

Moro

These are the primitive reflexes the baby is born with: stick a bottle in her mouth and she suckles. This is called the rooting reflex. Shove your finger in her palm and she curls her fingers. This is the grasp reflex. Trick her into believing you've let go and she reaches for you. This is the Moro reflex. Stand her on a flat surface and she will take a step. This is the walking reflex. She is born knowing how to eat, how to reach, that she should fear hitting the ground even though she cannot see it yet.

All lights but the one on the wall beside the crib are turned off. The shades are pulled up knee high, leaving enough light on the floor to cross over from the doorway. Her eyes are open and she lay quietly, and it occurs to me that it is possible to be too young to be afraid of the dark.

I haven't seen her mom since she was admitted. Baby arrived in the evening; an hour later mom said she was going home to change clothes, and it is now hospital day three. She said she would be reachable by phone and true to her word, she has been, sometimes, but she has not been back to visit. I remember what she looks like, but it bothers me that I don't remember what color her eyes are. Perhaps she needs a break, perhaps this baby came sooner than she expected and thirty-some days later, this is her only chance to tie up the loose ends of her old life. I wonder if there are paychecks left uncollected, violent television left unwatched. Maybe she'd been counting on just one more night of good sleep. It may be dozens of nights before she rests for six straight hours. Even then, I suppose that no new mother gets the same sleep that she once had for at least another ten years.

Baby is a sky-blue fleece burrito with a bald head. I think she is pretty though I know she is not, with her skinny thighs and skin translucent enough to see the vein running across her scalp to meet the IV line in her head. She is on her back, eyes no longer as sunken as the day she came and wide open, watching the ceiling. For all the millions of dollars that went into this children's hospital, there are no hanging mobiles of seahorses or stars. I wonder if in this stillness she can feel the earth move, if she's listening to cold air slam itself against the far window. The children's hospital is huge, new, towering, beautiful, with private rooms that are clean and safe. The walls are every shade of blue and there is a whiteboard in the corner with her name written across it in big bubble letters and "Goal for today: gain weight." The emptiness swallows the colorful walls whole, the baby's soft nasal breathing an isolated whistle in the dark. There is no way to know for sure, but I think this is the loneliest place in the world.

I unlatch the side of the crib, rolling her to face me as I lift her up. She can see maybe thirteen inches from her nose at most and is staring at my face, picking up cues. In a few months, she will use this information to cry for food, show discomfort, demand to be held. At two months she will start to smile to tell us she is pleased. Today, she is not yet able to smile, not really, not at others, though she does to herself when she farts. When I realize this, I tickle her belly to make her fart, and the two of us giggle together in her giant, empty room.

I drape a towel over my shoulder and cradle her head in the crook of my elbow, realizing I only know how to hold a baby from having gone to an elementary school covered end-to-end with pictures of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. She feels the end of the bottle hit her palette and her eyelids start to droop, and for the next fifteen minutes I hold her, hold the bottle, listen to the wind hurl flecks of ice at the window and imagine various iterations of her life stretched out in front of us on a maze of unwinding streets. On one, she is never first in four square but gets ice cream after dinner for being a good loser. On another, she braids her sister's blonde hair. On another, she tells the sitter that she can't fall asleep unless she's been tucked in.

These are the maternal reflexes a woman is born with: there is only one. It is not a reflex that tells her how to hold the baby. It does not help wake her every 2-3 hours to breastfeed. It does not tell her how and when to soothe, when to walk away. No white matter highway connects the uterus to the region of the brain involved in choosing between her family and her career. She has only a lactation reflex that triggers dilation of the milk ducts when the baby cries. This is the letdown reflex.

I push us back and forth in the chair, watching scaffolding outside swaying in the winter wind, thinking about letdown. Even the Virgin Mary had it.

Logic says the baby is more durable than she looks – after all, people have been raising people since there were ever people to begin with. My eyes, however, say that she is no more than an unwrapped fleece away from hypothermia, a missed bottle away from hunger, an unwashed hand away from sepsis. Part of me wants to believe all women are wired to nurture and I think it is there in our construction – hips like rebar folded into soft sides, voices pitched for nighttime lullabies. I imagine, when I rock her, that this is how it must feel to be a great lake or a sequoia, to be so a part of the present as to be unmoored from it. But women, I know, are not trees or landmarks. We are not separated through childbirth into wire mothers and cloth mothers. All babies grow up to be children who grow up to be adults who are too heavy to be carried. While she drifts in her milk-sleep I tell her I'm sorry she came into the world at this particular time, the age of building walls and life after runaway warming and unflinching certitude from everyone at once about right and wrong, good and bad. I apologize that for all the money and cleverness our species has amassed, we spend so much of it making sitcoms and specialty coffee drinks. "On the day you arrived, I said your mom was a bad mom," I say. "I'm sorry for that the most."

She is asleep.

I lower her back into the crib, fully swaddled, set her softly on her disposable mattress pad and pull up the gate. She lets out a tiny baby fart, smiles a tiny baby smile in her sleep. The screen above her head plays a lullaby that a dormant corner of my brain thinks might be an old Disney song. I've wrapped her up tight as a sleeping bag and she is still too young to roll, so I back slowly away, toe-heel, toe-heel, confident but not certain she will be okay at least for another hour. "Goodnight," I say, though it's one-thirty in the afternoon, and I call her by name, the first two syllables low and round and the last lilting and sweet. It suits her. One day she will recognize it. When I get back to the workroom, I let my attending know that she is eating well today, then I sit down at the phone and dial. The other end rings in another county, another town, and I am begging her mother to pick up.