

Birth Mnemonics

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H – Call for Help!

H – **H**ow it begins with water all life **h**ow we are composed **th**us **h**ow it commences with a trickle in **th**e afternoon light a Saturday **h**ow I breastfeed my son for **th**e final time **h**ow I sleep or try to sleep **h**ow **wh**ole oceans seem to escape me in the **ni**ght **h**ow there are no contractions until morning **h**ow **wh**en **th**ey suddenly arrive **th**ey are two minutes apart **h**ow **th**ey last a minute each **h**ow we call **th**e midwife and agree to meet at **th**e **h**ospital in an **h**our **h**ow my **h**usband **h**elps me take my pyjama pants off and I get a contraction **h**alfway **th**rough **h**ow **h**e says *You best toughen up it's just the start, you know* **h**ow the morning obstetrician insists on trying to break my waters **th**ough I tell her **th**ey **h**ave already broken **h**ow waters surge like tides at the first approach **h**ow she can't find a vein in my **h**and for the canular (*just in case*) **h**ow she keeps on poking me with the needle **th**rough my contractions until a nurse takes it from her **h**ow my arm is bruised from **h**and to **sh**oulder the day after **h**ow **th**e only thing to read in the birthing suite is a small poster with a mnemonic for something called **Sh**oulder Dystocia **h**ow our eyes are naturally drawn to it all **th**roughout **th**e long day between almost constant contractions.

H – **H**abitat/e: dwelling, to dwell. A growing place / uterine / womb. A **h**aven for my baby, these red-**h**ued walls pulsing, gentled with **h**earbeat.

H – is a letter two along from **F** [for forceps, for forbearance, for flower, **th**e way cold steel opens and blooms red, **F** for all that will follow...a foreshadowing].

H – Harrowing. That **h**arrows or lacerates **the** feelings; acutely distressing or painful. **H**arrow / wing the longing to take flight from **what** is acutely distressing or painful.

H – Hysteria, n. Over**wh**elming, uncontrollable emotion or agitation. *There is no way out but out no way out but out no way out* I beg for a caesarean **wh**en the obstetrician **th**reatens me **with** one, but **he** backs away from **his** bluff and proclaims *I think we can deliver this baby right here on this bed!* **He** and **his** offsider descend beneath my view. After **the** interventions begin, **three** **h**ours after the start of active labour, I scream and beg **them** to *Stop!* Stop cutting, forcing with forceps, stop **the** ventouse vacuum, **the** needle jabbed into my perineum. But **there** is no way out but out no way out but out no way out no way out but out nowayout

H – humerus: **The** bone of **the** upper arm, extending from **sh**oulder to elbow. One of **the** two bones broken in my baby’s body during her **birth**. In **the** photos of **her** first weeks of life, you can see **her** left arm is bandaged, strapped to her torso. The sleeve of her 0000 winter onesies is empty in these pictures. You can see **the** deep cut over **her** eye **th**at later leaves a tiny **wh**ite scar. **Other** marks of tissue damage **th**at eventually fade.

H – † had-I-wist | hadiwist, n. Obsolete. A **ph**rase: ‘if I **had** known’, expressing regret for something done in ignorance of circumstances now known; A vain regret. Two years earlier, the **birth** of my first **ch**ild was complicated by being undiagnosed breech. **He** was born calmly

via caesarean section. I **chose** what is called Vaginal **Birth** After Caesarean (VBAC) because I wanted to spend as little time as possible in **hospital** after the **birth** of my second **child**, so I didn't **have** to be away too long from my first.

If

I

had

known

...

H – Haemorrhage | **haemorrhaged**, n. An escape of blood from the blood vessels; a flux of blood, **either** external or internal, due to rupture of a vessel; bleeding, esp. **when** profuse or dangerous // **The** floor is covered in blood. **The** **handsome** obstetrician's fancy runners and **his** ironic t **shirt** are ruined by red. **When** my **husband** must take our newborn baby to be x-rayed, seeing **the** red floor for the first time, **he** swears in shock. **Though** **the** obstetrician **has** earlier told us **there** was a problem getting **the** bleeding under control, we were oblivious to **the** volume of **the** flow escaping [me] after **the** **horror** of the **birth**.

H – Haiku

A room **with** bare walls

bears a poster mnemonic

spelling blood and break.

E – Evaluate for Episiotomy

E – Episiotomy: *Surgery.* Incision of the vulval orifice to facilitate parturition, an operation of this kind. The first intervention is the cutting. My episiotomy takes place prior to the emergency, not in response.

E – Excision / elisions of mercy, of listening or hearing. During the fully effaced or dilated, prolonged active stage of labour, the obstetrician says to the gentle midwife and I—*You have half an hour before we take over.*

E – Enter night. Exit light.

E – Edifice: A complex system of beliefs: [everything will be all right—Your body knows what to do—Do you feel the urge to push? I never do.]

E – Eislich: fearful, terrible.

E – Edge, to harrow. Close to the end, the obstetrician says *if you keep saying* (screaming) *Stop! I must stop. It's a matter of consent, but I have to get this baby out urgently.* He doesn't say the baby might die. He takes the gas away. My husband offers me his flesh, a thumb joint to bite down on, to help bear me to shore.

E – Education: I am receiving an education.

E – Effacement: The process of effacing; the fact of being effaced. An effaced cervix is ripe and ready for birth, an opening. An effaced woman might disappear no matter how loud her screams.

E – Eiland: a foreign place.

E – Effer: To bring forth. The baby's head is born and then the baby's shoulder is stuck behind my pubic bone. The mnemonic training swings smoothly into action. An alarm is raised [**H**elp!] The room fills quickly with serious-faced professionals. The mnemonic is spelled out via its physical parts / enaction's upon my body.

E – Efferous: fierce, violent—savage as the act of [this] birthing.

E – Effuse: To pour forth or out (a liquid); to shed (blood). The swift spill and ebb of an overflow.

E – Elapion: The action of elapsing or slipping away. The state of having elapsed.

E – Elegy. A song or lament.

L – Legs – McRoberts Manoeuvre (hyperflexion/adduction of both hips, (knees at lateral abdomen) requires an assistant at each leg.

L – Labour: The process of childbirth from the onset of uterine contractions to delivery of the fetus and placenta; an instance of this. Also: (...) An eclipse of the moon. Usually in plural in **labours of the moon**. Chiefly *poetic*.

L – Lead-up. Something that leads up to something else.

L – Leonard Cohen’s *Live in London* album plays over and over for the twelve hours I am in labour in the hospital. My husband tries to change the music but each time I crave the even balm of Cohen’s gravelly vocals and *Live in London* goes back onto repeat. After the birth, the obstetrician plays the song *Suzanne*, that my daughter is named after.

L – Lost: incomplete list of things lost during this labour:

Courage

My voice.

A floor-full of blood.

L – Lachrymation, n. The shedding of tears; weeping; a fit or bout of weeping. After, all through the night, my wounded baby slumbers in her translucent crib beside me. I manage sleep in brief, shallow drifts and then jerk back into wakefulness, and each time I cannot allay the quiet sobs that overwhelm me. A kind midwife who was present during the birth comes in and holds my hand. She tells me I was only minutes away from the breaking of my pubic bone and / or possible brain damage or the death of my baby. She says newborn baby bones are miraculous, that they will fuse and heal without trace. She assures me that my baby will not remember this broken beginning.

L – Latch. My baby and I are too exhausted to attempt breastfeeding. The midwives and nurses don’t even try to latch her. They milk me with eyedroppers for colostrum, while I whisper-plead for grains of salt from my husband’s crackers.

L – Leeser: a deliverer: When my midwife comes in two days later, after my blood transfusions, she sits by my bedside and says, *I'm so sorry. That was a terrible birth.* She bears wounds inflicted by my fingernails embedded deep in her hands. She tells me it wasn't my fault, anyone's fault, not really. Though for the longest time I believe it was my fault, my deficiency for my body not knowing how to do what to do to just push.

L – Clavicle or collarbone, both contain two letter **ls**, shapes resembling unbroken bones, unlike the right clavicle or collarbone, the left humerus of my baby daughter.

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L – Lichamly *Obsolete.* Bodily adj. in a bodily manner or form; in the flesh. That which we cannot escape.

P – Suprapubic pressure: Pressure is applied to the suprapubic area in a downward fashion or a rocking motion from the fetal back toward the front.

P – Parturition: the act of giving birth to young; childbirth.

P – Promise. When I get her home, I hold my baby to my chest inside my cardigan, her head curled into me as I sit on the bed, my face bowed to touch hers. I whisper a false **promise**—

I won't let anyone hurt you ever again.

P – Pubic bone: of, relating to or connected to the **pubis**. A wall, a barrier. A **stopping** place. Considered breakable.

P – Pubic Symphysiotomy is an operation in which the fibres of the **p**ubic symphysis are **p**artially divided to allow separation of the joint and thus enlargement of the **p**elvic dimensions during childbirth. It is **p**erformed with local analgesia and does not require an **o**perating theatre nor advanced surgical skills.

A long way from a sym**p**hony. The unwritten [last resort]
end-letter of the shoulder dystocia mnemonic. Narrowly avoided.

P – Please, stop! A scream that will deliver no mercy.

P – Phalanx, the two bones of the thumb. The thumb has no middle bone, but it is the middle, the bend where I bite down on my husband's thumb as though a belt, a strap made of leather. He does not cry out or remove the digit.

P – Posterior. In the days **p**rior to the birth, I scrub the floor on my knees, to encourage my baby to change **p**osition, but we remain, on the day, **s**pine to **s**pine.

P – Push. Your body will take over. It will know what to do. You will not collapse into **h**elpless coughing fits every time you try to **p**ush, due to a cold that you have recently recovered from, rendering you breathless.

E – Enter, rotational manoeuvres

E – Elide: to omit. No one ever told me birth could be like this. The first we knew of Shoulder Dystocia was a poster on the wall before the fact, the only thing to read in the room. Though,

I remember the stories of my grandmother's first baby girl, destroyed by forceps, dead of her injuries at three days old.

E – Elucation, the action of bursting or struggling forth. I hardly notice the sensation when she is finally fully born. I'm in so much constant pain just before the end that the medical team must tell me when I am having a contraction as opposed to this other endless agony—to push.

E – Emergency: Shoulder dystocia is a medical emergency. The baby will need help to be born. Though the head is delivered, the umbilical cord is compressed. The baby is suspended in this liminal space without breath, the chest crushed within the birth canal.

E – Enter. When she finally enters the world, my daughter does not cry. Her skin is grey. I hate to look upon the photos that the midwife takes of this moment on my phone, where the baby and I both look half dead, bloodless, as though we have come through a battle we have only barely survived.

E – Ventouse – vacuum extractor, obstetrics.

E – † Endamageable, adj. Capable of receiving damage, susceptible to injury; *perishable*.

E – Exhibit. To show. The assistant obstetrician gestures to my husband to show off to him the handiwork of the single long continuous stitch she has embroidered into my flesh to repair the excision made during the episiotomy. She does not offer to find a way to show her handiwork to me.

R – Remove the posterior arm

R – Red, *transitive*. To make red; redden the colour of the floor, awash with my blood. There are so many words for **Red**, to make red, to redden. To cover a floor with the colour of your blood. To ruin a doctor's shoes and his shirt with blood. To empty one's red-ness. Unseemly. As if unseamed.

R – Apgar, a measure of the physical condition of a newborn infant, obtained by adding points (2, 1, or 0) given for heart rate, respiratory effort, muscle tone, response to stimulation, and skin colouration. My daughter's score out of 10 is 3 immediately after birth. She needs a C-Pap machine to help her to breathe, but her score rises later to ten.

R – Racine, a root cause, a source. The single most common factor for shoulder dystocia are the interventions of forceps and ventouse extraction. Afterwards, the hospital's Head of Obstetrics theorises that my pelvis is too small, is the wrong shape for childbearing. A female doctor told me once that I had a beautifully shaped uterus.

R – Readiness: The condition or fact of being ready or fully prepared.

R – Remove = by any means necessary. To fracture the tiny humerus if necessary. To deliberately break an infant's clavicle. As needs must.

R – Roll the patient to her hands and knees.

R – Birth trauma: there is no entry for birth trauma in the Oxford Dictionary, though there is one for 'Birth story: The story of a person's birth or of a mother's experience of childbirth.'

R – Ream – Clamour, shouting; a shout, an outcry. Also: the cry of an animal. The action of tearing, splitting, or rending. (Obsolete).

R – Repair. The action of repairing a damaged, worn, or faulty object or structure by replacing or fixing parts. I can hardly walk for a week afterwards, and to painfully sit, I need the cushion of an inflatable ring for a time, but [some] bodies do heal.

R – Recover, *intransitive*. To regain health after an injury or illness; to get well again. The bandages and tape come off the baby after six weeks. No signs of palsy. The bones probably as good as new. Medical professionals don't like to x-ray babies any more than necessary. X-rays at five minutes old are more than enough. There is just the tiny, white, butterfly-shaped scar on the eyelid that remains.

R – Ruminare, *transitive*. To revolve, turn over repeatedly in the mind; to meditate deeply upon. My daughter is eight now. She touches the little scar on her eyelid in wonder of battles fought and forgotten. For me no scars remain but the memory of this mnemonic, an epigraph for all that takes place in the spaces between letters.

Dani Netherclift was the 2023 winner of the Local Word Prize for her essay 'Telephone & Address Book'. Her essay 'Beneath these surfaces' was honourably mentioned in the AAALS/Antipodes Fiction and Nonfiction Prize 2023. She has had essays in *Westerly*, *Island Mag*, *The Slow Canoe*, *Meanjin*, and elsewhere.