

Rachel Rose

Delivery Room Under Renovation

—for Susan, for Alec Michael

The night my water broke, a week early,
I held my wide sides and rocked, knowing
that before another day came, no matter what the pain,
you would be born. And then I went upstairs
to my quiet study. It was two a.m. and my last chance
to be alone with poetry for what I knew,
the second time around, would be a long
exhausted, milk-pocked haul. Every time I stood
to take a book down from the shelf, your waters
poured out of me. I sat and wrote until the contractions
became too strong. Slowly I was drawn by the rope
around my hips, dipped in and out of that well
of pain. In between I sipped rose tea,
marked a few last-minute changes on a manuscript,
dripped and dripped and dripped.

In the hospital a day later, they handed me you
in the recovery room. My abdomen had been
stapled shut and I was still numb from the ribcage
down. We were in a room full of the knock and rattle
of jackhammers. Plastic sheeting covered the drywall remodel.
“You should breastfeed her now,” said the nurse,
and I couldn’t quite believe it. “*Now?*” I complained,
more child than mother, “I’m pretty tired right now,”

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but the nurse set her lips, untied my hospital gown,
helped that tiny rosemouth yawn and latch
onto the breast. I gasped as the baby's tugs burned
the thin skin, then laughed at her fine round face
as she squinted at us, blinking her eyes,
and we were blessed, and wiped our eyes.

The nurse, leaning over my bed, said to us
they were bringing in a woman to recovery
whose baby had just died. She did not need
to ask us to stifle our delight. The woman was wheeled in,
moaning but sedated. The nurse pulled the curtain
around her bed, and I held my newborn, her eyes
still glistening with erythromycin, the small white bonnet
pulled over her wet hair, and only a thin curtain
separated me from the mother whose baby had died:
I don't mean a metaphorical curtain, I mean a thin
green hospital curtain on a metal track,
and I wished, but dared not, pull it back.

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