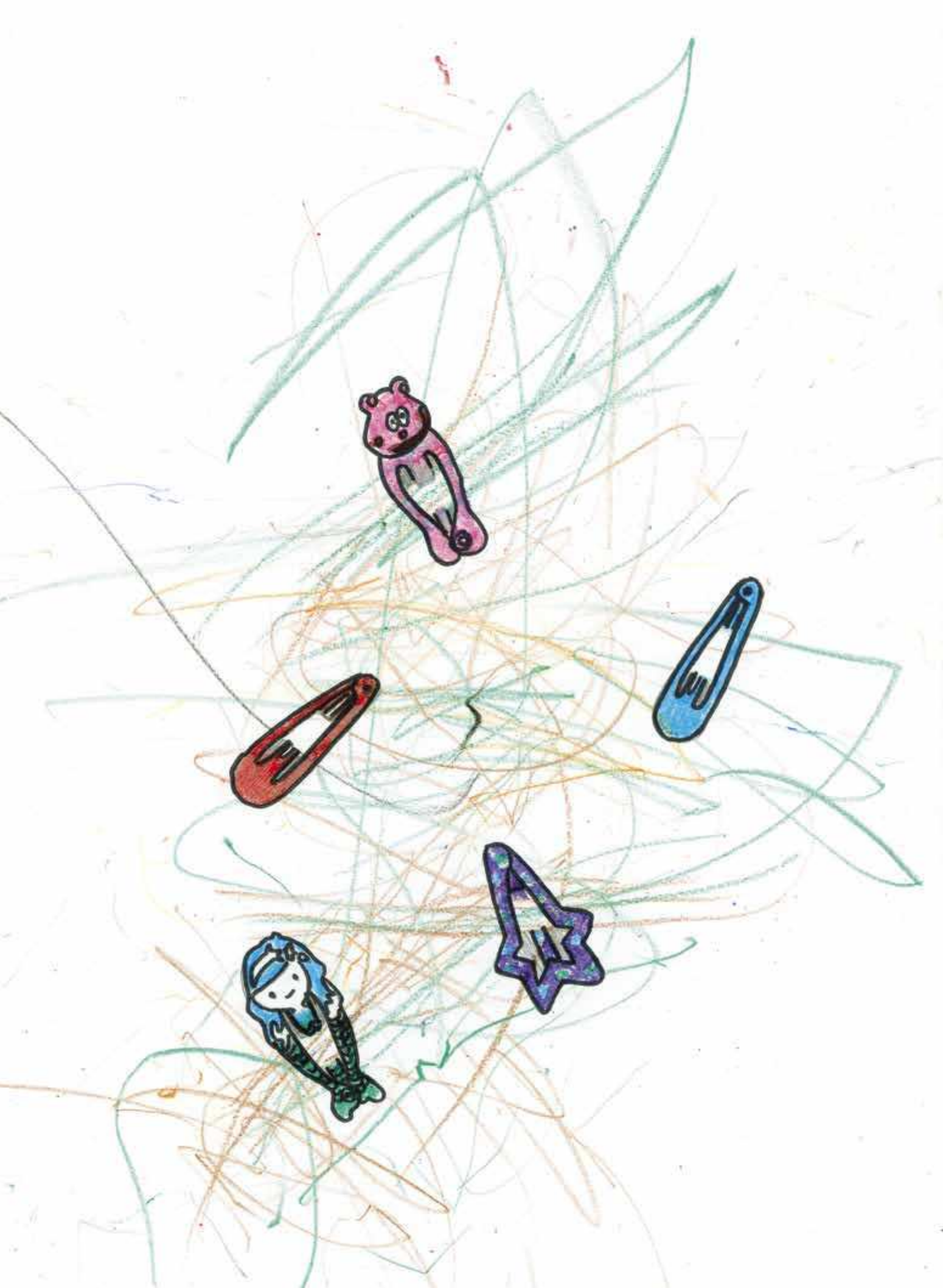


Reut Asimini

**Mia & Me**





Maria H. Loh  
Lifelines

Lines can be unbending, bossy things. Timelines. Deadlines. Guidelines. Line up! Tell me your bottom line! A hardliner toes the line, follows party lines, is always trying to bring other things and other people into line. They draw a line in the sand, they mark the baseline, they streamline in order to make everything and everyone around them fall in line. Sometimes it's a drag to be on the frontlines (where you must hold the line). Being in the line of duty means you're in the line of fire; you've sworn to put your life on the line. You must tread carefully in order not to reach the end of your line and simply flatline. Some lines go up and come down. Hemlines. Hairlines. Airlines. Others expand. Waistlines. Laugh lines. Skylines. Some are noisy, chatty things. Headlines. By-lines. Taglines. Storylines. Plotlines. Chorus lines. (A beeline and a battleline, however, are surprisingly quiet). Other lines are wily,

ambiguous things. These blurred lines loiter on chatlines with pickup lines; some have all the right lines. Hesitant ones will tell you it's in the pipeline. Those guys, they're all out of line. They travel 'along the lines of...' without ever reaching the finishing line. Lines can also be unruly. They cross the line. Cut the line. Do a line. Colour outside the lines. They go offline. They're generally out of line. Sometimes they even hide inside words like undisciplined and disorderliness (for those, you really have to read between the lines). Some are anxious—they're on hotlines where a calming voice will tell them to stay on the line. There are also sentimental lines. In Dr. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), of the seventeen separate uses for the word 'line', the fourteenth covers:

**Progeny, family, ascending or descending<sup>1</sup>**

Next in line. Bloodlines. Maternal lines because—to quote an expansion upon a well-known ancient saying—*pater semper incertus est*, but the mother is *certissima*. These are lifelines of the deepest kind and lifelines can be bossy, unstable, wily, unruly, or sentimental, and sometimes all at once. They rise and fall, get tangled and tied up, criss and cross, swirl and fly, and wind up in a warm embrace in the drawings made by Reut Asimini and her daughter Mia in the tender days and nights of 2020/2021.

In the beginning, it was as if the whole world retreated into a post-partum spell. Anxiety. Panic. Neurosis. Sleep-deprivation. Uncertainty. *Throw me a line, I'm sinking fast* sang Roxy Music on the stereo (we had time again for vinyl in those early days).<sup>2</sup> Everything appeared a potential threat—the doorknob leading to the unknown outside, the dusty piliferous nooks and crannies in our homes, the broken plastic surface of toys, and even the air in our own lungs. This sense of terror often rises to the surface in *Mia & Me*; it manifests itself most urgently in the drawing where Mia stabs at the skin of the paper with short, clipped, consecutive marks, prompting Asimini to respond with caution. On the ground below, a figure straight out of Francisco de Goya's *The Witches' Flight* (1798) tiptoes away, trying to escape the mayhem in the air. The original painting was itself a critique of frightful superstition and widespread ignorance in Goya's time, an especially apt metaphor for our own unsettled pestilential times.



Witches' Flight, Francisco Goya 1797–98

The new reality that quickly engulfed us in the spring of 2020 was difficult to grasp at first. The hours began to seem more elastic, as the spatial parameters that defined our place in the world became a lot less generous. Time and space withdrew from the social sphere of rules, expectations, and the customs of everyday life outside. From a certain perspective, the suite of drawings assembled here reads like a visual diary of those fluid weeks that turned into months and then into years. Indeed, some might read *Mia & Me* strictly through the lens of a pandemic, but parenthood—it's worth underlining—is always an uneasy passage even at the best of times. Becoming a new mother in a season of universal dread and doubt simply turns the experience into tragic-comedic hyperbole, like watching *Medea* performed by finger puppets and teddy bears.

Two months shy of Asimini's thirty-seventh year, when her daughter was nineteen months old, Mia threw her mother a line and showed her a way out: "You inspired me to start drawing again". Drawing has long been considered psychotherapeutic. In the jittery, sputtering years between the first and second World Wars, a group of artists (including André Breton, Jacques Prévert, Yves Tanguy, and Benjamin Péret) gathered in a house in Paris rented by their friend the French writer Marcel Duhamel. Sometime in the 1920s, these young men began to combine the practice of automatic writing with drawing. Their collective experiments led to the Surrealist parlour game known as the 'exquisite corpse'. One person would start a drawing, fold it in a way that partially obscured the form and then pass it on to the next person. Prompted by the broken lines on the page, he or she would then continue the picture before repeating the process with the next person. When the page was filled, the drawing would be revealed to all. Yet, for all the revolutionary bravado of the Surrealists, the images they produced in these collective séances were quite predictable concoctions. The co-authored image might begin with a woman's face that would morph into a pair of ducks in place of the arms or tennis rackets in lieu of the feet. The end results were nothing special (schoolboy graffiti meets toilet humour, but safely anchored in the conventional tropes of figuration). Still, there is a sympathy here, for what

links the 'exquisite corpse' with the drawings in *Mia & Me* is the pleasure of drawing and of collaborative invention. Asimini's practice, however, is a form of 'matrilineal surrealism' that short circuits the machismo and puerile eroticism of the Parisian boys and aims instead at something more remedial that was about safeguarding and world-building. The call and response between her daughter's doodles and sketches and her own served to mitigate the frightful fragility of the world outside.

The verb 'to draw' can also mean to draw something heavy like a bucket of water out of a deep well. Sometimes this double meaning hangs heavily on Asimini's lines. In an especially poignant drawing, the artist portrayed herself standing on the edge of a precipice, gazing down into the bleak pit. "You need eyeglasses," Asimini said to her daughter, "and I need perspective," she added to herself. But if her frantic weaving of pencil strokes is like the activity of the industrious spider who crafts for herself a magnificent safety net, Mia's joyous blue lifeline was always-already there, wrapping itself around the edges of the funnel of nothingness, transforming it into a marvellous cavern of curiosity of the kind you find in children's books and fairy tales. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Lewis Carroll's young protagonist finds herself unexpectedly free-falling down a rabbit hole. Rather than an adult's sense of panic, however, Alice's mind filled with wonder at the curious things around her:

**Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her, and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything: then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and bookshelves: here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs.<sup>3</sup>**

The world that is crafted in the pages of *Mia & Me* is full of wonder, and wonder is the proper domain of the child, first and foremost, and then only second of the artist. In 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908), Sigmund Freud compared the mature artist's creative activity with the child's world of play and fantasy:

**The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with her play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that she creates a world of her own, or rather, rearranges the things of her world in a new way which pleases her?<sup>4</sup>**

When we are suspended in the life of imagination and play, we are all like the child, a 'dreamer in broad daylight'. In the Freudian model, artistic creation (and this applies to both the writer as well as the visual artist) opens up a safe space in which the tension between the

child's desire to maximize enjoyment (the 'pleasure principle') and the adult's compulsion to bring things into line (the 'reality principle') are defused, even if only momentarily. If on occasion some grown-ups express the desire to go back to their youth with all the wisdom they have gained as adults, the works in Asimini's series might ultimately suggest that it is better perhaps to be in the present with the wide-eyed curiosity and wonder of the child, freed from the constraints of reasoned judgment and societal mores.

The instinct to control is hard to shake in adulthood, especially in periods of heightened stress. In one of the earliest images in the series, we can see unscripted, carefree, green, yellow, brown strands being pulled into place, like knotted locks of unbrushed hair. The clearly delineated clips grab and hold the pandemonium in place. In another image from this period, we find Mia stepping forward in a magic portal in yellow, arms open, eyes wide open to the world before her. A frantic field of parallel stitches, however, seems to be child-proofing the dreamscape, padding the ground beneath her little feet with a carpet of pencil traces. Her shadow tethers her to the floor and a thatched ceiling of cross-hatching at the top cocoons her from the unknown white void beyond the magical golden lasso that keeps her safe. A mother's work is never done; nor is an artist's. For Asimini, the work doubles down and multiplies itself. On two occasions, we find her trying to tidy up her daughter's

skittering red tracks and traces in the calming rituals of domestic work. But how to gain control of something uncontrollable (like holding the sea back with a colander)?

The reflex to protect and safeguard runs deep in these drawings, and the artist must constantly transform herself into supernatural forces of all kinds to combat a universe of visible and invisible dangers. In one instance the artist becomes a conductor as she struggles to direct the cacophony of Mia's linear loops in teal into a sweet summer symphony. On a cold winter day, a pack of jackals lies in wait inside the forest of Mia's thick black line. On another day, like Atlas holding up the weight of the world, she turns herself into a column so that her daughter can lose herself in the pages of a picture book. A is for apple. We are only just beginning. It is going to be a long day yet for the parent.

The expert babysitter and the seasoned story-time reader will spot the familiar and calming setting of Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947) sneaking into the background of the images here—above all, the window full of stars, a glimpse to the world outside. There are other allusions too (intended or otherwise), as when Asimini turns herself into a wind god entering from the right to blow away the *mal aria* clinging on to the surface of the page. There are many classical precedents for such deities in Renaissance paintings and maps. What came to my mind, however, was Margaret Wise Brown's

less well-known book, *The Runaway Bunny* (1942), in which a mother rabbit must metamorphosize into all sorts of creatures in order to safeguard her little son who is eager to explore the big world. In one scene, the bunny threatens to change into a boat and sail away, but his mother responds:

**If you become a sailboat and sail away from me, said his mother, I will become the wind and blow you where I want you to go.<sup>5</sup>**

Written in the middle of WWII, *The Runaway Bunny* reflects both the terrifying anxiety and the impatient exhilaration of venturing out into an uncertain future. Like *Mia & Me*, it is also an allegory of the heavy responsibility of loving and protecting the small lives you watch over. How to negotiate the desire for freedom with the threat of harm? How to contend with unruly lines without becoming too bossy and rendering them too straight for their own good?

And indeed, sometimes the effort to keep everything in balance is too much. One summer day, Asimini lifts up her shirt to reveal to us everything that she has tried to suppress inside her. Some months later, she lies on a couch, not in a session with a therapist but simply overwhelmed by it all. But there is much hope in these pages as well. Sometimes, it turns out that straight lines, rather than being high-and-mighty things, can also be quite beautiful and glow like a rainbow pulled into view between the



fine teeth of a comb. These drawings remind us not only to be tolerant of but to be open to the unexpected. Almost one year into the new normal, Asimini learns to cohabit with Mia's wilful red line rather than trying to wrangle it into order. And one warm spring day, she allows Mia's line to dance and play above the quiet cityscape below. The proud, graceful, bold red spirits glide this way and that like seraphim in a fresco by Giotto or like lovers in a Chagall painting.

Flying, floating, hovering in the skies. When this occurs in dreams, it is often interpreted as a sign of freedom, elation, and hope. In the final two instances when Mia appears in the co-authored pictures, she is bespectacled. They give her an aura of wisdom beyond her small years, but like Tiresias—the legendary blind seer in Euripides'

*The Bacchae*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*—insight is often more powerful than external vision. Two years and eight months into her days, she sits tall upon the bow of her own creation, like Venus riding her swan-drawn chariot through the heavens. How far she has come since we first met her just over a year ago. With her hair trailing behind in an invisible breeze, she is her own muse. In the final drawing where Mia's elegant, long black slashes have metamorphosized into wings, she sits with knees bent, her hands on her lap, and her eyes directed downward. She is watching the world below. Quietly. Patiently. Calculating. Surveying. Vigilant. Omniscient.

Mia is like Damiel (played by Bruno Ganz) the statuesque guardian angel in black and white at the beginning of Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987), towering over the isolated and fragile souls beneath his feet, listening to their sorrows, anguish, hopes, desires, and prayers. A middle-aged actor (performed brilliantly by Peter Falk), anxious about his upcoming role. A nonchalant young man in a trench coat who has come to clear his deceased mother's apartment without shedding a tear for her. Aged parents anguishing over their lay-about adult son whose head is lost in rock-n-roll. Around the flow of cinematic images of lonely, broken people, the angel's sing-song voiceover wraps itself, returning now and again to recite the lines of Peter Handke's poem, *Das Lied vom Kindsein* (Song of Childhood), which begins:



Als das Kind Kind war,  
ging es mit hängenden Armer,  
wollte der Bach sei ein Fluß,  
der Fluß sei ein Strom,  
und diese Pfütze das Meer.

Als das Kind Kind war,  
wußte es nicht, daß es Kind war,  
alles war ihm beseelt,  
und alle Seelen waren eins.

Wenders' *Wings of Desire* has been read as a love song to the divided city of Berlin in the years immediately before the fall of the Wall. It can be interpreted as a political allegory of a specific historical moment, but it is also a much grander narrative than just that. It is an artistic document of the transformation of monumental before into after; of the thin line that separates the child from the adult and the immortal from the mortal.

One might read Asimini's final drawing of Mia in this collection simply as a sentimental image, for instance of a little girl in a fairy costume. This would be too literal. She is anything but play-acting here; she is a clear-eyed soul ready to take off on her own.

When the child was a child  
It walked with its arms swinging,  
wanted the brook to be a river,  
the river to be a torrent,  
and this puddle to be the sea.

When the child was a child,  
it didn't know that it was a child,  
everything was soulful,  
and all souls were one. <sup>6</sup>

Two years, eleven months old, she is on the cusp of becoming her own little person. But the metamorphosis is even more significant than just that, for she has also changed her mother in that same time. When Asimini transformed Mia's joyous green line into an orchestra led by a conductor, she inserted the explanatory aside: "I tried to make you laugh", but who is the real cheerleader in this story? Who is comforting whom? We receive the answer some months later: "You drew on yourself and that made me laugh". The mother became the child and the child the mother, bound together by a most exquisite lifeline that they drew themselves.

One often sees out in the world (again), lilting rows of young children

hanging on to long ropes led by their schoolteachers. On street corners beneath traffic lights at the edge of pedestrian crossings, the line bunches up and gathers together as they wait to traverse large boulevards, which must seem like vast fields to them. One presumes that adults are always the ones to lead, but sometimes the opposite holds true as well. *Mia & Me* is an account of the artist's odyssey with her daughter through the darkness and into a magical Wonderland of their own

making. Drawing became a way for them both to confront and get a hold on the unknown worlds in which they found themselves. As a fairy-tale, *Mia & Me* also instructs us that in a topsy-turvy world, straight, bossy lines became more pliable, and the unruly, sentimental ones more resilient, as the child continues and completes the adult, becoming the guardian in her stead. Lifelines—we must not forget—can be bossy, unstable, wily, unruly, or sentimental. And sometimes all at once.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson quoted in Tim Ingold, *Lines. A Brief History*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan Ferry, "Virginia Plain," E.G. Records, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, M. W. & Hurd, C. (1991). *The runaway bunny*. HarperCollins Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Creative Writer and Daydreaming," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Vol. 9, London: The Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 149, 143 [emphasis and gendered pronouns mine].

<sup>5</sup> Brown, M. W. & Hurd, C. (1991). *The runaway bunny*. HarperCollins Publishers.