Troubled Water

MaryJan Munger
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How I'd like to say I've brought a secret from the other side. Some message from the ghosts who lumber through our sleep. But I have brought back nothing. Another child, wordless as a fish, smooth as a waxy petal. She is sleeping on a quilt in the middle of the lawn, white flower quivering through thick water near the bottom of the sea.

Those first mornings while the fat sun swam into the sky and I paddled back and forth across the shallow end, the child would sometimes bobble up inside the womb. Back and forth each morning, I would singsong beneath my breath, Someone swimming in me swimming in . . . Above the glassed-in roof a bird rowed through scuds of mist. All around us the watery world, the boom and splash of voices over the surface of the pool.

The sky turns gray. The walk outside the clinic just long enough to pace between each wave of pain. At one end, the deep lawn, fields, an orchard, the trees and rooftops of the city. Strips of cloud trail onto the mountain to the east: rain, at a distance. Wet wind swells across the valley, down from the upper slopes where water drops from pine-tips, sinks into the grass. Where rain slants through aspens into shoals of wild mint, of white columbine bobbing.

Once I forgot how to breathe. Good, crooned the midwife, groaning’s good.
Groaning's fine. But the pitch kept rising, filling the room with someone else's wail. A sound you'd hear at night, far from home, belling across the water. Not that the even, counted breathing absorbs pain. But without it, you lose your way. You circle somewhere in the middle. You never come home.

Today while this daughter sleeps, I watch the shadows sway uneasily beneath the trees. My body is still fragile. I've heard other women say they slid into eternity, that the hidden mother opened beneath them as they opened. I was too busy easing my way back to notice. Now, beneath the neighbors' car,

a small white cat stretches its neck, eyes me as if I knew. Rolls itself into the dust, one paw in the air, gazes at me over its back. White tail, white head twist in and out, a flood of allusive gesture. All I can think of—tallest mountains floating like a frozen crust on molten rock, deepest sea a film of water pooling. Trees on the high ridge ride a wind I can't feel. They billow and ripple away from me. Already she closes her eyes when I come too near.

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