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What No One Mentions

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What No One Mentions

Abstract

Is how the birth comes together and in waves and you come to know one another in those hours like you'll know one another ever after: which of you is afraid of pain, which of you is angry, which of you is stubborn, which of you is cautious and swaddled in memory. I knew Phoebe's reluctance even while she was being born, and in it, I understood her intelligence. I knew then her life would be a burden to her, that she'd blame me for it, but also that she'd never let up, that she'd hold each one of her days fiercely in her teeth. Her birth took fifteen hours, and it was like we were working against each other, like she was raging for the remainder of darkness that she knew then as light. Womb-light, deeper than a bruise. She fought, and she knows in her muscles how I wanted her born, how I worked and wailed just to get her here.

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What No One Mentions

Fiction by Rachel Jamison Webster

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How We Got Her

I thought I would know her like something I'd wondered up. But she was always way outside me, watching coolly. And it is true that not much fire brought her to earth, mostly just me wanting to know what sex would be like, and wanting to know again and again until sex became its flesh result. That was what we'd given her for origins, and most days it seemed to me a tawdry thing—two kids, Ralph and me, cycling out to the edge of town to climb inside each other's bodies, pawing off each other's

clothes on an old sheet laid down beside milkweed and chicory. That was all, and for her to come in with all this knowing? I didn't trust where it—where she—had come from.

Roots

Phoebe is six months old, everything too bright; the light that arrived on godpaws when she was born has not yet departed. I take her outside and lie down with her in the wintering grass. She flexes her fists, tries to get up from the cold and crawl, and I do the same, to show her how it's done. Then I plop down and she follows. Oh, dear one. See the yellowing roots of the lawn, see the tendrils webbing under us, this webbing that's suspending us. I lie with her in the grass, and we watch the little bugs leaping—in industry and fear. I point to the darkness below the blades and dab a little dirt on my finger, run it like lipstick along her lips. Don't be like me, I say, drifting away, always just outside of your days. At first, she laughs, then tastes it, the dirt, and wrinkles her face into the question she'll be asking all her life.

The Nightgown

Ralph got up at dawn, coughing, to milk the cows, and as usual I pretended to sleep, not wanting to talk. Then, after I heard him motor out of the side yard, I went outside, barefoot, and stood in the yard in my nightgown. The air was still damp, and the dew came in to lick my skin. I was myself again, the self that flies out beyond the body to enter the world it belongs to. And almost as if she sensed it, Phoebe began to cry from her room. She never wakes looking or wondering, it seems to me, but just goes immediately into needing. She has her father's eyes, and his stubbornness, the kind of stubbornness if you aren't careful can harden into ignorance. Her mouth turns down at the corners. Why does she tether my mind?

Swing

Ralph is on the porch, swinging Phoebe. And her watery blue eyes hold him in devotion, in miniature perfection as the first man on earth. She reaches for his chin, pats his sandy whiskers with her perfect, dimpled hand, saying, "ba, ba, ba." He looks down at her and cannot get over it—this little being almost too bright for him to see,

the perfect female improvisation on him, on me. He has a mother, a father, long fields waving with corn, fifteen chickens, two cows, a tractor, and a motorcycle. He has me. But now he has a daughter, which it never occurred to him to want, and he has to slide over, make room for this feeling. Fireflies skid out among the grasses, throbbing now and then with light. Like thoughts. Something, I think, like happiness, the way it flashes fast and is gone when you try to find it again. Or like a phosphorescent algae I read about once, how it covers miles of ocean, glittering in loose veils of light, rocking forward, then slipping back in the waves. Just let them carry you, I say to myself, their rocking creaking back and forth like my anxiety, the wrongness gnawing at my mind. Let them carry you, I say and say. It will be okay.

One

It is Phoebe's first birthday, and I've made her a white dress smocked with yellow thread. Her cells are doubling rapidly, and a new layer of self-consciousness has grown—little glimmer, little mirror—in her eyes. I give her a present, a stuffed rabbit, wrapped in the brown paper of one of my old dress patterns. She crinkles the paper and looks at me, the paper sticks, and she shakes her hand to get free. What do you know, what can you show me, why does the world feel this way? she seems always to be asking me. It is summer. We are all clammy with heat. I know every inch of this one's body, and it is a knowing so knitted inward not a thing could have prepared me. Layers of it removing me.

Fields

All year I gave her my breast, small and hard as an apple. And we stared into one another's eyes, into our becoming. Hers that pale blue like her father's I couldn't recognize. She saw me, and I wondered what she saw. I wondered whether she saw me more than I saw her. I wondered how to see her.

Now she babbles from the highchair as I warm a bottle. I watch the bottle bobbing in the water like a hunch. There are always other choices, her eyes tell me, as if she can see into me. But in this case there is only one and I am in it, I try to tell her back. Silently. With my mind. I am looking at my life from a great distance, standing in the present as if it were the past, as if it were a yellow kitchen, in 1924, in Rinard, Iowa, ensconced in an infancy like the yellow memory of light. I am looking out the window

like the window my own mother looked out of, at curling stalks of corn like the same woman over and over and over.

On My Birthday

I wake to my life inside me like a golden bowl of oil. I don't want to spill it. I don't want to just siphon it out. It is almost like feeling Phoebe inside me. First she was a nest of heat, then a little fish, then a bat. I felt her lashless eyes. But while she had taken nine months to be ready, this had taken only a day. Or twenty years, depending on how you look at it.

Ralph woke wanting sex. I knew him. He wanted to have sex, then afterward put Phoebe on the bed between us, so we could watch her play, see the sunlight filter through the muslin curtains, peel up into her curls. His hair was as pale as hers, as pale as corn silk. His hands were lovely—branched, strong farmer's hands, the blue veins ridging them, coursing under the skin like rivers course under the land. It was what I liked most about him, his hands.

I tried to memorize it all. The faint groaning way he kissed my neck down to the rise of my breasts. The feel of his lips on my belly, my lips. When did we stop using our tongues, I wondered. I memorized the mole on his thigh, the faint blond hair on his arms, his mouth and its own particular blend of hunger and ownership, its moments of hesitance, its soft familiar wanting. I paid attention to what his hands did, to the way his breath entered mine, the way I got caught up in his rhythm, like a gift I was giving and taking. He hurt me a little, and I even noticed that. I loved it all: the rough feel of his hands on my breasts, the way his callouses chaffed the nipples. His sharp knees pressing into my legs.

“What would really make me happy,” I said afterward, “and would be the best birthday gift, is if you'd take Phoebe to church and let me stay in bed and read.”

“Really?” he asked.

How could he not know? I thought, missing him already, angry at him for being so stupid. For being so simple, so good, for underestimating what I could do. He never asked me what I was reading, being too afraid of what he didn't already know. Like anyone.

I dressed Phoebe in her yellow dress, white socks, white lace-up shoes. She frowned the whole time. And when I kissed her on the head she cried and clung to me. I pulled her to me and smelled her hair, and the smell of her almost choked me. I thought, *I'll be back for you.*

Leaving

Outside it was wet, everything soggy and yellowed. The catalpa's trunk soaked dark, wagging its heart-shaped tongues for leaves. The bed unmade.

I was outside myself, looking down on Hazel like a scarf flying behind. And the farther I got from home, the more vivid everything became. It wasn't like I was seeing everything for the first time, but like I was remembering it somehow. That's when I had the realization that when we enter our real life, we see it doubly, because we recall it from the future. How would I remember, I wondered, the places I lived before my true life began? Would I forget all those people who loved me once? Their bodies, their names?

Rachel Jamison Webster is a professor in Northwestern University's Creative Writing Program and author of the full-length collection of poetry, *September* and the hybrid book of poetry and prose, *The Endless Unbegun*, as well as two chapbooks, *The Blue Grotto* (2009) and *Leaving Phoebe*. Her work appears in many journals and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *Narrative*, and *Labor Day: Birth Stories from Today's Best Women Writers* (FSG 2014). You can read more at www.racheljamisonwebster.com.