

# *Breech*

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**F**irst she swam. I could hear her splashing in the salt water of my amnion like a pocketful of coins dropped into a fountain. The water there is supposed to help the baby grow, so the doctor worried that mine would not suffice. The doctor explained the nutrients a growing body would need, but I assured them she was fine. As I grew larger, so did she, and so did my little pool in which she played. There were no charts to show how a mermaid baby would develop, so I was free to imagine until I started getting sonograms. I thought how dark it must be inside where she was, like a forest but without the night or the fringes of pine needles. It was myself but a world I would never know, and I already loved her, knew nothing about her, would go anywhere for her: Eurydice. I sang her songs when we were alone together, strong Orpheus-songs. I was careful not to sing her any songs about the sea because it might make her want to go back where she came from. Not that she jumped from the sea into my waiting womb like a salmon into some luxurious salmon mansion, but she must, at one time, have been in the sea. After all,

now she was inside of me. I was careful not to imagine her face too hard. I thought it might send her away if she really was Eurydice, and when I didn't think that, I worried that I would get so attached to the face I imagined that I wouldn't recognize her when she emerged from me. At first, when she did not yet even have a face, she was objects, things. When she was small enough to be a secret, I thought she must look like a key, a silver-colored key. Perhaps I had swallowed it and she was the only way to get into some secret place. She would press against me and unlock my womb, come tumbling out of me. She grew into a crescent moon, not the actual moon of course, but some light and loosely pinned version of it.

When she was the moon, I went out at night a lot, knowing that she was protecting me, would glow inside me if I were ever in absolute darkness. She knew how to do that and I must have, once, but forgotten upon taking a breath. But she kept me safe. Never had I gotten such pleasure out of people-watching, just strolling past windows and looking in at people. I witnessed many insignificant moments that I will never forget. I went into a coffee shop downtown, right in the middle of things and therefore full of homeless people, local politicians, and anybody who'd been standing outside asking for money for one cause or another. I had been to this coffee house before one night after drinking too much, and I could remember wiping the frothy throw-up from my lips after I threw up in their toilet. Today cranberry tea and one of the homeless men; *It will be all over! Everything that has begun will be over soon!* I wondered if people had grown numb to *the end of the world is at hand* and now needed to be reminded of beginnings.

Beginnings. Hers. I didn't know about her until she was several weeks along, until I was an airport away from where she must have begun, from where I met an atheist named Josiah and made love to him. He had light, blond-brown hair and a day's worth of stubble on his face. I liked him because he wasn't pretending anything. I place a hand on my belly. Knowing she is in there, I can't bring myself to recount all the details of my night with Josiah, even though the night was more sweet than anything else. I am all mother right now, can't let the sin trickle down the umbilical cord and into her mind, not while it is so soft and young. But I was with Josiah, it happened

in my hotel room. When you get an atheist in a hotel room with a mermaid, the conditions differ from what they might be otherwise. I welcomed this, his handprint lingering on the bedpost after the same hand had lingered on me. The way my hair spilled out all over and he said it looked like a beautiful dress. The nightstand, Bible-gravid, shut tight, silent, irrelevant. The blinds between us and Vancouver closed and beige, no darkness. Slits. The rest, our bodies and how they worked or played—this is the part I must explain differently than I would have if she weren't inside me. He was the captain who opened the port and launched her little boat. That was all now, all he was. He would never know. Of course I would catch myself remembering his hands, the way he liked to touch me where my fleshy belly gave way to shimmering fins. That's a part of my body that's always caused fascination and sometimes fear—I remember one man saying it was a "grotesque amphibian beauty." I told him that was a good thing because I'd rather lie down with lizards than with him. He took his human self out the door, tail predictably between his legs. Josiah just touched it, petted it, liked the feeling on his palm as I changed from one thing to another.

But as is the case with hotels, the lovemaking was impersonal no matter how much we said, and even though it made this little person, even though I thought about him, of course, on the plane ride home. This would have been her first time in the air, her first time crossing a border, her first time coming home. Her first time stowing away.

Below us, Vancouver became pure geometry and green grass as we flew higher, higher, she and me together during those first few days. I saw all the right angles of rooftops and caught myself trying to stack them all up with my eyes, make some new sense of order out of them.

When I got home, everything still felt normal. I laid the suitcase on the bed and set out the dirty clothes I'd put in the bag the hotel had provided for that purpose. There were some things I hadn't worn. I laid each of them out on the bed, folded them, put them back with my other clothes. Everything was in order.

I didn't find out about her for a few more weeks, though I felt different from the start. There had been something changed in the

way I walked, something I couldn't quite name. It felt like a starfish regenerating a limb in me. It's not romantic, but that's how it felt. Somehow I knew what it meant but didn't really think it at first, as if to think her was to create or erase her. I kept going to work and taking the train and getting stared at and/or ogled on my way home during rush hour, where the crush of bodies was as sexual as anything could get but also the least sexy thing a person could do with a body. Holding onto a pole to stay standing up between two men wearing ties, I was trying to concentrate on not falling when the train would make stops. The train stopped roughly on St. Mary Street and the man behind me hadn't been so well-balanced, falling into me. In a memory I'm sure is false, I can feel his Windsor knot imprinting itself on the back of my neck. That was when I thought it: something is growing in me. There wasn't anything about the feeling that made me think of a baby—my first thought was some kind of vine—but I knew that something, for some reason, had decided to settle and grow in me.

My third way of knowing was the night I woke up in-between. In-between what and what? I don't know, but it was another territory, like the space between cars of a train. The night was quiet. The room had a purplish cast to it. I was lying down, I was still, but half of me was pitching forward into the nothingness. I felt parts of my own body thrown into that empty night-purple, suturing itself back to me momentarily in little flutters of nausea. I had colonized myself, using my very own body, my very own lust to make another body.

The next morning I counted out exact change for a pregnancy test at the chain drugstore just down the street past a set of traffic lights. I read the instructions so carefully; this was a new process for me. There is nothing natural about a pregnancy test.

The double lines appeared steadfastly in the "yes" column. I poured out the open half-bottle of wine that I had in my kitchen and took the green bottle outside for recycling day. Then I went back to the pharmacy and bought a lot of vitamins.

Then I found a doctor, one with a trustworthy feminine first name, Maureen, and I gathered up all my vitamins so she could tell me which ones I needed to be taking. I rode the subway to my

appointment, and they have those special seats for old people and pregnant ladies. But I didn't look pregnant yet so I didn't sit there, just crammed myself into the regular seats between the college students and the commuters like I did every day. Nobody knew I was pregnant. She had stowed away again. I showed her the subway map so she could see the city as I so often did. I recited which line went where and traced each one, its elbow and how impossibly straight the tracks were on all the maps. I told her which one to take if she got lost and needed to find her way back to me. Remember, I said, this is our stop. This is where we live. As I said this, I kept one finger pointing at our stop on the illuminated map and one hand on my belly, wishing I had a nice round one so I would always always know she was there, still alive, still growing.

There were a lot of appointments but the first one that stands out is the first ultrasound, the first time I really saw her. She was mysterious, a little light in the darkness that was apparently myself. Her light was funny, like a heart-beating ghost, a neon spark that I had swallowed and kept aglow. Maureen asked me if the father was human and I said as far as I knew he was, which made her smile. I knew then that she had constructed an image: girl mermaid, boy mermaid, baby mermaid, and I flashed on what a stick figure drawing of such a family might look like. A strip of blue for water and another strip of blue for water and a house with windows to let what in except maybe more water. Mermaid children don't draw their families this way.

After I saw her that first time, I could not keep changing her. I stopped imagining her as different things. I was her outside and she was inside me. I was the fruit to her seed, disposable, her vessel.

When I went to see Maureen, I brought my baby inside me every time. I was sure to. The doctor took blood from me, just a little bit. The doctor checked to make sure she was there. She checked every time as if I might have misplaced her, my baby, which was swiftly turning from a fragile sheath, a jellyfish with no poison, to a boned thing. My boned thing, inside me, amnium hooked to me by my flesh, corset-baby, flesh of my flesh, amnium hooked up to me like flowers hung up to dry. I thought of the flowers I'd seen that way,

how I once mistook drying dusty miller for sets of old hands. It took a long time for her to have hands, which were first just nothing and then something vague but substantial like pouring hot wax into a jar of water. Her fingers developed into tiny fringe. “Now your baby can hold on,” the doctor said with a smile. I thought how nice my doctor was for bringing my baby to visit this way, for letting me know aside from splashes that might be life or might be homesickness.

The splashes. She was moving inside me like sound carries through water. At night the rhythm of my own body carried me away to sleep. The splashes were small and self-contained, like she was swimming laps rather than trying to swim away from me. I met a man named Dale and tried to be a normal mermaid again, but the splashes kept him up at night. He liked them at first though he was afraid of hurting me, of hurting her. He would wrap me in a sheet and gingerly put one ear down to listen. He said it did remind him of the ocean and then he told a few stories about getting stung by a jellyfish, how swollen he had become. The word swollen seemed made for me, how it could apply to sound as well as bodies, and I wondered if he was trying to tell me that he thought I was too big and too loud. Regardless, he eventually turned on his side and grew to putting in earplugs to drown out the sound that I so loved, the sound that told me she was there.

Apparently she had already wandered astray as she turned inside me. My doctor mentioned a breech birth. First I thought she said “beach birth” and was making some joke about me looking like a beached whale at my current size. I was going to say something nasty in response to her, but then I heard her say the phrase again and realized she meant my baby was upside down and would be born backwards, like she had been trying to float away from me. She said my baby had a hand out, pointing out my uterus as if she were showing someone else the way out. She said they should version me. I thought if I rolled over and over, it would fix it. But the doctor said they only did that in a manner of speaking. She said she was going to place her hands on me to encourage the fetus to convert to a vertex position. That’s how she put it all.

I asked what the success rate was, and my doctor said it was fifty percent. She gave me a brochure to take home. In it, babies

were in all sorts of yogic positions, illustrating the different kind of breeches and giving each one's level of infant mortality. My doctor hadn't told me which one mine was. I put my hand on my belly and tried to tell based on my own changed shape, knowing that was hopeless but still somehow trying to know.

That night I walked downtown again. This time, my baby could not be the little light inside me. I had to keep her. I walked past all the same windows that I had those nights when she was the moon, but this time I was the sky. And nobody looked at me the way everybody looks at a mermaid, but I heard someone whisper something about the pregnant lady. It was me. My hair was falling now to the length of my huge belly.

I came home that night, my arm looped around my belly and looked out the window. There was the moon above, the actual moon. She had stopped being the moon and left me for the actual sky, and now the sky was up ahead and she had become another thing, crawling through me, apparently turned the wrong way. My womb was this great unknown space, a glass box on which she could pace the floor on all fours, could turn her whole body around, could hang like a bat. I thought of all the things she might be doing inside and felt a jolt inside me, her saying hello in a way that went through my whole body like a sound. Another night I would have had some wine by myself, but tonight I just went out in the forsythia.

The next day I went in for my versioning. Maureen told me that they had to quiet my uterus and again I was offended that the splashing should bother so many people. "No," she said. "We just need it to be more steady for this." So she gave me an IV, Ritrodine to keep my uterus steady, as if it had been this unsteady thing while carrying around a baby for months. I lay there for about half an hour while the medicine drip-drip-dripped into my veins. Then Maureen came back in and started pushing on my belly. The rhythm was a mystery to me, but it must have made sense to her, how my baby was, how my baby should be posed inside me. She explained that she worked on the head first while she was also pushing up the bottom and the feet. She tried to work the baby's head lower as if to show her the way out. It hurt, of course, but I stayed alert, watching, fascinated at this. I tried to imagine my little girl and

her little hands swimming back around, pointed in the right way. Or resisting, wondering what this strange force was from above. I worried that to her it felt like a kind of apocalypse.

“Is it working?” I asked finally.

“Not yet,” Maureen said.

“Is that a bad sign?”

“Usually it works right away if it’s going to work, but we can keep this up for a few more minutes and see.”

So we did, me lying there while the doctor pushed and palpated me, my little mermaid-girl swimming to infinity, reaching one hand out of me even as we tried to turn her upside down.

The procedure was not successful.

“We still have a few weeks to see if she turns herself vertex on her own,” Maureen said. Maybe she could read my disappointment. I had failed. I had failed my girl-baby, failed to make her right for this world. This could be the first in a lifetime of errors as a mother. Mother. I had never attached that word to myself before, but there it was, a word for a relationship I shared with her as real as the placenta that bound us in flesh.

“Complications with breech babies are rare these days,” Maureen added. “Even if she doesn’t turn vertex, she can still be delivered without any problems. We may have to do a C-section, but I’m sure both of you will be fine.”

I was still thinking of my failure, thinking of her little hand reaching out of me as if to escape the confines of my body. I could feel—or thought I could feel—her tail against my pelvis, a fluttering pressure. She was trying to swim out of me. Because I am the only mermaid, I cannot ask if all of this is normal.

I cried on the long ride home. A boy watched me. I was the pregnant lady in a purple skirt and hysterics. I was the only mermaid.

“How far—” I heard a man begin as he sat down beside me.

“Thirty-seven weeks,” I replied automatically.

He smiled. “I was talking about the train. How many stops until Central?”

“Two,” I said.

Thirty-seven weeks. There was still time for her to turn herself

upside-down. But she didn't. They would have to cut me open and cut her out of me. I imagined her holding on, not wanting to leave—did she love the confines of my womb or could she not bear life outside the body? I cried at this question until my body grew so big I almost couldn't bear it. I lay down in the forsythias, thinking how they are one of the few flowers that could make milk sugar. I touched my breasts, thinking about the milk that I would make. I would be a forsythia.

Each flower looked like birth, the way the folded lips opened up. When it is about to rain, forsythia petals become pendant to protect the flower's womb. I had planted these flowers before I knew I would be a mother. I had never loved them before. I walked inside and leaned against a doorpost, unable to get comfortable with my massive body. I looked out my window, back at the forsythias and as far beyond as I could see.

I lay down on the sofa, closing my eyes and trying to sleep. I wanted a bath but couldn't fathom getting to the tub, couldn't bear the thought of standing up and then putting myself back in the water. I could only manage that ghost sleep like the sleep on airplanes or trains. There was too much pain in my body, a pang that bashed and tore at me. It felt like a ship in wind, a sharp boat battering the cliffsides during a fierce storm. I did not know what the pain meant until the ship broke the sea: there was a sudden gush of water from inside me. It sounded like a sigh of relief.