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Birth

HOPE

GIVING FEAR TO THE LIGHT



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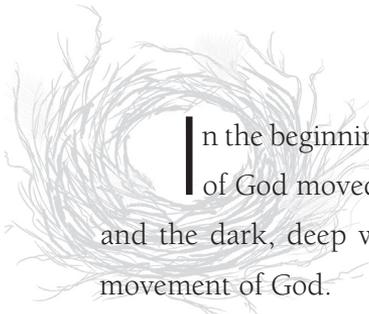
FLOAT

Spanish-English

DAR A LUZ

transitive verb phrase (idiomatic)

To give birth. (Literally “to give to light.”)



In the beginning, there were the waters, and the Spirit of God moved lightly over the surface of the waters, and the dark, deep waters rippled and trembled with the movement of God.

And God gave all that is to light. And God called all of these things good: the light, and all that the light shone on, and all that is in the depths of the waters that the light did not shine on.

Tov. Good, God said.



I trembled and clung to my father's neck by the apartment pool and would not consent to be taken into the water. He said he would hold me the whole time, but going into the water, even in his arms, was unthinkable. I was sure we could not pass through it and live to tell. The photographs of my baptism, in the Sea of Galilee, when I was seven, show me smiling, but with spindly arms and legs all right-angled, tensed and clinging to my father's arms as he immersed me—you *are buried with Christ in baptism*—and raised me, spluttering seawater; eyes squeezed tight against the brilliant Middle Eastern sun. I could not yet swim.

Until I was eight, I lived in New York City. Now and then my parents and I went and stayed for a few days at the small beach cottage way out on Long Island, built by my dad's grandma, my grandma's mother, the year that my dad was born. It sat among the native vegetation, all scrubby pines and dune grasses, full of pale buttery light, and the sounds of the Atlantic's waves through the open windows: no frills but these. The surf was rough, too rough, by my parents' estimation, for swimming. I dug holes, sculpted sand, hunted beach glass, and let the waves bury my toes with sand at the high edges of the tide. When the waves were rough, I ran in terror, as had my father before me, in his childhood summers spent on that beach.

One summer, my mother brought her sewing machine to the beach house and made a dress at the same sturdy table that had held dozens of summertime meals, clusters of sun-pinked children gnawing corn on the cob and mincing their overcooked hamburgers—which they called “meat cakes”—into bits, which they mixed with ketchup as lubrication. An only child, I sat in the white wicker rocker with the huge spring cushion, reading book after book, and waiting to go down to the sea again, and begging to go see the dead whale.

The whale had washed up dead on the shore and stank with a terrific stink. It was also unimaginably large, especially by my lights. I couldn't stop myself from looking at it, from taking in the awful stench of it, the massive size of it. A living thing so enormous was a part of this world, just as I was, and other living things, huger and stranger, occupied the dark vastness of the ocean, which, from there on the beach, was beyond endless for all I could see. Now the whale was dead, stopped, just lying there and rotting and fertilizing my imagination. *What kind of whale was it? What did it die of? What will they do with it now?* I asked questions until my parents, worn by my incessant inquiry and not in possession of any further knowledge of this whale or whales in general, said I wasn't allowed to talk about it any more. Had there been a children's adaptation of *Moby-Dick* on the beach house's plentiful shelves, I might have buried myself in it, but instead my

mind itched, reaching for information and for a narrative when there was only a presence (the whale) and an absence (its life) wrapped in mystery and malodorous blubber. I could think of little else.

We moved from New York City to Eastern Long Island, in a house facing not the wild Atlantic, but the largely becalmed Peconic Bay. A short walk in almost any direction led to beaches or docks: on one side, the bay, on the other, the Long Island Sound. Still I feared water. These waves slapped lazily at rocky beaches, cresting and breaking only on exceptionally windy days. I collected rocks resembling food—lamb chops, baked potatoes, peas—or else tried to skip flat, smooth rocks across the surface, once, twice, thrice, the way my dad did so effortlessly. I dug many deep holes, and mostly avoided getting wet.

Once, I was playing with a small group of children at a calm swimming spot on the bay. Schools of minnows swirled in the shallows, so thick they could be scooped up in a plastic pail. I gathered a pail of them and nestled the pail's bottom in the sand, in a spot in the sun so I could see the minnows well—fragile-looking fish lips like the buttonholes of a filmy silk blouse, gaping and pursing, little rainbows playing off their scales; tiny black eyes somehow serious.

I could look at minnows for hours, just as I could play with one patient ladybug for the better part of a summer's day,

letting it hike over the tall grass of my arm hair, tickling its way to my shoulder, from which I'd transfer it to the other hand and so on. One afternoon, I cried when my dad asked me to leave my ladybug in the garden outside the nursing home, where we had come to visit the elderly. He was the Baptist pastor in the small town, and some of the old saints now resided at San Simeon, by the Long Island Sound. He relented.

Just keep the bug. Try not to let anyone see that you've got it.

I wandered the halls, shaking hands and smiling and receiving kisses and listening to half-remembered stories, all in the secret, pleasant company of my ladybug. We always washed our hands before we left: my dad explained, well out of earshot, that when people got very old, they might not remember to wash their hands after they went to the bathroom. So we washed ours. My ladybug rode home in the car in my hand. Later, in the yard between home and church, it flew away, and I felt a twinge of loneliness and loss. I said goodbye, as I always did. It wasn't kind to hold on to wild things, I knew.

I would have liked to take the minnows home that day, but they'd have died in short order had I tried that. As I studied my minnows, some of the other children began digging holes and pouring buckets of minnows into them, covering them quickly with sand. They laughed. I screamed at them, tears hot in my eyes.

You're killing them for no reason! Stop it!

They stared, stunned by my fury, but perhaps also amused at my carrying-on and annoyed that I was taking their fun so seriously. A grownup left her beach chair to investigate, and told the other kids to stop.

I was aware of my own drama and enjoyed it a bit: casting myself in the role of heroic minnow savior. But I was also sick at heart, thinking of those little buttonhole mouths gasping their last in the rocky sand. Images like that stuck with me for days: an injured pigeon, a limping dog, a dead deer. A dark, cavernous hollow would open inside me, and I sensed doom. One evening, as I walked my dog around the yard, she barked and lunged at a stray cat, who made for the other side of the street and was hit and killed before my eyes. I couldn't look at my dog for days, and the moving picture of the scared cat flying dead from under the tires played on a repeating loop in my head.

"I'd rather just go to the Lewises' pool," I'd whine, when my parents brought up the question of my learning to swim. I didn't swim there, either—just bobbed around in an inflatable ring in the shallow end once arm floaties and goggles and nose clip had all been secured. These layers of protection were embarrassing, since all the other kids were playing Marco Polo and swimming in the deep end, apparently not fearing death by drowning. I fantasized about an ordinary bathing suit with floatation pads discreetly sewn

inside it—it would hold me up, and it might make me look portly, but I’d look more like the other kids, and I wouldn’t have to learn to swim.

My mom said I’d have an easier time learning to swim if I tried it at the beach. *Salt water helps with buoyancy*, she said.

I knew this; we’d visited the Dead Sea in Israel, and I watched as our friends waded in and then stretched out, heads lifted, as the sea lifted them high, like ducks. I dipped my feet in but went no further. “Dead” Sea is a creepy name, and the water was milky with salt, not quite transparent. Who knew what might be lurking beneath?

I like pools better, I told my mom. *With a pool, you can see to the bottom. You know nothing is under there about to get you.*

My dad was sympathetic. He didn’t learn to swim until he was twenty-seven; when he was a child, his own father had dragged him, screaming, into the roaring Atlantic, which didn’t exactly eliminate his fear of water. As he did with other things that terrified me—Ferris wheels, summer camp, roller-skating—my dad didn’t push. But everything that scared me also attracted me. I pictured myself gliding along the lake on water skis, but couldn’t get out of the boat; I imagined taking off across the skating rink gracefully, but always clung miserably to the rails along the perimeter. I was the crying, runny-nosed child for whom the carnival ride operator had to stop the roller coaster she thought she could brave.

CHAPTER 1

Eventually, I doggy paddled, without even the arm floaties, along the shallow end of the pool. The next summer, I was swimming. Later, feet encased in protective neon-colored water shoes, I braved the calm waters of the Peconic Bay, where the occasional jellyfish or unseen pinching crustacean or imaginary sea monster would scare me ashore, sometimes for the remainder of the season. But I learned to scamper and swim quickly out of the shallows to where my feet no longer touched. I'd stretch out my arms and arch my belly to the sky, closing my eyes to the sun, enjoying the sea-muffled beach sounds of gulls and children and tubular aluminum-frame beach chairs screeching open. In those moments I felt I was being held in the womb of the earth. I exhaled forcefully, to see if I could make myself sink. Instead the waters, or the Lord, held me like a babe in arms, rocking, rocking; giving me again and again to the light.



Our first voyage is a watery one. Deep within a woman's body, in the darkness, cells divide again and again. Once, there was almost nothing; nothing that looked like much, but tended and guarded in that watery dark, the fragile, near-invisible almost nothing became you. Your mother's blood, and maybe her bones, fed you. Constantly you were held and rocked; you were never alone, never hungry, never dirty. Your

mother was herself your food, your clothing, your shelter, your breath. She grew large, grew tired, grew uncomfortable. Then the water that held you trembled with a movement that came not just from her but through her, and, one way or the other, you came to light: wet with water and marked with your mother's blood.

Then you felt cold or hot or hungry or alone; perhaps you remembered, then, the time before, when you floated weightless, but you contended with gravity now; your limbs had a troubling freedom. You learned to fear and to be comforted, to get your hands dirty and then to wash them, to walk and then to fall, and to walk again.

Birth, and many of the things that precede and attend and are implied by birth, provides potent, formative, and enduring metaphors, which is perhaps another way of saying that many stories can be told as birth stories. Birth is a metaphor for creative work, for risks worth taking, for pain that resolves into joy, for new beginnings, for struggle that is rewarded. Our language links thought itself with that which precedes birth—conception. A person who helps an idea or a process along its journey (and birth is a journey) is sometimes likened to a midwife; when we mean to communicate how vulnerable we feel, we speak of assuming the fetal position. Also implied in birth, though these metaphors are less commonly discussed, are connection and separation,

community and individuality, risk and sacrifice, life from death, darkness that gives way to light.

I have read that a woman's body acquires cells from each of the babies she carries, even as early as seven weeks into pregnancy. Those cells become part of her brain, part of her kidneys, even part of her beating heart. Scientists say that this may be protective, a boon to health; or it may be harmful, a contamination. This biological phenomenon seems merely to confirm what many women speak of as emotional and metaphorical experience: the sense that children, and even pregnancies that do not result in living children, change you, stay with you, become part of you in one way or another, in ways that are joyful and intimate, and in ways that are painful and intrusive.

So too do all our journeys and endeavors and relationships leave their marks, for better and worse. To bring anything new into the world is to open one's self and therefore to take on risk, to contaminate oneself with the other, to be made vulnerable. This requires not just courage but many things, among them faith, hope, help, companionship, grace—in a word, love. But if what we seek is fertility—if we seek productive power, fruitfulness, generativity—we cannot maintain sterility; we dare not, therefore, be too protective. Sex that's potentially generative of babies is sometimes referred to as unprotected. Unprotected is more or less what we

need to be when we dare to create or to love. Bringing something new to light requires us to dive fully into the water.

This book is about that plunge.

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