

The Cave

Caves

Last week we found our cave. We descended down a comically steep and winding path, tumbling. It opened up as it pulled us down, the slate-grey sea patiently waiting at the bottom. As we ran down the path to the shore you asked me if I had ever swum out to the shipwreck, named after Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the underworld. I said no, my daughter and I stay on the sand building castles. Then I told you about the single exception; the summer that I was pregnant with her, I forced myself to jump off the pier. Even though I fear heights, I jumped. I then told you how that pregnancy never felt right, despite the baby measuring well, her heart sounding perfect. I couldn't put my finger on it, I said, except that the baby never felt like she wanted to be in there. My stomach tissue felt like it was tearing. My blood pressure went up, but I never looked really pregnant. My hair went grey, though my face refused to soften in that placid bovine way of advanced pregnancy. There was a dull sense that something was happening, but not as I knew it.

We found our cave. We laid out our rug, and squealing, ran into the rocky water, washed our faces in the cold brine. 'Thank you! Thank you!' we murmured to the gaping sky and the rocks and the sea lapping at us like hunger.

Back at the cave you asked if I breastfed my babies. I found my self circling back to the girl, hearing the facts tumble out before I could stop them. I heard myself telling you that she had come home, after seven weeks in NICU, with a nasogastric tube. Although I didn't breastfeed her, I expressed milk for her round the clock, pouring it down the rubber tube that threaded through her oesophagus into her tangerine-

sized belly. My milk was the only thing that no one else could give her, no one else could replicate or invent, not with all the good intention or medical training in the world. This was my animal giving to hers.

You knew from past stories that she was born at thirty-five weeks, after my waters broke to a spooky absence of contractions. You knew that she was born tachycardic, via an emergency caesarean that saved her life but tore our mother–daughter fabric right down the middle. I had hinted at the long scroll of ‘abnormalities’ that was unfurled to us in the weeks following her birth, but didn’t tell you that everything from the shape of her head, to her gigantic liver, to her deep sacral pit, was up for brutal analysis. She was missing vital digestive organs, her blood sugar – had she not been hooked up to a glucose drip at birth – was low enough to put her in a coma. Her heart had a hole in a wall and a narrowing in an artery. She had the ‘webbed neck’ (a term I found intensely endearing) of a child with Down syndrome. Though she did not have this condition, her eyelids folded in a way that required an immediate call to the genetics team.

On the night of her birth, when I was finally taken to meet her, I poked my fingers through the tensile aperture of her crib, forcing that tiny plastic cervix to open to the urgent intrusion of my longing. A reverse birth.

What you didn’t know was that she was also solid inside the apparent fragility, strong in the perinatal bell-jar that surrounded her. I know how this must sound: parental rose-tintedness, hopeless bias in the face of grim reality. And it’s true; we knew her immediately, trapped her essence in the fascia of our hearts. But there was something else. Her body, some 2.5 kilos of it, appeared to us without apology. She was cut out of my middle and shown to me, and I wasn’t allowed to hold her or, more distressingly, smell her. Still. I saw, just for a fleeting moment, the completeness of this new being, her sovereignty, the stubborn loop of life-force.

Names

Of course, you know her name: Delphi. I chose this simple Greek word because it was pretty and ancient, having no idea how heavily both her father and I would lean on its mythology when the catastrophic first season of her life would swing into gear.

I dimly knew something about an oracle, but had no idea that the historic figure sat inside a cave and read the *pneumas*, steam coming through a crack in the earth beneath her feet. She read the vapours in a trance and spoke their prophecies – to everyone from the king to the peasants – in tongues. The cave where she sat was known to the Gaia-worshipping Greeks as the womb of the earth.

I was also under the common misapprehension that the oracle herself was called Delphi – she wasn't. The site at which she sat, dating back to pre-classical Greece, was the temple of Apollo, the handsome patron god of music, truth and prophecy, healing, the sun and light, plague and poetry. 'Delphi' means dolphin, and was the epithet of Apollo, who appeared to the oracle as such, swimming up to the cliffs of Mount Parnassus.

When I named my daughter, I had no idea that to the ancient Greeks, this god was as likely to bring on healing as ill-health. In the pregnancy that never felt right, my embryonic dolphin felt calm and happy in only one setting: when my belly was completely immersed in water. Despite being a very quiet baby the rest of the time, when I was in water she would swim to the ceiling of the womb, pushing her curved back up against the surface. I held to these moments, offered the mountain to her often, begging her to make herself known, to show me that she was made of matter.

The paediatrician was wearing the loveliest, most vivid green jumper on the morning she informed us that our child would most likely have problems with gross mobility. In the third week of her life, Delphi's brain MRI showed a malformation of her cerebellum. The doctor told us to expect everything from mild clumsiness to Delphi never walking or even crawling. 'We simply do not know,' she said, a tight smile crossing her tilted face in a bizarre fusion of sympathy and politeness. In that moment, Delphi was somewhere down the end of a long corridor, asleep with cannulas in the tops of her hands. Vascular sounds whooshed rapidly in my ears. And all I could see was the beauty of that green jumper, so saturated, such a pure green that wasn't emerald or lime or olive or mint or racing or bottle. It was just green.

That afternoon a parcel arrived from a relative in Europe. In it was a shawl, spanning (it seemed, to my over-exerted senses) metres of tightly woven wool. It was the dark red of last-day menstrual blood, the deep carmine of pomegranate molasses when the bottle is held to the sun, a quiet field sodden with soldier blood. That night, in a frantic search, I looked online for images of the oracle. The first image to surface was of an 1891 painting by Pre-Raphaelite artist John Collier. In it, the Priestess of Delphi is sitting on her tripod, a lion-footed, golden chair that straddles a deep crack in the earth. Her eyes are dark, shadowy. She looks nowhere in particular, though it is obvious that she is seeing something very specific.

I swam for my life in these details, thinking of my floppy black-eyed newborn; a baby who was yet to fix her gaze on anything, let alone mine. Pumping milk for her next round of feeds, I zoomed in and out of the mobile phone frame obsessively. In the portrait, the Priestess of Delphi wears her iconic shawl, perhaps her most famous

piece of attire: an endless expanse of dark red fabric wrapping around her back and over her head.

I gasped at the synchronicity. I had obsessed over symbols, but also dreaded them; sometimes the metanarrative lifted us off the sodden ground and sometimes it just rubbed our faces in its cold soil.

When we asked the head paediatrician if he could give us any assurance about Delphi's future, he said no. The next day I learned that carved into Apollo's temple were three phrases: 'know thyself'; 'nothing in excess'; 'make a pledge and mischief is nigh'.

Of all the urges I had while she was in hospital, the strongest was to know that Delphi recognized me as her mother. The day she came home I cranked the heater, took off my top, stripped her down to her nappy and lay her on my chest. Skin to skin. This was supposed to be the miracle cure to all that abrupted bonding. Instead, from the second our chests made contact, she screamed and screamed, tiny fists bunched, her tube flailing around her head like a rodeo whip. She did not stop screaming until I put all her clothes back on, lay her on her side and left her alone.

Meanwhile, Delphi was growing herself from the inside. As the weeks rolled on, I realised she had more non-verbal knowledge than I could apprehend.

One afternoon, a couple of months after coming home, Delphi was lying in my mother's arms. Her gaze was still wonky, her muscles flopped. She was beginning to smile, but randomly and without conviction. My mum decided to play some

opera on her phone, on speaker. She sang along, guessing the notes in order to show Delphi what singing looked like. A few bars in, Delphi opened her miniature trout mouth and issued a perfectly long and delicate note, in tune with the music. She did this about four times in a row, undergirding my mother's voice, broken as it was by tears at her grand-daughter's first solo.

When Delphi was three months old a team of paediatricians in Austria helped us wean her off the nasogastric tube. It is very common for newborns to become addicted to this method of 'eating', to forget the mechanical function of their mouth, to lose touch with the sensory apparatus of the tongue, the lips, the gums. Over the internet, night after night, they coached us in awakening Delphi's orality – we stroked her lips gently to revive touch; we sat droplets of apple puree on the edge of her tongue; we let her chew on soft spoons and the ends of our fingers. At each meal we would introduce a tiny amount of pumpkin puree instead of pouring milk down her tube. With each meal she would show a budding curiosity.

Over the course of three weeks the ratio flipped: meal after meal, she was licking apple off my finger and sipping pumpkin puree more than she was 'tubing'. As she sucked and drank, she made firm eye contact with me, her onyx eyes shimmering. Before offering the food I would tickle her bottom lip very softly, letting her know that something good, something nourishing, was on its way. She would poke out her tiny cat-tongue, smile, reach for the spoon. Holding my gaze, she would reach for this world – not just in a bid for survival, but a stretch towards sensation, towards pleasure.

Thanatos

Since you and I visited the cave I have been inundated with memories from Delphi's beginning. Straight after Delphi's caesarean, the doctors took her to a corner of the theatre to work her up, to work her out. My private midwife was listening to their obstetric banter, quietly funnelling anything relevant into my ear as I lay recovering on the operating table. At one point she said, 'Now they are looking at her placenta. There is something unusual about it. You know... the umbilical cord normally grows into the centre of the placenta, its 'branches' spreading out across the organ evenly... Delphi's appears to stick out from the side.' I tried not to panic. She kept talking. 'And her cord... it's only got two strands. Cords are usually made up of two arteries and a vein, right? Hers has just one of each.' I asked what this meant, to which she softly replied, 'You don't need to worry about it now. She survived, she's here.'

For better or worse, I let the cord thing go. Then one day, when Delphi was a toddler, I came across an article that informed me of the truth. I learned that **Single Umbilical Artery** occurs in up to 1% of pregnancies when the umbilical cord either fails to develop its second artery or it wastes away. Half the time, the condition can indicate abnormalities, particularly cardiac problems and also skeletal, renal and intestinal issues. Of the pregnancies that fall into this 50%, two-thirds are associated with a high likelihood of stillbirth.

I let this information sink, spasmodically exposing my horror and gratitude – dripping it like an axe-cut finger, really – to unsuspecting friends and family members. Delphi's father also took the axe wound, but not being a public bleeder he simply mirrored the midwife: 'She survived. She is here.'

I tell you this story because it braids all of them into one: it holds the ongoing tangle between life and death. If Delphi's bumpy beginning had a patron archetype, it was Thanatos, the god of death.

Thanatos strips us of ideas that need to die – healthy parents always make healthy babies; wild, unfair shit doesn't happen to the good and kind. In the final passage of Camus' *The Outsider*, as Mersault proceeds to his own execution, he declares his surrender to the 'benign indifference of the world,' a phase I find unbearably beautiful. This is Thanatos talking, mediating Mersault's surrender to his unbiased force, merciless and gentle all at once. This god's well-known symbol is the down-turned torch, but I see him with a graphite pencil, rendering contrast, sketching outlines: 'This is now, this is not'; 'Your life matters; your story, not so much'. Contrary to our society's small and histrionic discourse, his motto is not 'Life's a bitch and then you die.' It's 'Welcome to this moment'. And this one.' 'Breathe,' says Thanatos, walking alongside you as you exhale into the unknowable.

I am so happy we went back to our cave yesterday. The warm days are ending, ringed with the licked flames of borrowed time. There was no choice but to return to the caves inside caves, to tell one last story.

On the third day of her life, as I was drifting in and out of an Endone haze, it occurred to me that Delphi needed magic from the world I understood best: the world of words. Her original middle name was Lilah, delicate and velvetine, the Hebrew word for night. But I got a very strong feeling, deep in my freshly sutured gut, that she needed something more robust. So I called her dad in the NICU, from my bed in the maternity ward and told him: 'She needs a new name so she can live. I'm giving her a new middle name.' I was in pain, slurring, barely audible. But he knew what I meant. He heard the whisper beneath the water: 'Her middle name is Miriam'.

Just like the ancient prophetess, our Miriam will be the one to walk into the un-parted seas. She will take the first step and move forward until all of her body is immersed, even her eyes. She will trust in the time it takes to keep them closed and she will feel when it is time for them to open. For a while, our daughter will live under water, and only she will know for how long. But we will see her hand, held high, waving a tambourine. And when the moment comes, the sea will part and we – all her people – will follow. It will be easier for us, for we are the beneficiaries of her instinct. We will take each other's hands and run into that ocean, knowing what is the now, and what is the not. We will feel the sandy floor beneath our feet and we will know.