



The Chronology of Water

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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 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 bobbers. 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 38 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 25 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 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 moan. 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 Philip. 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, who 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 20 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 30 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.