

Poems from Noah's First Year

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Oeuf Claire

In your first photo (a black and white
in sound) you are not there.
Your mom told me the story of the picture:
There are the uterus walls, enlarged
as though growing a baby but
there, where the embryo should be, absence.
"Ouef Claire" the African doctor called it,
a trick the body can play;
an egg, yes, but undividing, blighted.
We mourned for you before you were born.
We missed you so much.
All we had built with our dreams
burnt down that night and your mother
and I were fired by the heat, hardened
in an embrace around our empty womb.
After, I found one memory of hope
and shared it with your mother:
A simple idea of a family
walking along ocean cliffs.
"Yes, beautiful," she said, "what we wanted."
Your mother's body kept acting pregnant
and we went for an operation, a D and C
but first and just by chance we took another photo
and this time you were there, eight weeks old.
You know the rest, you are the rest,
really alive the whole time we cried.
While we imagined what we had not met
was done for, maybe you were laughing
the way you laugh when you watch me swallow food
or the way you laugh when you bite
your mother's nipple and she screams.
But enough make-believe, you know
how we always walk along the cliffs
on the bay and now you know why.

(Untitled)

Can he Breathe?
my wife asked with every shift.
Uncoupled from umbilicus
whose job, the lungs?
We worried over his sleep
like King Lear over Cordelia
... and you no breath at all.
If no mist on the mirror,
stir in the blanket,
or tension in a lifted arm,
we jostled the corpse awake
to hear the cry and work at lull.
It was as though we had just bought
a car and hourly started her up;
new owners who must hear the rev
to believe in the engine.
Now we trust the pulse, we rough
house. When he falls asleep
in the carseat between Safeway
and the beach I park and pull out
a novel, reading a whole chapter
before reviewing his slumber.

Origin of Prayer

To reach his mouth
is his greatest desire.

But at three months
his hands have not yet blossomed
into four fingers and a thumb,
and his arms move in wild disunion.

Perhaps, by accident,
his flailing fist gets
to the lips but spills out
after an instant of suction
leaving the infant stunned
at what was there and left.

Then, one day, the still curled
hands find each other, stack,
and cooperate up to the face
where they are held for minutes
in this best rendition of a mother's breast.

It is a trick he picked up.
Soon the hands will know how to entwine
and he will not miss so much,
hitting his eye or scratching
a long, red line down his cheek.

One day he will learn words
to fill the mouth: So many eloquent fingers.
He will hold his own hands
and reach them up as far as they will climb

You Will Not Remember

Once, before you could walk
or even crawl I carried you
along ocean cliffs.

When a rain began a cypress
with a wide crown sheltered us
and because motion eased your sleep
I walked around and around
the trunk of the tall tree.

Circling this way a mantra
first learned in India came to me.
A Tibetan mantra I never imagined
repeating next to your thin ear
while rain resurrected
the scent of the warm grass.

Carrying Noah

I underestimated the care,
under-esteemed the investment of care.
I forgot all about the long embrace,
the heft and sling from birth.
There is no sleep, no feeding unaided.
We feed him sleep.
We feed him plums carefully mashed,
each small spoonful a sonnet.
And we pull from his mouth the whole inedible world,
dirt and books and shoes.
I underestimated the administrations
of love, the labor of creation.
I had no idea
what lives was carried here
and stays only because held.

(Untitled)

Coarse, black, your Japanese hair,
hennaed in certain light, half Irish,
thin strands of gray, your age moving in.

Because there was no time for vanity
after the baby you cut your hair
to a shoulder bob.

It took two weeks for me to notice
with my hands. With my hands
I hold our son.

He sleeps with his mouth to your breast.
I sleep on the couch where night
feedings won't wake me.

We bathe him and dress him, make silly sounds
and pucker to draw smiles to his face;
the face of our love combined.

Love, but farther and farther from lovers
we moved to husband and wife
then father and mother.

Coarse and black, it will be years before long
again, before there's time to comb out
the tangles we make in your hair.

(Untitled)

The other bones stay buried,
hardening in muscle
but these rise through
the damp flesh biting
for days at the surface.

The growing pain of it.
Frozen bagels don't help
for the pain is already blunt,
blunt and meandering.
They do not cut straight,
not like a needle, it is a local
pain that grows to fill the mouth.

Just when I've survived
the first another hits a nerve
and another and they become
duller and must displace more gum.
The molars are worst.
They dig in my very ear.
And for these fierce teeth,
can you imagine, I'm
to get a few half-dollars
while I sleep.

Down Will Fall Baby

After he shares a lukewarm bath
we pad our steps, extinguish
all but the blue nightlight.
He has lived all day.

Mommy bears her worn breast.
Oh how he screams and
pushes off my chest
with his eentsy, weentsy arms.

Here is a bedtime story
about a slumbering house
that wakes and is happy.
See the robin singing?

He hears the lullaby coming--
sleep's siren--and tunnels
through his comforter, slaps
at the nursery door.

Hush little baby,
the cotton is high.
When the wind blows row
merrily down the stream.

Once down, his is the deft sleep
of womb memory,
the absolute surrender
of awake. Mid-night

he will break our dreams
with a cry. And we will
nurse him, walk him, sing him and
change him into sleep again.

Learning Point

The three of us, a small, new family,
walk along railroad tracks, through tall fennel
to a beach sheltered by cliffs, sand coarse
and still warm above the high-tide line.
While the sun alights on offshore fog
we dig a hole and bury our feet,
eat Cheerios one at a time
and find sea rocks too big to swallow.
I point to ribbons of pelican
flying south in the September sky. "Look
Noah, pelicans." You stare at my hand.
Kimi laughs and points, one finger
extended, and you laugh and watch her hand.
Laughing, we lift you and point you skyward
where you follow one uneven "V".
Walking back to the car, on my shoulders,
you try on the gesture. On you it's gorgeous,
the hand pushed up, overhead, all fingers out,
and the expression in the eyes always,
even inside, "Look, pelicans."