

BIRTH POEM: SUMMER 1977

You're in the hospital for 6 weeks
laid out on a bed in a body cast from
your belly button to your toes.
And protruding from your right side
through the cast is a valve connected to
the colostomy bag that you shit into --
but not at first -- during the first few
days after surgery they don't feed you
at all. Instead,

you fill the bag up with the green juices
from your lower gut, the rest is sucked out
the tube that runs up your nose down into your
stomach, and they keep you alive with the
sugar water dripping through tubes into
your arm and out the catheter in your cock.

And you lie there like frankenstein's newly
created monster, only worse since you're
starving all the time. Then for the 2nd
post op week they put you on liquids & Jello,
so you eat it until you feel like Pavlov's dog,
only, getting sick at the sight of Jello.

You try to sleep but are so miserable since
you can't move & your back & ass are raw
slabs -- you'd give anything to turn on your
side or your stomach and you're fighting the
pain, not wanting the pain killer that
stiffens you with fear when they stick it
in your hip. From sheer exhaustion

you drop off to sleep, and five minutes later
the nurse wakes you with a shake -- pressure cap
and thermometer in hand -- you hate her and you
fantasize fucking her to death, and when you
can't stand it anymore, you tell her this --
but it isn't news, she doesn't give a shit.

After three weeks you finally beg them to take
the cast off and when they do give in to your
pleas, you find that you're raw and bleeding
from your unhealed surgery, and they tell you
the cast didn't really seem to make that
much difference. And you hate them & you
boil inside & just then they break out the
35 mm camera and take pictures of you like
a freak in a porno movie, and they
handle you like putty, pulling your
legs up and turning your body over
for better shots. When strength

returns you wake with a hard-on that crawls up the catheter and you nearly scream in pain and you almost yank it out but the air bubble in your bladder won't let you, so you beg them again.

It takes you another week to learn how to walk again, the first few days with a walker. Another week and you're ready to go home with a colostomy bag stuck to your side.

You wife is almost nine months pregnant when you get out. She's been fantastic -- staying alone at the apartment and driving to the hospital nearly every day -- she's literally your hold on reality while you're in there, and you know you've got to be good for her now. You've already taken

the Lamaze classes, and you want to try Le Boyer, where they dim the lights and hand you the kid to wash in a bath and he/she smiles and you've got the camera ready.

But before you're even on your feet, her water breaks one night -- 2 weeks early and you haven't driven a car in six weeks but you must now. First to your in-laws,

then to the hospital where you're blessed with a semi-private room: two beds, one for each of you. She takes 12 hours of labor in stride with Lamaze. You, as daddy to be, make a natural coach, but then the back labor starts and you have to go to work rubbing her back, applying as much pressure as possible to counteract the pain, over & over until your arms want to fall off, and you can't believe she can possibly stand one more contraction. But she does and you drop on

the other bed and the nurse gives you a weird look -- worried someone might look in, shocked at this masculine intrusion.

Two hours after she dilates to 8 1/2 cc, they decide to take X-rays. They unplug the monitoring wires that run up inside her and you and she and the nurse rush down to X-ray -- the kid's too big.

And you're so tired you lose your cool and all you want to do is kill a doctor. It's going to be a C-section, and your anger swells up inside with frustrated

tears you swallow, but she's still a trooper -- something maternal, some strength you'll never know -- she only wants the labor to end. They won't let you

in the OR, so you sit on the corridor floor, surly as hell, glad no one's around to see how you feel. You're too tired to sleep anyway, and you think now that hatred will always be part of your shared attempt at natural birth, and just when your cynicism says, "sit me in the C-section,"

they bring him into the nursery, and you can't be cynical -- you smile, and you go, "oh my god, oh shit, a boy, my son,"

you've got a son. The doctor sticks a tube down his throat to suction him clean, and he yanks it out with both tiny hands -- you stand there looking at him amazed, fearful, full of joy, full of apprehension -- 25 more minutes before they bring your wife out. You see her in recovery & she too smiles.

The doctor tells you he is perfect and you try to apologize but he shrugs it off. Somehow you drive to your in-laws, spend a few restless hours before returning to the hospital -- the next 5 days offer more pain and sleepless nights -- you even have a fight with her, and you know it's your ego, but then what's really important is that he's what you both want and that you finally get your family home.

It's all so new, so you read the books and talk to other parents, and you begin to notice the little people tagging along everywhere.

And when he sleeps all night, you wake him up every three hours for a feeding -- afraid he'll starve, and you learn how to change his diaper and before you get a new one on, he shits over the table, onto the wall and into your lap. And it's like you've been born again.

-- Leo Mailman

Long Beach CA