

My daughter's eyes emerged, wet pigeon replaced by amber. We missed the sweet burnt smell of her drying umbilical nub. She grew fine black hair from the middle of her head and we missed her bald, senile vibe. Her gaze steadied.

We removed her hat and dreams moved across her face and escaped through the top of her head. My beard hairs claimed her cheeks. Her lips kissed ghosts, then began to sync with sounds: zombie words. We supplied the words, day and night, as though she required translation.

My wife and I shared a story about our daughter which began not with conception but with a birth we considered to be good: it was fourteen minutes (or five pages) between us entering the hospital and her entering the world. That story was packed away, stored for future use.

The public myth began when she was named. We returned home from the rite that was not a rite, left the front door on the latch and called it domesticity. Extended family passed through low-lit rooms, narrating how our daughter had grown and who she looked like and where she had come from—uncle or aunt, Devon or the Gulf of Finland. When they left, we tried out her name again in private, still loose on her body.

I thought I had known where I came from but now I wasn't so sure. For ten years, between eight and eighteen, every Monday I travelled back and forth between my father's house and the house where my mother and stepfather live together. My fathers share the same Christian name and both became granddad. It was strange to me that I was my daughter's only father: surely half of what she needs. I needed to find a way of fathering in the singular.

In the cool shower water pooled between my daughter's stomach and mine. I stared at a clock-face on the side of an adjacent building. The clock was always wrong—but always in a refreshing new way. I was convinced, every day, in a refreshing new way, to give myself up to that random clock. Some days lasted twenty-seven hours—why not—and some days barely sputtered into life. Have you ever, during coitus with someone you love, suddenly startled: I have absolutely no idea who you are!? Waking was something like that, every day, several times a day. Mornings were manifestoes. Painting red nails to show how we work in our hiding [come back] places. Beginning by looking back to a beginning

by spending a week of convalescence peeling an orange wrapped in the tribe's felt and fat after the crash.

Beginning each morning with the future fathers are explained by the Tartar's felt hat, the satsuma. Meanwhile my coming-of-age hides in the shoe cupboard. I visit and find it outraged, refusing to account for these new days. The duck's face when the model speedboat donuts. I convince myself to love even though I do. I forget why I entered the cupboard and the future draws strength from the doubt. Today she smiled, organising mist into a stream. The next day we swam and the next day

By the time we dried off it was winter. Our lives became plain and possible. We were seized with the practicalities of moving house. We looked in earnest at newbuild semi-rural semis. I began driving lessons, filled with intense nostalgia for the present with every stall.

In the cooler, more rational air, I could see two models—the revolution never happened—of fatherhood: take over the kitchen or disappear into work. At the library I saw fathers perform one role or the other: intimate but brittle exuberance or benevolent but distant strength. I could see no future in either. Neither seemed true to the lingering startle:

I have absolutely no idea who you are!

Six months after birth, I found that I had developed an alternative set of ambitions as a father:

- 1 not to betray that uncertainty;
- 2 to be gentle;
- 3 to wear matching socks.

My adult male body was large and hard and milkless. My strategy was to make up for biological lack with tools and enthusiasm. I went to a dark green camping shop and bought myself a vest with useful pockets. I strapped my own baby to my chest and ventured out,

walking in long circular thoughts, clinking with official equipment.

In cafés I read pages from Russian novels and recent fathering manuals and concluded that I was, in some important respect, the first father who had ever lived.

Out in the snow I dared judgemental old ladies with my eyes to accept that fact. A woman was concerned my baby should be wearing a hat; I produced from one of my many useful pockets a hat, and shouted that it was she, the middle-aged woman, who should be wearing it—to keep her hair on!

I averted my eyes from other young fathers, who seemed to me preposterous.

When I saw friends it was to introduce them to the baby and to say goodbye. We would be leaving the capital soon. They expressed their own longing to breathe cleaner air and mustered serious comments about schools.

I reacted badly, the way I had done a few years before when the same friends bought houses. Our move was, I said, about other things.

My wife and I convened hazardous meetings where life was brokered. We began to ask for a new kind of time that existed outside the household economy: to ourselves. We attempted to give the baby time to itself and it declined the offer. I watched clocks and eyelids and my

own voice, which seemed to be taking on a life of its own.

I noticed my wife making plans for future solvency—using her time to herself for things other than other things—and it seemed a feat of prodigious imagination. Instead, I worked on a novel in tensely passionate bursts, reading it to the baby until I could no longer ignore her side of the dialogue:

rapid blink  
toe flex  
rising sound  
falling sound  
falling over (from horizontal position)  
neck grasp  
fingernail moult

It was work without a goal, I told myself; the reward was the labour. When I was there, she needed me. But it made her dependence easier to bear for me to think that I was replaceable. I took comfort in sealing her nappies and sending them out on their journeys, by refuse truck, beyond the known world. If there were parts of my baby scattered everywhere, she would never die.

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