

I. Holding Breath

The Chronology of Water

THE DAY MY DAUGHTER WAS STILLBORN, AFTER I HELD the future pink and rose-lipped in my shivering arms, lifeless tender, covering her face in tears and kisses, after they handed my dead girl to my sister who kissed her, then to my first husband who kissed her, then to my mother who could not bear to hold her, then out of the hospital room door, tiny lifeless swaddled thing, the nurse gave me tranquilizers and a soap and sponge. She guided me to a special shower. The shower had a chair and the spray came down lightly, warm. She said, "That feels good, doesn't it?" The water. She said, "you are still bleeding quite a bit. Just let it." Ripped from vagina to rectum, sewn closed. Falling water on a body.

I sat on the stool and closed the little plastic curtain. I could hear her humming. I bled, I cried, I peed, and vomited. I became water.

Finally she had to come back inside and "Save me from drowning in there." It was a joke. It made me smile.

Little tragedies are difficult to keep straight. They swell and dive in and out between great sinkholes of the brain. It's hard to know what to think of a life when you find yourself knee-deep. You want to climb out, you want to explain how there must be some mistake. You are the swimmer, after all. And then you see the waves without pattern, scooping up everyone, throwing them around like so many floating heads,

and you can only laugh in your sobbing at all the silly head boppers. Laughter can shake you from the delirium of grief.

When we first found out the life in me was dead, I was told the best thing to do was deliver vaginally anyway. It would keep my body as strong and healthy for the future as possible. My womb. My uterus. My vaginal canal. Since I had been struck dumb with grief, I did what they said.

Labor lasted thirty-eight hours. When your baby isn't moving inside you, the normal process is stalled. Nothing moved my child within. Not hours and hours of a Pitocin drip. Not my first husband who fell asleep during his shift with me – not my sister coming in and nearly yanking him out by his hair.

In the thick of it I would sit on the edge of the bed and my sister would hold me by the shoulders and when the pain came she would draw me into her body and say, “Yes. Breathe.” I felt a strength I never saw in her again. I felt the strength surge of mother from my sister.

That kind of pain for that long exhausts a body. Even twenty-five years of swimming wasn't enough.

When she finally came, little dead girlfish, they placed her on my chest just like an alive baby.

I kissed her and held her and talked to her just like an alive baby.

Her eyelashes so long.

Her cheeks still red. How, I don't know. I thought they would be blue.

Her lips a rosebud.

When they finally took her away from me, the last cogent thought I had, a thoughtlessness that would last months: so this is death. Then a death life is what I choose.

When they brought me home from the hospital I entered a strange place. I could hear them and see them, but if anyone touched me I recoiled, and I didn't speak. I spent whole days alone in my bed in a cry that went to long moans. I think my

eyes gave something of it away – because when people looked at me, they’d say, “Lidia? Lidia?”

One day in their caretaking – I think someone was feeding me – I looked out the kitchen window and saw a woman stealing the mail from mailboxes on our street. She was stealthy like a woodland creature. The way she looked around – darted her eyes back and forth – the way she moved from box to box, took some things, not others – it made me laugh. When she got to my mailbox, I saw her pocket a piece of my mail. I belly-laughed. I spit a mouthful of scrambled eggs out but no one knew why. They just looked worried in that uh oh way. They looked like cartoons of themselves. I said nothing of this, however.

I never felt crazy, I just felt gone away. When I took all the baby clothes I’d been given for my newborn and arranged them in rows on the deep blue carpet with rocks in between them, it seemed precise. But again it worried those around me. My sister. My husband Phillip. My parents who stayed for a week. Strangers.

When I calmly sat on the floor of the grocery store and peed, I felt I’d done something true to the body. The reaction of the checkers isn’t something I remember well. I just remember their blue corduroy aprons with *Albertson’s* on them. One of the women had a beehive hairdo and lips red as an old Coca-Cola can. I remember thinking I had slipped into another time.

Later, when I would go places with my sister, whom I lived with in Eugene, out shopping, or swimming, or to the U of O, people would ask me about my baby. I lied without even hesitating an instant. I’d say, “Oh, she is the most beautiful baby girl! Her eyelashes are so long!” Even two years later when a woman I know stopped me in the library to ask after my new daughter, I said, “She’s so wonderful – she’s my light. In day care she is already drawing pictures!”

I never thought, stop lying. I didn't have any sense that I was lying. To me, I was following the story. Clinging to it for life.

I thought about starting this book with my childhood, the beginning of my life. But that's not how I remember it. I remember things in retinal flashes. Without order. Your life doesn't happen in any kind of order. Events don't have cause and effect relationships the way you wish they did. It's all a series of fragments and repetitions and pattern formations. Language and water have this in common.

All the events of my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory of a relationship, or one about riding a bike, or about my love for literature and art, or when I first touched my lips to alcohol, or how much I adored my sister, or the day my father first touched me – there is no linear sense. Language is a metaphor for experience. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory – but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.

AFTER THE STILLBIRTH, the words “born dead” lived in me for months and months. To the people around me I just looked ... more sad than anyone could bear. People don't know how to be when grief enters a house. She came with me everywhere, like a daughter. No one was any good at being near us. They'd accidentally say stupid things to me, like “I'm sure you'll have another soon,” or they would talk to me looking slightly over my head. Anything to avoid the sadness of my skin.

One morning my sister heard me sobbing in the shower. She pulled the curtain back, looked at me holding my empty gutted belly, and stepped inside to embrace me. Fully clothed. We stayed like that for about twenty minutes I think.

Possibly the most tender thing anyone has ever done for me in my entire life.

I WAS BORN cesarean. Because one of my mother's legs was six inches shorter than the other, her hips were tilted. Gravely. Doctors told her she could not have children. I don't know whether to admire the ferocity of her will for deciding to have my sister and me, or to wonder what kind of woman would risk killing her own infants – heads crushed by the tilted pelvis – before they could be born. My mother never believed she was “crippled.” My mother brought my sister and me into the world of my father.

When the conventional doctors voiced their medical concerns to my mother, she went to another kind of doctor. An obstetrician/gynecologist who practiced alternative approaches to health. Dr. David Cheek was best known for his work using hypnosis on patients using their fingers to tell him the subconscious causes of emotional or physical illness. The process is called “ideomotor.” Particular fingers are designated (by the doctor or the patient) “yes,” “no,” and “don't want to answer.” When the doctor asks the hypnotized patient questions the relevant finger lifts in response – even when the patient consciously thinks otherwise, or has no conscious awareness of the answer.

In my mother's case, this technique was used to help her through cesarean labor. Dr. Cheek would say things to my mother during her labor such as: “Dorothy, do you have pain?” And she would answer with her finger. He would ask, “Is it here?” And stimulate the area. She would answer. He would ask, “Dorothy, can you relax your cervix for thirty seconds?” She would. “Dorothy, I need you to decrease the bleeding ... here.” And she would.

My mother was an important case study.

Dr. Cheek believed we are imprinted with particular emotions even while in the womb. He claimed to have taught hundreds of women to communicate telepathically with their unborn children.

When my mother told my birth story, her voice took on a particular aura. As if something close to magical had transpired.

I believe that is what she believed. My father's telling of the story was equally filled with reverence. As if my birth were other-worldly.

The morning I went into labor with my daughter the sun had not come up yet. I woke up because I didn't feel anything moving in me. I put my hands all over the world of my belly and nothing nothing nothing but a strange taut round. I went to the bathroom and peed and an electrical shock traveled up my neck. When I wiped there was bright red blood. I woke my sister. She wore worry in her eyes. I called my doctor. She told me it was probably fine and to come in when the clinic opened in the morning. In my belly there was an immovable weight.

I remember crying in great waves. I remember my throat locking up. Being unable to speak. My hands going numb. Child things.

When morning came, even the sun looked wrong.

In my body, birth came last.

Metaphor

I'M GOING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING THAT HELPS. NOT in the usual way; this isn't in any textbooks or guidebooks. It has nothing to do with self-help or breathing or stirrups or speculums – god knows that territory has been done to death with its terminologies and systems – first second third trimester, quickening, lightening, labor, expecting, fetal heartbeat, uterus, embryo, womb, contractions, crowning, cervical dilation, vaginal canal, breathe – that's it, little short breaths, transition, push.

But what I want to tell you is away from this story. The truth of it is, the story of a woman having a baby is the fiction we make it. More precisely, a woman with bulging life in her belly represents – is a metaphor for making a story. A story we can all live with. The fertilization, the gestation, the containment, the production of a story.

So let me give you a tip. Something you can use in relation to this grand narrativity, this epic status, something you can live with when the time comes.

Collect rocks.

That's all. But not just any rocks. You are an intelligent woman so you look for the unimaginable inside the ordinary. Go to places you would not ordinarily go alone – riverbanks. Deep woods. The part of the ocean shore where people's gazes disappear. Wade in all waters. When you find a group of rocks, you must stare at them a long while before you choose, let

your eyes adjust, use what you know of the long wait waiting. Let your imagination change what you know. Suddenly a gray rock becomes ashen or clouded with dream. A ring round a rock is luck. To find a red rock is to discover earthblood. Blue rocks make you believe in them. Patterns and flecks on rocks are bits of different countries and terrains, speckled questions. Conglomerates are the movement of land in the freedom of water, smoothed into a small thing you can hold in your hand, rub against your face. Sandstone is soothing and lucid. Shale, of course, is rational. Find pleasure in these ordinary palm worlds. Help yourself prepare for a life. Recognize when there are no words for the pain, when there are no words for the joy, there are rocks. Fill all the clear drinking glasses in your house with rocks, no matter what your husband or lover thinks. Gather rocks in small piles on the counters, the tables, the windowsills. Divide rocks by color, texture, size, shape. Collect some larger stones, place them along the floor of your living room, never mind what the guests think, build an intricate labyrinth of inanimates. Move around your rocks like a curl of water. Begin to detect smells and sounds to different varieties of rock. Give names to some, not geological, but of your own making. Memorize their presence, know if one is missing or out of place. Bathe them in water once each week. Carry a different one in your pocket every day. Move away from normal but don't notice it. Move towards excess but don't care. Own more rocks than clothing, than dishes, than books. Lie down next to them on the floor, put the smaller ones in your mouth occasionally. Sometimes, feel lithic, or petrified, or rupestral instead of tired, irritable, depressed. At night, alone, naked, place one green, one red, one ashen on different parts of your body. Tell no one.

Now.

After months of collecting, when your house is full and swollen, when you begin to experience contractions and dilation, after you check the color of the too red blood, after you use a timepiece to record the seconds, minutes, after you

begin to regulate your breathing and abandon your thinking to the story you have been told about this, and, after your baby is born dead in the morning – which you cannot find in the story you were told – after you think of the words “born” and “dead” next to one another, turn to the rocks. Turn to the rocks and hear seas echoed from as far away as the Ukraine. Smell kelp and taste salt; feel that underwater animals have brushed near you. Remember parts of your body are scattered in water all over the earth. Know land is made from you. Lay all the baby clothes that have been given to you as scripts or gifts on the floor in lines. Sit with the tiny clothes and your rocks and think of nothing at all. Have end-less patterns and repetitions accompanying your thoughtlessness, as if to say let go of that other more linear story, with its beginning, middle, and end, with its transcendent end, let go, we are the poem, we have come miles of life, we have survived this far to tell you, go on, go on.

You will see you have an underlying tone and plot to your life underneath the one you’ve been told. Circular and image bound. Something near tragic, near unbearable, but contained by your irreducible imagination – who would have thought of it but you – your ability to metamorphose like organic material in contact with changing elements. The rocks. They carry the chronology of water. All things simultaneously living and dead in your hands.

On Sound and Speech

IN MY HOUSE ONE OF THE CORNERS OF THE LIVING ROOM was called the crybaby corner. When you cried, you had to go stand there facing the corner. The principle was one of shame. My sister tells me that when she was sent to the crybaby corner she would cease crying almost immediately. I can picture her leaving the wall with a face as stoic as a nun's. Almost like an adult.

By the time I arrived in the family, eight years after my sister, the laws of the house were in place. But none of them seemed to work on me. By the time I was four, when I cried, I wailed. Epically. And I cried all the time. I cried when I had to go to bed. I cried in the night. I cried when people I didn't know looked at me. I cried when people I did know talked to me. I cried when someone tried to take my picture. I cried being dropped off at school. I cried when new food was presented to me. I cried when sad music played. I cried when we put the ornaments on our Christmas trees. When people would open the door to my "trick or treat" at Halloween. I cried every single time I had to go to a public restroom. Or in bathrooms in anyone's house. Or bathrooms at school. Until I was in seventh grade.

I cried when bees came near me. I cried when I wet my pants – in kindergarten, first, second, third, and sixth grades. When I got any bruise or scratch or cut. I cried when they put me to bed in the dark. When strangers spoke to me. When children were mean, when my hair was tangled or ice cream

hurt my head or my underwear was inside-out or I had to wear galoshes. I cried when they threw me in Lake Washington for my first swimming lesson. When I got shots. At the dentist. When I got lost in grocery stores. When I went to movies with my family – in fact, one of the more famous of my crying stories happened when they took me to see *Gone With the Wind*. When the little girl has the pony accident and Rhett leaves Scarlett my grief was inconsolable. For about a week.

I cried when my father yelled – but I also cried sometimes just when he entered the room.

When my mother or sister were sent to retrieve me, the victories were small. About the size of a child.

It was my voice that left.

In my house the sound of leather on the skin of my sister's bare bottom stole my very voice out of my throat for years. The great *thwack* of the sister who goes before you. Taking everything before you are born. The sound of the belt on the skin of her made me bite my own lip. I'd close my eyes and grip my knees and rock in the corner of my room. Sometimes I'd bang my head rhythmically against the wall.

I still cannot bear her silence while being whipped. She must have been eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Before it stopped. Alone in my room I put a pillow over my head. Alone in my room I got my parka out of the closet and buried my skull in it. Alone in my room I drew on the walls – knowing the punishment – pushing the waxen color as hard as I could against the wall. Until it broke. Until I heard it stop. Until I heard my sister going into the bathroom. I would steal inside and hug her knees. My silent mother ghost would make a bubble bath. My sister and I would sit in it together. Voiceless, we would soap each other's backs and make skin pictures with our fingernails. If the picture was on your back, you had to guess what it was. I drew a flower. I drew a smiley face. I drew a Christmas tree that made my sister cry – but only into her hands. No one could have heard her. Only her shoulders and back moved. The red marks of a child's fingernails remaining

even after the soap washed off.

When my sister left the house I was ten.

I didn't speak to anyone outside of my immediate family until I was about thirteen. Not even when called upon at school. I'd look up, my throat the size of a straw, my eyes watering. Nothing. Nothing. Or this: if an adult required me to speak, I'd hold one leg up stork-like with one hand, and my other arm I'd put behind my head in an "L" shape, and I'd rock until I lost balance. Instead of talking. Little bird ballet. Little girl making an "L" for Lidia with her arm. Anything but speech. All those years with my sister in front of me I was silent. And after she left. Terror stealing the voice of a girl.

Sometimes I think my voice arrived on paper. I had a journal I hid under my bed. I didn't know what a journal was. It was just a red notebook that I wrote pictures and true things and lies in. Interchangeably. It made me feel – like someone else. I wrote about my father's angry loud voice. How I hated it. How I wished I could kill it. I wrote about swimming. How I loved it. About how girls made my skin hot. About boys and how being around them made my head hurt. About radio songs and movies and my best friend Christie and how I was jealous of Katie but also wanted to lick her and how much I loved my swim coach Ron Koch.

I wrote about my mother ... the back of her head driving me to and from swim practice. Her limp and leg. Her hair. How gone she was, selling houses, winning awards into the night. I wrote letters to my gone away sister that I never sent.

And I wrote a little girl dream. I wanted to go to the Olympics, like my teammates.

When I was eleven I wrote a poem in my red notebook that went: In the house/alone in my bed/my arms ache. My sister is gone/my mother is gone/my father designs buildings/ in the room next to mine/he is smoking. I wait for five a.m./I pray to leave the house/I pray to swim.

My voice, she was coming. Something about my father's house. Something about alone and water.