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For A Newborn Child Who Cries Too Much

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FOR A NEWBORN CHILD WHO CRIES TOO MUCH

for Devin Charles Gallagher

For weeks you have delivered
your anger up to us, nonstop as an express,
until your mother cannot believe she brought
such an unwelcome guest into her house:
frightened, half-mad, wondering why,
of all babes on this earth, you chose
to be special in such a harrowing way.

Will there be no end? No one can imagine
your lungs holding out for another minute.
The doctor and his cronies have read and re-read
shelves of medical texts, and there is not one left
less dog-eared than the last book in the world.
They have X-rayed you more carefully than airport luggage,
and poured enough Milltown down you to calm the sea.

Psychologists have come, trooping by your crib
with pads and notebooks flipping
back and forth like uncertain tongues, and still
they cannot say what devils haunt you.

More desperate than cornered criminals,
your parents call in a minister. You greet him
with a voice worn so thin it cracks
and rasps like old trees in mild winds.
But the man of God has no more luck than science,
and baffled, angry, disposed to cry all night himself,
he leaves. Your mother and father
fall into silence, like the drowned.

Eventually your fame spreads: letters flow in
like your tears. The world sends charms and spells,
powerful potions and remedies for the damned:
one a voodoo doll from Haiti, with instructions
in a hand untranslatable for all the scrawl
and symbols of it—yet clear the meaning
of the chubby child, eyes closed,
perfect in each detail, with real red hair
and mouth sewn tightly shut.

But these fail too, and as you scream,
I ask myself
why entering this world has been so bad.
Or was it the shock of leaving your last one?
I read somewhere
that babies who cry too much
are trying to say the names
they had in their former lives,
and when someone says them, they will stop crying.

So I stand here,
in a nursery lit only by the priest's thin candles,
all other ears in this house well-cottoned
three rooms from you, while I, a grown man, your uncle,
am reading aloud from a book of all the names
of men this past millennium,

and as the century
is closing its last unmystical pages,
I am caught up
in the rhythms of my whispered bass tones
and of your screams: your mouth moving with mine,
your breathing the same as mine,
continually afraid
that in your last life you never spoke
this language—

until my voice trembles and rises,
breaks into a chant like a Shaman,
beginning to sing now, louder, higher,
while the candles turn suddenly into torches
that flicker and dance among the blue shadows:

and a procession of mourners
appears, moving by my strained, inhuman eyes
now fixed trancelike on your crib that has become
a grave, with the pale gray eyes of an old man
staring up at me, staring through me
into his own death, beyond death, the mouth open
as one who sees
all his acts in this world relived:

and like a projector run in reverse,
his life runs backwards through age after age,
his form continually changing,
shifting, becoming old, then young, over and over,
face after face looking through me, now living, now dead,

and even the mourners changing with the man,
their clothes becoming unstyled, out-of-style,
stranger and stranger, ancient as the earth,
until all of them turn into wraiths, into sad,
hooded faces, become transformed to savages,
hopping about old stones, receding farther
into the past, and deeper, as you, child, are deepening,
as you are changing with them, appearing girded
with cloth, then skins, and finally nothing at all—

the mourners dressed in nothing, the cave-lights
smouldering, sputtering, the chants of the elders
shifting farther back in their throats, falling away
like the cave walls, the lights strange—
nothing ever seen by man—
all receding until there is no face, no crib,
no troop of mourners—only an ape or toad or lizard
and then a shadow
that slithers back down some beach, a fish-god,
with three moons watching it, slipping into the surf,
back to its beginning and beyond. . .

I wake to my latest self,
shaken out of a heavy trance by the hands
of my brother, half-robed and frightened
of his mad relative perched like a raven
on the end of the crib and screeching at his babe,
calling all the names of man down from the heavens—
later said by the neighbors to be speaking
unknown and unutterable tongues—

and his wife rushing in
to snatch her boy up from the pit of the crib,
who would have struck me dead there
if she were not amazed
at her child glancing curiously up at the shadow
of the book crumbling to dust in my numb hands:
the baby now finished crying for all the lives of man,
wide awake, and as quiet as a smile.