



# 3ELEMENTS

*Literary Review*

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## IDENTITY UNCOVERED

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## ENOUGH FOR BOTH OF US

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**SAM** is born an absence, lacking color, gray clay. He's born without breath, a noose around his neck, quieter than the silence in my head. My senses, searching for signals of Sam, return with nothing. No one holds him up for me to see. There is no skin to touch. There is no head to smell. I cannot taste my tears, which do not fall. I am vaguely aware of blue movement, figures in scrubs whose faces I cannot see. There's a rush of bodies, one replacing the next, every movement a prayer for breath. In the hustle and flurry someone cuts the cord. Relentless and muscular: the angriest, slickest rope you ever saw. You ever made.

I am a corporeal spasm. "This is normal," our doula assures me. "Postpartum shivering. Your body just went through a tremendous amount of stress." I nod, teeth chattering too hard to speak.

A minute passes.

"He's gonna be fine, right?" I manage. "You've seen this

before?”

“He’s going to be just fine,” says our doula.

Then he wails.

*Oh. So that’s what they’re doing.* I had forgotten he was supposed to cry.

They swaddle him and bring him to us: “You have about one minute and then this little guy needs to go to neonatal intensive care.” They place the bundle on my chest. Sam stares unblinking in the direction of the ceiling.

“He’s perfect,” my wife, Jean, whispers.

I wait for a flood of endorphins to meld us, maker and made.

Maker and clay.

There is no flood.

*I thought he would be beautiful to me. Everyone said he’d be beautiful.* “Hi, Sam,” I manage, touching his cheek with the back of my index finger.

Someone lifts bundle-Sam off my chest and Jean asks, “I think I should go with him?” Reconsiders. “I’m going with him.”

“Of course, baby, you should go.” I mean it. I do. But as I lie there getting stitched up, I long for her. This yearning regained edges in the final throes of labor, adrenaline reigniting our passion, its mythic proportions. But the world has righted and I am alone. Jean, never leaving, is somehow always gone.

Five hours later we’re in the recovery room without our baby. I watch the clock anxiously. At ten o’clock I buzz the night nurse. She said I could shower at ten. It’s ten.

“I want to see our son,” Jean demands.

“Not yet,” says the nurse for the third time.

I bathe with the bathroom door open, to be closer to my wife. The love I feel for her after twenty-two hours of labor stuns me. I feared I would scream out during labor, “I don’t even love you anymore,” triggering a great unraveling. Instead, I feel as giddy as the night I first traced the inner curve of her thigh. Fingers on seams, threads to a wet, hidden treasure. Beneath the table. At the office party. When she was still my boss.

“Sam is in the NICU,” Jean tells her best friend over the phone, and yet, and still, she radiates triumph. The grip of jealousy tightens around my sternum like a hand, fierce but familiar. Tragic only in its banality.

During labor, everything was new. During labor, Jean was mine. Contractions swelled greater, surged longer, crashed down on the next wave shaping below. Jean and I watched the fetal monitor transfixed. The higher the needle jumped, the greater Jean’s awe, breathing “Wow . . .” again and again as she marveled at my body, at my strength, at my being.

Now, seated on a plastic shower chair, my insides smeared from my pubic bone to my rib cage, it is suddenly, painfully clear this will not last. It is already half-memory.

My wife has moved on, calling people, celebrating our child. “He wasn’t breathing for a while,” she tells her best friend. “It was really scary. Well . . . I was scared.” She laughs. “Yeah. Tough as nails, my wife. But yeah, anyway. They breathed for him for a while, to get him going. He’s fine now, but we haven’t really seen him.”

“I’m still here!” I want to call, but hurt constricts my breath and I whisper to the shower stall instead: “Why am I not enough?” And

yet. What is it I expect her to do? Shed her clothes and stand under the showerhead? Lean against the door jam and watch the uterine lining leak down my leg? Only talk to me?

There's adhesive on my forearm, and blood, maybe iodine, beneath my fingernails. *How long have I been sitting on this shower chair?* I turn the water on and stare at my deflated stomach. *At least people will know I had him.*

Jean's best friend is a lactation consultant. "She can breastfeed him tonight around midnight if she wants to," Jean tells her.

I don't want to nurse him. I don't need to hold him. I just want my wife.

Screw my birth plan. Let him have formula.

"I think I'll wait until tomorrow to nurse him," I call out. There is no response. I towel off and my wife is quiet.

"You know, he's not just some baby," she finally says. "He's our baby."

"I guess," I say.

She looks worried. I can't bear to see my joyful wife sad on this long-awaited day. At midnight I sit in the wheelchair and let her push me down to the bowels of the hospital. Here, nurses tend to babies too early for this world. A nurse picks up our baby and helps me hold him to my breast. He latches on immediately.

A doctor appears outside our glass room. He has the bulging eyes of a cicada and carries a clipboard. Jean motions him in.

"You know, it could have gone either way," he concludes. "And . . . well, in this case, though, his color was just so incredibly pale that . . . one of the things that we worry about when the umbilical cord is that tight around the neck and body is possible effects to the

brain. But his labs look perfectly normal. I think he's going to be just fine."

I thank him profusely. He bows slightly and leaves.

"Do you love him?" my wife asks with concern. I shrug. "Do you feel anything?"

I stare at her. "I don't know," I say.

She leans past me. "Sam," she whispers, "I'm going to love you enough for both of us."