

## BIRTH GEOGRAPHIC, by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

originally appeared in *Water~Stone* magazine  
and in the poetry collection, *Lucky Fish* (Tupelo, 2011)  
selected as a Notable essay in *Best American Essays 2011*

1.

When you give birth, there is no map – no bud and burst of compass  
blooming in the corner of the page. How do you know where to visit?

2.

My mother had a Caesarean. I had a Caesarean. My son will not have a  
Caesarean. He will glance up at the lights in a dentist's office and think only:  
*Lights.*

3.

Suppose you had a ball at birth. A literal ball – one you could hold in your  
arms, bigger than a beach ball. I brought my very own to the hospital. Mine  
was rubber, a good weight, blue. A whole planet beneath my legs. Nowhere  
in that world was it cloudy. In between contractions, I rocked and rocked on  
the Earth and it was good.

4.

[[ In the Philippines ]]

It is said that if a woman has a lot of blemishes on her face, the baby will be  
a girl.

It is said if the mother glows and radiates beauty, the baby will be a boy.

It is said if a mother is craving sweets and other carbohydrates, the baby will  
be a girl. It is said if a mother is craving oily or fried foods, the baby will be  
a boy.

*I only craved sleep, so I thought  
for sure I would give birth to a pillow.*

It is said the mother cannot eat anything slimy or she will miscarry.

It is said the mother should eat fish (especially bangus) to make her child smart.

It is said the mother should not eat mango to avoid having a hairy baby.

*Oh, dear heart –  
I fear we may have a very smart and terrifically furry child.*

5.

[[ In India ]]

My father was the first of six children born at home, in the kitchen, surrounded by tin bowls and cups, cinnamon, and coriander. It was an easy birth. He was an easy child. This is all I know from my grandmother. I once tried to ask him about it when I was first pregnant: You were born in the kitchen?

– Yes.

His cockatiel squawked in the next room. He brought it to his shoulder. It sat there while my father continued to read the newspaper.

And that is all I know.

6.

When a female bower bird arrives to inspect the male's nest, the male struts and sings. He hopes his carefully decorated entrance and 'avenue' will entice her to stay. To this end he selects all manner of blue decorations to line his nest: pen caps, flower petals, berries, chips of shell, bits of foil. All blue. If the female leaves – he will simply wait, hope for her return, and pass time by constantly fine-tuning the placement of each knick-knack, each twig and snap of branch.

7.

I had a birth plan – Xeroxed and stapled, slipped into a Manila folder for easy distribution among the nurses when I arrived at the hospital. I had a doula who was supposed to “hold the space” for me. Everyone slept. Even the doctors.

Everyone slept                  except my valiant husband  
    who stayed awake   for almost three days  
 and stayed   strong as a pepper plant.                  He was starlight  
    and samosa and every good thing.                  I could actually see  
 him                  even though I had my glasses off. My three-page  
 single-spaced birth plan shrank   into one sentence – “Mother alive,  
    baby alive.” And when my husband wasn’t looking, I snipped it  
    to just two words:

**8.**  
 Baby alive.

**9.**  
 Oh where was the Knight of Knives to rescue this lady in the high tower?  
 Where was the sword, the halberd, the red banner?

It was my decision. Mine alone.

**10.**  
 No one suggested                  I get it done. No one even whispered it,  
    or maybe they did –

but I never heard it. I would have fire-screamed them out  
    of my sight. After thirty-two hours of labor  
    and no drugs, my tiny body frame

simply gave out.                  I pushed twice and leg-wobble.   More  
 leg-wobble. I looked at my husband                  and he nodded *Yes*.  
    I was a table with no legs,

on a table with no legs, transferred to another table and bitten  
in my back like the bite of lemons  
in your first sweaty drink of the summer. *Delicious.*

**11.**

My mother promised me her special dessert when I finished, so I focused on that: alligator pears (avocados) mashed with milk and sugar, a little dollop of ice cream.

**12.**

When I couldn't focus on sugar, my husband held my hand in front of the blue curtain and when I felt the tug – I focused on his sweet face. All the chrome and shine in the room could not match the brightness of his smile. I was a fish, a happy fish. I finned up to meet his face. My husband was all the bright lure I needed until I was caught. When I was caught, I didn't put up a fight. I lay there and let them do their beautiful job.

**13.**

Memorial Day weekend: everyone was supposed to be at the beach for a picnic. They hauled me up for the double chord and catch. And inside me:

a boy who I promise you, smelled like the sea.

**14.**

*Directions for Assembling a Bluebird Nestbox:*

- a. Position one side approx.  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch beneath the slot flush with the edge from the back and nail from the back.
- b. Nail the other side, taking care that both sides are even.
- c. Position the bottom centered on the nail holes and nail through each side. The top will be higher than the sides. This allows for ventilation.
- d. Slip the beveled edge of the roof into the slot and screw it down tightly using a #8  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch brass round head wood screw.

**15.**

Because I know talk like this frightens you, I will say this only once: If I am ever lost or someone ever wonders if the cause of my death is by my own hand – let it be known that I will never leave you on my own accord. Never. If someone takes me, I will scratch and bite until I gargle soil. My mouth will be an angry mouth if anyone rips me from you. The center of my hands boiled with blossoms when we made a family. I would never flee that garden. I swear to you here and now: If I ever go missing, know that I am trying to

come home.

16.

Oh, *Lord*.  
Lord, my bottom lip is bruised from singing Your name.  
But it is good, Lord.  
We are good.

17.

All weekend long the dahlias spun themselves into creamy blossoms in the rain-slicked mulch. What flower should I call you? You arrived too late to be crocus, too early to curve into morning glory. Here in our tiny town in western New York, I was ready to give you anything – a dogwood branch, a solar system, complete with glittery meteors to track. A single orange. A dark and lucky sharktooth.

18.

Baby, we are *alive*.