

WATER-WOMEN AND THE WOMBS WITHIN

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No abundance of floral prints and chiaroscuro baby portraits can soften the stark contrast between the primal violence of childbirth and the institutional frigidity of the hospital setting. Despite the harsh glare of the operating lamp and the endless supply of sterile towelettes, we insist on entering the world accompanied by the gush of organic fluids and animal odors that have marked labors and deliveries since before continental drift. Around my fourth or fifth delivery I discovered how much truer this is of “natural” births than of those assisted by increasing degrees of pharmacological intervention.

She checked into the Labor and Delivery ward with her boyfriend a little after dinnertime, dreads askew and sweat already beading on her hazelnut skin. Depending on the intensity of her contractions, she alternated between incoherent whimpers and lucid, tense questions about the likelihood of completing her delivery naturally. We reassured her that she was ultimately the mistress of her own delivery, and that while the epidural would not be available once the final countdown was initiated (so to speak), she could choose a number of other pain management options, or not, as she saw fit. She relaxed into her hospital bed and appeared to retreat to some remote corner of her mind. I had a sudden, misplaced urge to ask her to take me there, to walk me through where she had gone verbally; was she visualizing star patterns? Was she conducting some kind of take-no-prisoners negotiation with her baby? Was she taking her own internal inventory to better assess her chances of successful delivery, or was she leaving her body altogether to avoid the pain? The moment passed and I contented myself with placing some paper-towel wrapped ice in her hand instead. She rubbed it back and forth across her forehead and upper lip and sighed in obvious relief.

In the time it took us to set up the room and grab an instrument tray she was already in the grip of some terrible, ancient, pre-programmed sequence that I had not observed in any of the previous deliveries. It was futile to ask her to stop pushing; her lizard brain had detached itself from the reins of its wrinkled primate cortex many minutes before and decided that the

time was nigh. There would be no carefully timed waiting for the contraction to build, and laboring down seemed no more possible than the sudden arrival of a baby-laden stork at the windowsill. Her groans progressed to guttural bellows which resonated through my surgical boot covers and up into the base of my ears, as if she were trying to distribute her pain through some forgotten vibratory medium. Her nails dug little half-moons into the seasoned wrists of the night nurse holding her quivering thigh, and her skin took on a dusky cinnamon hue. Her belly was covered with a gown and a blue folded drape, but I imagined her uterus clamping downwards like some kind of monstrous mollusk expelling the foreign body within it. On the third bellowing push she screamed, “He wants to come out NOW, get him OUT OF ME!!!!”

And with impeccable narrative timing, he arrived.

Not to be outdone by his preceding birth-fellows, the six pound peanut of a baby exploded out of his mother in a matter of seconds. The attending tried gamely but with little success to control his head and shoulders as they slithered out. Amniotic fluid splashed across both of our gowns with audible force and just like that it was over. The clocks started ticking again, the lights brightened, the spectators sprang into action and the ancient force that had possessed her released its hold.

On his way out, the “wolverine baby” (as the attending called him) managed to inflict a long sulcal laceration and a labial tear, both of which were bleeding vigorously. The subsequent rapid delivery of the placenta and the tense repair which followed were striking in a completely different, wincing, breath-holding kind of way. When the bleeding finally stopped and she was allowed to hold her squalling boy to her breast, it seemed to me that they had become a new kind of human circuit; she had fed him with her blood, she was feeding him now with her milk, and she would (judging by the serene contentment on her smooth features) continue to feed him physically, mentally, and spiritually for as long as some spark of life animated her fierce, brown little body.