Something good enough

Tamarin Norwood

Our middle child was 72 minutes old when the midwife listened for his heartbeat and heard no sound. His peaceful death was the long-anticipated conclusion of a pregnancy fraught with inconclusive scans and tests, and eventually a diagnosis of anhydramnios that put all ambiguity to an end. With no more amniotic fluid to help his lungs grow strong enough to breathe, we knew that his birth would be the death of him.

All the same, his perfect stillness in my arms appalled me. It was completely at odds with the reality I knew, which in turn began to feel unreal. All the people and things in the hospital room seemed to slightly lift and begin to float, barely perceptibly, from the surfaces they should have been resting upon. A little drift. It was as though the centre that had been holding us was suddenly insubstantial, and the drop in gravity cast everything subtly awry, gradually loosening the bonds between us, until our family found it possible to go back home, and strangers found it possible to come and go as though it were just an ordinary room, on an ordinary day, and not unreal at all.

Two women in scrubs stopped at the door and came into the room to admire our son, never mind his being dead. They appeared to know me and, although I could not place them, I was glad of the admiration. I wanted more people to come and see him. Anyone. Another woman brought a clipboard with the autopsy consent form. I was still holding our son in my arms, and there was a moment’s deliberation as she hesitated with the clipboard held aloft and I transferred him to my husband’s arms. The neatness of the midwife’s arms, and the looseness of his, the limbs moving through their joints as though with ease. There is a video I watch very rarely, as rarely as I open the bag his blue woollen hat is sealed inside, as though looking at the video like opening the bag would release his smell and it would go away. It

I remember very little of the hours that followed. What memories remain are rounded and smooth and still as stones. By now I know them well. They are so worn with recollection that all their shape and roughness is long rubbed off, and only the most dense and silent parts remain.

I remember dressing our son in a new white sleepsuit never worn and much too big. I rolled his left sleeve until his little hand could be seen, and my husband the right. The cutting of hair. A little snip, close to his scalp; I was so afraid I would irreparably cut his skin for the millimetres of hair we would keep for proof. The pressing of palms and feet against treated card to make small prints. The midwife bringing an oval pill to suppress the production of breastmilk. It tasted bitter, medieval, an old wives’ tale of a pill the colour of milk but in every way its opposite, and most of all so dry—dry enough to desiccate all the milk of those gentle hours that would have been ours. Without this pill I would overflow with need for him, or worse be overfilled with need, breasts swollen thick and engorged with milk undrunk, love unspent, milk he would have loved to receive as my body would have loved to give it.

The smoothest of the stones is the memory of his bath. I can still lose myself in this memory. If I close my eyes I remember very little of the hours that followed. What memories remain are rounded and smooth and still as stones. By now I know them well. They are so worn with recollection that all their shape and roughness is long rubbed off, and only the most dense and silent parts remain.

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is the only recording of any length we have, and it is a
good recording. The floor of the room, the edge of an
open cupboard, and then the bed move into view, the
translucent plastic bath set upon absorbent sheeting
before which I kneel while my husband stands beside
me. The midwife is saying sorry that the water must be
cold not warm. I am replying to her, and my husband is
already silent, tending his son in the water.

In the water he is his most perfect, most comfortable,
skin most clear, mouth and brow most at rest, legs
floppliy crossed in memory of the womb. All the
loveliness of a baby. For once he just looks asleep. I
watch my husband’s hands. The heel of one hand rests
on the side of the bath and the other works very softly at
his son’s hair, which we could say we are meant to be
washing. A little work at his temple, neatening as if for
a proud first day at school, and then his fingertips hold
in the water a moment or two, and his other hand visits
the legs and little toes, sees if there is cleaning to be
done there, and then retreats to rest on the side again,
soap suds up to his wrist. He lets me. My hands seem to
know the baby, the right hand honoured to support his
head, thumb stroking his hair, its incidental movement
giving the impression of a baby all tired out and
nuzzling in his sleep. I pluck his drifting hand from the
suds to lay on his chest and it slips back into the water.

Over time I have come to understand that these
memories of our son’s birth and death were not formed
by accident at all, but were crafted. They had been
lovingly carved by the efforts of many, many people,
some of whom we met in the hospital that day and
ensured she would help us gather a bundle of stones
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Our son’s death, and the deaths of babies like him, are
so powerful they pull into their orbit not only the
families that loved them and the midwives to their births
and deaths, but nurses, consultants, researchers,
advocates, women in scrubs at the door. And they are
not pulled in by chance. Parents like us have been
listened to again and again by these people. Our words
and silences have been recorded and transcribed,
anonymous, and interpreted by professionals who have
watched grief descend many times and will have known
that when our baby died everything would begin to lift
and spin, and that we would cast out our hands desperate
to reach for anything that might tether us, before we
should drift out of reach even of ourselves and be lost.

In these moments we are, more than anything else,
an aching lack of something to hold, and we will answer

Declaration of interests

I am collaborating (unpaid) with Held in Our Hearts, a baby loss
charity based in Edinburgh, UK, to help develop creative writing
resources for parents bereaved at birth. I convene the Lives in
Medicine research network at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing,
University of Oxford, UK. I declare no other competing interests.

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