINS
on the
bond between
mother and
daughter



*Above and above left:
Flora Watkins as a child
with her mother in rural
Suffolk. Left: Flora with
her daughter Romy*