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## The Amorphous Children

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LAUREN SARRANTONIO

# The Amorphous Children

*“For children, childhood is timeless. It is always the present. Everything is in the present tense. Of course, they have memories. Of course, time shifts a little for them and Christmas comes round in the end. But they don’t feel it. Today is what they feel, and when they say ‘When I grow up,’ there is always an edge of disbelief—how could they ever be other than what they are?”*

*-Ian McEwan*

I had seen that stare before. There was something familiar in their hysterically deadpan faces—they looked more into me than at me, yet all that was left of them was a primitive two-dimensional image on a canvas. Yes, that was it: the eyes of the middle child in particular, who made direct eye contact—though all eyes were dark and identical—reminded me of the boy I babysit back home.

Professor Toothe tells us that *The Mason Children*, projected onto a tall white wall, was painted by an unknown American artist around 1670. Although the Elizabethan style was stolen from England, and the new homes settlers claimed as their own were stolen as well, this was the beginning of American art. The deliberate documentation of resettlement in America was limner—creepy and primitive. In the oil painting, the only boy wears puffed sleeves; he stands firm and aloof like a true aristocrat, despite his being no more than ten. He is portrayed as if he already has a receding hairline. They really do grow up fast.

The middle child's eyes lock with the viewer's, though her head is turned to her right; she catches your stare with her own. She is placed in the middle of the portrait, as she is the middle child. Her disproportionate fingers balance a yellowing folding fan with rosary beads tucked over her too-thin, pale wrist. The smallest imitates her taller sister's completely conservative lace dress and tied bonnet with a rose in her hand. These children—though battered and aged from hours of work, dressed up and posed like dolls for their living room wall—they were American kids, like me.

These children are just as much American kids as the little ones who stand and pose for pictures today. Perhaps the greatest difference is that twenty-first century children's portraits hang proudly on Facebook walls *and* the living room walls. *The Mason Children* most likely hung solely in the Mason's house, beckoning visitors to see just how put together they were.

Though the Mason children and Ethan are equally American kids, Ethan does not harvest the crops, clean the house, nor slaughter the ducks. He lives in a condensed, highly populated suburban town on Long Island, just as I did at eight years old. He gets on and off the school bus every day and attends public school somewhere in between. What happens outside this window of time is sometimes—as hilarious, ironic, and pathetic as it is—up to me.

Whether he likes it or not, Ethan can not help but look up to me—I'm several feet taller than him. Most times, I am sure he resents this fact. I resent, but also respect, the absurdity that someone half my size could present me with challenges bigger than I could measure.

Over the winter break of my senior year of college, I babysat Ethan for a week and, although I have known the deal since he was four, I was exhausted. I hand the job over to my sister, Nicole, for the next week. Nicole has known the deal with Ethan ever since I first left for college, and she was asked to step in for a bit.

"You wait for him at the corner until the bus comes and then he needs to be watched until his mom is home from work—around six." My sister is more resistant to the job than I, perhaps because she is three years younger than me and she is some steps behind in the virtue of patience. She groans at the news but does not put up a fight. We are hardly ever in town anymore because we are both away at school now, and besides, distance makes the heart grow fonder. Distance certainly made the New England settlers more fond of the English style they left behind, and a difficult child is kind of like a petticoat, is it not? A bit too heavy to carry all the time and unnecessary for basic survival, but people insist.

Nonetheless, Nicole agrees to cover me for the next week. I lay this on her gently, trying not to think about the incident last week when Ethan ran out of

the house and disappeared around the block without a coat in biting winter air. This was his reaction to the crumbled remains of his remote-control race car—“You *made* me break it!”

As I trotted to catch up to him, hands numb and nostrils flared in cold pain, my heart pounded in a hybrid of excitement and horror at the thought of him lost. We stood at the edge of some stranger’s lawn, bewildered, his face wet from tears and snot, my body the only barrier between him and the road.

“You can’t tell my mom. She said the next time I run away she’d call the cops. Now she’s going to yell at me.” He scoffed at me as though I were at fault, his sobbing speech barely intelligible. I assured him that we could start fresh if he agreed to walk back home with me. Interaction with Ethan in this state is a ticking time bomb, and one must move quickly before destruction. He fiddled with the stranger’s short wooden fence and a picket collapsed. I raised an eyebrow and held back a smirk. The age-old question resurfaced in me: As a leader, would you rather be feared or loved? While I witnessed this stranger’s fence get broken by the boy I had to chase down the street, I remembered why being feared is sometimes a leader’s greatest desire. Suddenly, he was in a great rush to get home.

The catch is: Ethan likes me. At least, I think he does. I am the only babysitter that has stuck around. I am unsure if this says more about my backbone or my resilience, but I cannot count how many babysitters Ethan has sent into self-doubt, reconsidering their public claims of, “I love kids!” at family parties. Maybe I could throw it on my resume:

skills include: leadership, patience, stoicism

babysat a child with a 1% babysitter retention rate

One summer, I needed a lot of coverage, so I encouraged a longtime friend to step in for me. Now, whenever I mention Ethan to her, she retells her traumatic experience:

“He tried to stab me with the back of an earring.”

“He peed on the kitchen floor, then threw my bag into his proud puddle.”

“He tried to knock me out with a lacrosse stick.”

I do not doubt any of these occurrences. One summer, “bad days” such as these moved me closer and closer to quit on his mother. “Bad days” were what we called it. I would pick him up from day camp with a skillfully concealed hesitation. His helpless, teenaged counselor often pulled her face muscles back in regret: “Ethan had a...bad day today.” Although I was only a couple years older than that camp counselor, I felt the distance in our ages. Just a few years

ago I would have stuck him in timeout, called for backup, and tattle-tailed, too.

But what Ethan needed, I learned as I became more conscious of the situation, was engagement, purpose, validation—just as any human. He still had pacifiers scattered all over the house until he was five years old. Some were deliberately hidden from his mother, suspended between walls and bed frames, wrapped in dust bunnies. He learned how to rinse them himself under a running faucet. I imagine him as he would pretend to sleep while his mother turned off all the lights and descended to her bedroom for the night. He must have leapt from his covers and scurried to the bathroom sink to get his binky fix.

The day I finally gathered the silicone pacifiers together and placed them on the dining room table, I snapped a picture of what must have been upwards of fifteen multicolored binkies. I concluded: letting go is a collective human struggle.

In the wake of the binky incident, I think of the evolution of childhood, the invention of the teenager, and how not only kids, but also their parents do not want their children to grow up. Perhaps because it is a reminder of our own mortality. Never mind the fact that the Western world no longer thrives on the labor of its own children to accommodate life's demands. Children today, unlike the Masons, have more time to be kids, prolonging the thrust into adulthood that brings entirely new struggles.

Childhood has certainly morphed and, quite literally, expanded since the beginning of America. The word *kid*—slang for *child*—sprouted into existence less than a century before *The Mason Children*. Nonetheless, the use of the word suggested more of a skillful young thief or pugilist, if not a baby goat, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary. Skip over a century, and *kid* meant more of what a modern-day American would think: a tiny version of someone who does not yet know they are a tiny version.

If this is the linguistic history of children, perhaps it is a perfect reflection of how we see youth. A kid is something like a pugilist—ruthless and lively—and maybe most of all, a thief, who takes more from you than you could imagine.

I do not know much about child psychology aside from my own intuition. What I do know is that while I was watching this *kid*, Ethan, fight through his childhood, I came to the immediate and painful realization that I was shedding mine.

Jessica, Ethan's mother, divorced his father around the time that I started working for them. In this self-fulfilling prophecy, I quickly felt as though I became his father. I played catch with him across the living room. We prac-

ticed soccer with the garage door as our net, even though scuff marks appeared if you kicked too hard. He imitated me popping wheelies on bicycles, and I'd put up with smelly sneaker feet afterward because, like a true American father, I was unsure how laundry procedures worked.

When Ethan's father visited on weekends, I had to tell him where Ethan's favorite snacks were hidden and which super power he preferred that week. On more than one occasion, we were down the rabbit hole of imagination in which a stuffed animal, a great white shark, lunged ruthlessly at my hand posed as a smaller fish. Ethan longs to believe he is a great white shark, -charged with ferocity, but really, he is a boy with an innocent imagination that pulls me in.

Ethan's father would arrive through the doorway wearing heavy work boots. He didn't say hello right away—his noisy keys and cigarette smoke spoke for him. I wonder still whether he was waiting for a hello or wanted to listen in on the sounds of his son lost at sea. Or maybe he wanted to revel in the quiet before it was his turn.

Despite the deliberate sounds of Ethan's father entering and my shift ending, Ethan placed more focus on his stuffed animals. He became intent on our game like a surgeon at work and refused to acknowledge that our time together was over for the day. I ritualistically placed my hand on his head—another reminder that I was in fact taller than him—and promised, "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Promises made aloud to him solidified my intentions to not give up.

Babysitting Ethan became much more than sitting around a house waiting for a parent to return, since his Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder makes that virtually impossible—it became a series of small victories.

We often played with his handheld toy dinosaurs; he enacted a family where the child dragon was orphaned. The first time he did this I realized where I was: not only in the middle of a cluttered, boy's bedroom, but deeply embedded in the life of a kid who wanted somebody to look up to. Usually, when he looked up, there was either a ceiling fan or me.

Ethan's life and mine unveil teenhood, unlike the Mason children. With my teenhood tucked in the pocket of my not-so-distant memory, Ethan's awaits. The concept of the teenager sprouted into existence in only the twentieth century. The term itself was unheard of until the 1920s, which is when the so-called teenage mindset began to unfold. As a matter of fact, what parted the red sea to teenhood were school bus doors.

Automobile technology led directly to the other major factor that fostered a teenage culture: the consolidated high school. Buses could now transport students farther from

their homes, leading to the decline of the one-room schoolhouse. Furthermore, Americans were realizing the potential of a longer education, and states were adding more years to their compulsory schooling laws. As a result, a larger number of teenagers were thrown into a common space than ever before. (“The Invention of the Teenager”)

In hindsight, I offer a silent nod of gratitude to dead automobile engineers. At this rate, I’d be married to my closest neighbor with children by now, but instead, the modern teenage babysitter gets an introductory peek into parenthood, with breaks to earn an education in between.

As a child, a friend and I had our own unique adaptation of a game we called “teenagers.” Our mothers were friends and, whenever they would bring us along for a day at the beach or an afternoon out to lunch, we would declare ourselves ten years older than we truly were. We walked ten steps ahead of our mothers and younger sisters, pretended to be at the park all on our own; the hot sun never a second thought, so long as we maintained the illusion of our flawless and free teen selves. We would place tiny sunglasses over our eyes and rest our hands on our hips with an attitude that we must have learned from older cousins.

Looking back, I realize that playing “teenagers” was not so different from *The Mason Children* overdressed like their full-grown parents—aside from the fact that the Masons probably had no say in wearing bonnets and lace collars. My tiny friend and I were the lucky ones. Teenhood meant that we could linger in the wonder and newness still spilling over from childhood, yet we could also have the freedom to do as we please. To walk without holding our mother’s hands.

I noticed that Ethan plays the same game. When we discussed the preface for games he’d often announce, “I’ll be *fourteen*. Okay? And you’ll be thirteen.” He looked at me as though he had just derived a genius plan, as if being fourteen years old is the climax of the human experience. Not to mention the undeniable power dynamic of deeming me a whole year younger than him in his imaginary world. My natural reaction would be to roll my eyes at the naïveté, but then I remembered my mentality as an eight-year-old: being a teenager meant you could *think* you are grown up, even though you don’t *have* to be.

This is what, I suppose, I put my faith in as I anticipate adulthood. I have incubated comfortably in the in-between for the last few years; an adult in the lukewarm bathwater of my teenhood. But Ethan is almost tall enough to sit in the passenger seat of a car and I now own my very own pair of pointy-toed boots, a grownups-only piece of wardrobe through my younger eyes. We must let go in order to reach the next best, fitting thing.

No doubt there are more connections between Ethan and *The Mason Children* than we can imagine, despite the changes to the meaning of “childhood” over the last three hundred years in America. Their flat faces decorate portraits that Americans habitually hang on physical and virtual walls. Perhaps all the children have knocked on wood three times to counteract an unwanted statement from coming into action. It is possible that while Ethan rushed to wash his pacifier before a nightlong snooze, 343 years in the past, the son of the Mason family snuck out into the dark regardless of his father’s commands. Yet, *The Mason Children* stand forever frozen to us; it is Ethan’s turn to grow into a person. He moves and changes, and so do I. There was once a time for the Masons to move and change, but now they are oil paint on a canvas.

What it means to be a child has changed, and what it means to be a mother has, too. As a babysitter, I am a passive witness of the daily churn for single mothers in 2016. To wake a child from sleep means not seeing him for another thirteen hours that day, to return through an unlocked door after sundown with countless grocery bags hanging like anchors from the fists—domesticated but worldly.

I played a part in this churning of the modern child and I wonder what Ethan will recall of his mostly consistent babysitter—the one who continued to listen to his impulsive outbursts despite hearing his mother pull the Audi A6 into the driveway, despite the itch to go home for the night and live out my own youth. I wonder if I will appear in his mind when he is ripped into the realization that he, too, will lose his childhood.

Then again, “loss” is not quite the word for talk of our childhoods. I have found that it is fluid, still with me like a guardian. Childlike perception returns to me when I engage with one who is in the midst of it. Ethan, despite being a child of divorce who lives a much different homelife than I did at his age, inevitably follows an evolved routine from *The Mason Children*. In all his premature rage and uncontained excitement, he showed me what it is to be a child, and, to some degree, what it is to have one.

Childhood is amorphous. Teenhood, after all, was invented. It comes and goes in all its institutionalized structure and finite angst. But childhood is a benevolent thing that follows me. I see it in the resistance in the tiny faces of *The Mason Children*, their anonymous portrait painter forcing them to stand still for hours. I feel childhood whenever I learn something totally new like the sleep pattern of sharks. I felt it when I watched Ethan pop a wheelie for the first time and in the widening of my eyes. I offer a silent nod of gratitude to childhood when it resurfaces and invite it along as a guest to whatever comes next.

## Works Cited

“The Invention of the Teenager.” *Ushistory.org*. Independence Hall Association. Web. 27 Feb. 2016.