

from Natural Birth · Toi Derricotte

The following sections are from a booklength narrative poem, *Natural Birth*, which related my reactions to an unwanted pregnancy and the birth of my son in a home for unwed mothers.

When I arrived in Kalamazoo, with two months to go until the birth, there was no room in the maternity home. I was placed with a family who had generously offered their home until space was available.

With all the things working against it, things that could go wrong, things that must be perfectly timed—it seems amazing that even one child is conceived. . . .

—Dr. Roland Dean in conversation

II NOVEMBER

nun meets me at the station. first month with carol and dick waskowitz. *set the table. clean the kitchen. vacuum. thank god she didn't ask me to take care of the children.*

i dry dishes in the afternoon. watch her can apples from the backyard, put them in the cellar to save for winter.

why is everything so quiet? why does the man come home from school everyday at 3:30 and read the paper? why a different casserole on the table every night and everyone eats one portion and one portion only? why is there always enough, but never too much . . .

try to understand this quiet, busy woman. is she content? what are her reasons to can, to cook, to have three children and a pregnant girl in her house? try to be close, lie next to their quiet ticking bedroom, and hear no sound, night after night, except soft conversation. in the morning, before light, i hear the baby's first cry. i picture her in there with her bra unhooked and her heavy white breast like cream on the cheek of that baby.

inside i wonder what she thinks, feels, who she is. and every night it gets dark earlier, stays dark later. i don't want to wake up smiling at cereal. dark overshadows snow, and a fear comes into my cold heart: *i am alone.*

one afternoon, drying dishes, her cutting apples by the sink, i ask her about college. i picture her so easily in penny loafers, peck and peck collar, socks, and a plaid skirt on her skinny still unchilded body. here she is today with hips and breasts, a woman thirty who had taught school—she must have some thought about her life, some arguments and passions hidden in this kitchen.

finally, she tells me her favorite book is *the stranger*. we go and find it on the living room shelf. i wonder, though she never says, what she understands about being a stranger . . .

i meet her mother—all the same—they treat me all the same: human. i am accepted, never question who i am or why. never make me feel unwanted or afraid. but always human love and never passion, never clutching need, lopsided devouring want, never, not one minute, extending those boundaries to enclose me . . .

oh soul,

i feel

cold and unused to such space as breath and eternity around me . . .

so much room in silence . . .

how will *my* house ever run on silence, when in me there is such noise, such hatred for peeling apples, canning, and waking to feed baby, and alarm clocks in the soul, and in the skin of baby, in the rind of oranges, apples, peels in the garbage, and paper saved because it is cheaper to save and wrap and wash and use everything again. and clean, no screaming in that house, no tears, one helping at dinner, and no lovemaking noises like broken squeaky beds. where is that part i cannot touch no matter where or how i turn, that part that wants to cry: *SISTER*, and make us touch . . .

she is kind. though i never understand such kindness. cannot understand the inner heart of how and why she loves: *i am the stranger*.

somewhere in the back of my mind, they are either fools or the holy family, the way we all should be if we lived in a perfect world and didn't have to strive to be loved, but went about our quiet business, never raising our voices above the rest, never questioning if we are loved, or whether what we do is what we want to do, or worth it . . .

and if they are fools who don't have hearts or brains or chords in their necks to speak, then why have they asked for me? why am i in their house? why are they doing this?

i never dare to ask because it is too simple, too direct a question. i am afraid of their answer.

one night in my round black coat and leotards, i dress up warm against the constellations, go down the snowy block alone in time. i am only going to the drugstore, but for some reason, the way i feel, pregnantly beautiful walking into the bright fluorescent drugstore, it is the most vivid night in my mind in the whole darkening november . . .

IV MATERNITY

when they checked me in, i was thinking: *this is going to be a snap!* but at the same time, everything looked so different! this was another world, ordered and white. the night moving by on wheels.

suddenly the newness of the bed, the room, the quiet, the hospital gown they put me in, the sheets rolled up hard and starched and white and everything white except the clock on the wall in red and black and the nurse's back as she moved out of the room without explanation, everything conspired to make me feel afraid.

how long, how much will i suffer?

the night looked in from bottomless windows.

VI TRANSITION

the meat rolls up and moans on the damp table.
my body is a piece of cotton over another woman's body.
some other woman, all muscle and nerve, is tearing apart
and opening under me.

i move with her like skin, not able to do anything else,
i am just watching her, not able to believe what her
body can do, what it *will* do, to get this thing accomplished.

this muscle of a lady, this crazy ocean in my teacup.
she moves the pillars of the sky. i am stretched into
fragments, tissue paper thin, a nazi lampshade. the blood-
thick light shines through to her goatness, her muscle-thick
heart that thuds like one drum in the universe empty
of stars.

she is
stuffed
inside
me
like sausage
like wide sky
black
night bird
pecking
at the bloody
ligament

trying
to get
in, get
out
i am

holding out with
everything i
have
holding out
the evil thing

when i see there is
no answer
to the screamed
word
GOD
nothing i can do,
no use,

i have to let her in,
open the door,
put down the mat
as if she
might be the
called-for death,
the final
abstraction.

she comes
like a tunnel
fast
coming into
blackness
with my headlights
off

you can push . . .

i hung here. still hurting, not knowing what to do. if you push too early, it hurts more. i called the doctor back again. *are you sure i can push? are you sure?*

i couldn't believe that pain was over, that the punishment was enough, that the wave, the huge blue mind i was living inside, was receding. i had forgotten there ever was a life without pain, a moment when pain wasn't absolute as air.

why weren't the nurses and doctors rushing toward me? why weren't they wrapping me in white? white for respect, white for triumph, white for the white light i was being accepted into after death. why was it so simple as saying you can push? why were they walking away from me into other rooms as if this were not the end the beginning of something which the world should watch?

i felt something pulling me inside, a soft call, but i could feel her power. something inside me i could go with, wide and deep and wonderful. the more i gave to her, the more she answered me. i held this conversation in myself like a love that never stops. i pushed toward her, she came toward

me, gently, softly, sucking like a wave. i pushed deeper and she swelled wider, darker when she saw i wasn't afraid. then i saw the darker glory of her under me.

why wasn't the room bursting with lilies? why was everything the same with them moving so slowly as if they were drugged? why were they acting the same when, suddenly, everything had changed?

we were through with pain, would never suffer in our lives again. put pain down like a rag, unzipper skin, step out of our dead bodies, and leave them on the floor. glorious spirits were rising, blanched with light, like thirsty women shining with their thirst.

i felt myself rise up with all the dead, climb out of the tomb like christ, holy and wise, transfigured with the knowledge of the tomb inside my brain, holding the gold key to the dark stamped inside my genes, never to be forgotten . . .

it was time. it was really time. this baby would be born. it would really happen. this wasn't just a trick to leave me in hell forever. like all the other babies, babies of women lined up in rooms along the halls, semi-conscious, moaning, breathing, alone with or without husbands, there was a natural end to it that i was going to live to see! soon i would believe in something larger than pain, a purpose and an end. i had lived through to another mind, a total revolution of the stars, and had come out on the other side!

one can only imagine the shifting of the universe, the layers of shale and rock and sky torturing against each other, the tension, the sudden letting go. the pivot of one woman stuck in the socket, flesh and bones giving way, the v-groin locked, vise thigh, and the sudden release when everything comes to rest on new pillars.