

What I Never Told You About the Abortion



That it hurt, despite the anesthetic,
which they administered with a long needle, shot straight into the womb.

That they hit the vagus nerve the first time and I fell down when I tried to stand.
That after the second shot my legs snapped shut—

instinctively as any wild mother protecting chick, kit, cub.
That I held the hand of a young Hispanic nurse and wept

when she said, “You know, hon, you don’t have to do this.”
That I believed I did, though I nearly got up and left.

That the doctor was crude, saying (when he saw me conscious),
“It’s always the ones who want to be awake who should be put out.”

That dilation and curettage is exactly what it sounds like:
opening, scraping, digging out a scrap of tissue that clings.

That mothers both create and take life. That I crossed a picket line
to get into the clinic. That I wanted to come back another day

but knew if I left then I wouldn’t return. That my mind was not,
as I let you believe, made up that night at Planned Parenthood,

the positive lab slip shining in my hand like a ticket to heaven.
That this was where the deep root of sadness began to take hold.

That I stood in our bedroom a few days before the “procedure,”
my blouse open and bra undone, looking at my breasts, marveling

at the way they swelled, even at eight weeks, like fruit I’d never seen,
remembering the rise and fall of my mother’s body as she nursed my sister.

That I felt *inhabited* then. Incarnate, the cells of my skin glowing,
bright and scared. That I wished we were married, though it seemed uncool.

That I wished you’d said, “A baby? Let’s do it!”
instead of “It’s your body. You decide.”

That it was all surgical and neat, not even
any blood afterward on the Kotex that made me feel fourteen.

That I dreamed of it for weeks. That we married years later, that dream
torn between us. That I had wanted to feel the hard bowl of my belly.

That I believed it was practical—you in grad school,
no health insurance, me the one with a job.

That the table I lay on was cold. That there was a poster
of a kitten dangling from a tree limb, with the words “Hang in there, baby”

on the ceiling above me. That I turned names
over and over in my head like bright stones:

Caitlin, Phoebe, Rebecca, Siobhan.

That the nurse wept with me, like some twentieth-century

Southern Californian fate, midwife to death
in her uniform printed with flowers.

That she wrapped my hands in her navy blue sweater.

That I described the thumb-size embryo inside me in all the obvious ways—

shrimp, peanut, little bud-wanting-to-open.

But not baby, never baby.

That I saved the paperwork as proof I'd been admitted
to the college of mothers. That I told you a good story,

letting you believe I believed I might not be able to write with a child,
that *this* was the beginning of the end of us.

That though we are kind now, and always cordial when we meet,
a decade after our divorce, it is the one thing I cannot forgive you.

That it has taken me twenty years to find words for this story.

That no matter how many *thats* I write, there are not—will never be—enough.

from *Margie*