

PRIMAL LOVE

A mother discovers that her whole being is wired to bond with her child.

HIS EYES ARE LIKE A SEAL PUP'S, huge and round. He is swallowing the world with them. Drinking the images of my hair, the window frame, the branches I gathered and put in a jar on the dresser, their yellow buds swelling. His small, flannel-wrapped body fits into the crook of my bent knee as I sit hunched at my desk, trying to write. For a few brief moments he is quiet, watching me with his unguarded, two-month-old gaze. Late-afternoon light falls on us through the window, and outside, the first green signs of spring make the silhouettes of trees less stark.

Then he whimpers, and immediately his cries distract me, tugging at the very core of my being. I am startled to feel this maternal code vibrate my bones. Startled that my body responds with the same instinctive language of comfort and nuzzling spoken by kangaroos and sea lions, I move to curl around my baby, to kiss his hair and cup his squirming body against mine. His cries speak a curdling, abrupt language that pulls on all my nerves and forces me to reply.

It is the same language that makes my breasts fill suddenly with milk, or starts the frantic chorus of worry in my head when he begins to sob without reason, without ceasing. It is the cipher of motherhood: this endless sequence of need and comfort, first his crying and then my response, offered up unswervingly before thought or reason, again and again and again. It is the language of a thousand prayers whispered into the aching dark before morning, of begging for the crying to stop, for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, for some small ladder of solace to be extended down into the well of hormones as they rise around me, drenching me with sweat, making me want to run. Yet even then, I hold him fiercely to my heart, shushing his wailing with murmured breath.

This is the narrative of new motherhood: half-finished sentences, everything interrupted, my days fitting together like the jagged edges of a broken cup. Nothing else makes me feel this way – so utterly split apart by anxiety and love and desperation. Becoming a mother has exposed a new subset in the language of my emotions. I know raw anguish now, and joy so intense it makes me gasp, my body covered in goose bumps.

He is crying, and I move to offer him a breast. As he nurses, his feet kick erratically, as though being in his body still surprises him. Then, with a sigh, he's asleep, milk running down his cheek, his breathing light and steady. I shift him back to my lap and watch his sleeping face. His lips move with the involuntary sweet memory of my breast, and his hands curl inward at the fingers, protecting his soft palms. Then, suddenly, like sunbeams, sleep smiles flutter across his face. I catch my breath.

I try to remember giving birth, but my memories are already like velvet, supple and dense. Though my mind goes back again and again to examine the fabric of that time, it remains somehow outside, touching only the edges. Something that was wide open in those moments

of birthing has since closed—part of the mystery of worlds colliding when life begins is accessible only then, in the immediacy of pushing and pain and exhaustion.

What I can remember is how my mind became like an animal's, locked entirely into the present. How my midwife was trying to tell me about my son's imminent birth, and how I could not be anywhere but in the contraction as in. I could not imagine what it would be like to actually hold my baby in my arms. I couldn't fathom touching his skin for the first time, couldn't know that it would feel so smooth—like touching warm water.

My entire being was occupied with the only thing it could know. Everything focused at the center of the pain I was in. That is what I remember of giving birth: the feeling of disbelief and frustration, my body so tired from lack of water, nourishment, and sleep—and then his little body rushing out, all of a slither, and after, when his tiny limbs curled on my deflated belly, soft and warm and red and new.

Even in those raw moments of labor I wasn't yet a mother, not in the way I would become one when I first pressed his cheek against my face. Up until his birth, I could still imagine my life without him. Even in labor, I still knew only my own experience; the words I'd used up to that point contained no trace of the fierce protectiveness I would feel towards this small being when I first held him in my arms. Then, as his otherworldly but mammalian scent was permanently imprinted on my brain, my linguistic map of self, too, was changed. No longer I, but we. No long want, but need.

Being a mother is a lesson wonder. Every one of the six billion people in the world—every single person I encounter each day—spent dark, watery months inside a womb and was birthed by a woman. This has become my ultimate act of devotion: to remember, in each encounter, your mother birthed you.

Over and over again, this act of selflessness is given to the world. Over and over again, warm and wet, a new human being enters the world, awkward and uncomfortable in the small body he or she arrives in. head large, legs curled like an amphibian's, eyes searching for the first blurry impressions of a mother's face. How remarkable this is—this act of birth. It unites us with all the other mammals of the world, gives us a shared language: the pup and the foal, too, were mothered.

I can no longer feel wholly separate from the world—I am of it, a part of the predetermined genetic map of procreation, a part of the spiritual trajectory of human evolution. I can no longer step outside my life and choose another, nor can I am longer act with only my own life in mind. Now I hold a piece of the cast world in my arms, a small sliver of the ocean and planets, this tiny bundle of perfect cells working in harmony to be in tiny fingers, a beating heart, a miracle of breath and dreams.

In the middle of the night, when I stumble to respond to his cries, I utter low murmuring noises like a mother cow or she=bear. I nudge my baby close, offer a breast, or stroke his cheek. my muscles and fleshy curves. I give and keep giving, even when the urge to run is greatest.

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