

The Reproductive Page

By Justine Bold

The Reproductive Page is a narrative poetry sequence. It's a story about a journey to motherhood through infertility, assisted conception and premature birth.

One female voice to read the poems as a monologue.

V/O or second actor needed for a few words in italics (these are clinician's words or excerpts from medical notes/journals).

Work has been performed at The Bush Theatre in London as part of Fertility Fest 18, the world's first art festival dedicated to fertility, infertility, modern families and the science of making babies. The work takes @15 minutes to perform.

The Poems:

- BFP
- Making babies the hard way
- Tomb
- Defrost
- Two
- Next scan
- Haematoma
- Kangaroo care
- Sepsis
- Forest morning

BFP?

I'd no idea what it meant,
a mystery.

Like all the abbreviations,
and the list is long.

I spent hours on the forum looking for
a glossary, learning the language.

Talking to faceless friends through cyberspace,
cycle buddies and forum mates.

Through a phrasebook of the unspeakable,
with a language of its own.

B for Big
F for Fat
P for Positive
BFP
Big Fat Positive

How you eluded me
and how you
were missed from my forum signature.
Full of BFNs.
Big Fat Negatives.

Making babies the hard way

The materials to make you
were honed by love
and tried for a long time
even before the investigations,
operations and treatment procedures.

Tried over and over,
like the vials in the carry case
ordered again and again
as fingers shaking for jabs
become steady experts.

The language learned
and abbreviations understood.
At first strange, then familiar,
like the code of life itself,
helix halves becoming whole.

Tomb

Foetus warm, wrapped inside,
I think of you with the longing of
'one day'.

Carrying you, for sixteen weeks
thinking you were safe.

Next time, over sooner.
Done by nine weeks.
No scan to etch in forever's mind,
all a pool of tears.

The one after, just fleeting moments,
over within a week of starting.

They called it a chemical pregnancy.
One of the one in three.

Defrost

I wake early and sit by the phone
for hours, knowing today is the day.

I imagine a stranger holding cloudy vials
of four who will melt transparent into life
or death.

I let it ring four times, a sound for each;
good news and bad.

Two okay, one looks particularly strong,
growing - the other has lost cells
but it's still alive so worth a try.

I say thank-you and goodbye.

Two

The digital stick in my trembling hand confirms a dream. Two - three weeks pregnant. Only eight days after a blastocyst transfer, so it's strong. I am walking high, tall and very smiley. Scared to believe it might be okay this time.

Activity becomes a distraction, planning and preparation. Need to know I have covered – everything. Done all that might be possible. I could never forgive myself - if I hadn't and something went wrong.

Blood tests every few days. Every precaution taken. Aspirin, heparin and lots of other medication. 40 mg prednisolone, plus drips every two weeks. Intralipids... soya and egg to confuse the errant natural killer cells and protect precious life.

Just before six weeks, blood clots the size of my palm. I think it's over, again. They scan. Two sacs, just one heart beat. I think one already gone.

Next Scan

The next scan, two weeks later so nervous I don't want to go or look.
They tell us you are both still there. My heart skips beats.
I smile there are tears.

V/O A viable intrauterine DCDA twin pregnancy seen today.

Precious flutters of light, as two heart beats fight through bloody clouds.

V/O Foetal heart beat present – twin 1 & twin 2.

They give me a picture. Two little sacs resting against each other,
besides a long grey smudge.

V/O Between the two gestation sacs there is an echo poor area seen which measures 17x25x12mm and is suggestive of haematoma.

The sonographer does not charge the normal fee.

Haematoma

One day my father cleans, as my mother lies me down wiping away tears.
Bathroom floor flooded red and mopped, again.
Each time, stuck unable to read or concentrate on anything much.

V/O

*Subchorionic haematoma. 'The aetiology of such haematomas is uncertain. Some authors have reported an association with thrombophilia and the presence of autoantibodies such as anti-cardiolipin... Foetal loss rates of 25% to 50% have been described in some studies. In the largest review to-date...high rates... of premature delivery were found. '**

Words foretelling our future? Signed off work, *pelvic rest*.
I can do little. I sit and crochet. Each stitch a moment of suspension.
Blankets made of love and hope.

The haematoma – now grown to over 8cm wide between the two babies and threatening the placentas.

V/O 'This is a pregnancy at risk.'
'You will still bleed, but you might be lucky and hold on to the babies.'

I cherish each minute holding you in case it's the last.
At seventeen weeks the blood stops.
The haematoma resolves, no sign on the scan.

* Loi K, Tan K. (2006) Massive pre-placental and subchorionic haematoma. *Singapore Med J*. Dec;47(12):1084-6.

Kangaroo care

Both boys cry, my heart sings through a propofol haze as machines breathe.

V/O Twin 1 live birth 1.88kg. Twin 2 live birth 1.76kg. Bag and mask ventilation.

I see you from afar, incubator warm and wheeled away to
your high dependency ward.

V/O Transferred to NICU.

To be touched by those that will not know you as I already do.

I cannot hold you, yet in my dreams you both lie upon my belly—
and you are here with me now, as I lie spilled open
and intravenous lines feed you before I can even nuzzle or kiss your skin.

*V/O Post partum haemorrhage, 900 milliliters blood loss. IV antibiotics.
Temp 38 degrees.*

I cannot come little ones, am not with you when you need me.
You bleed without a mother's comfort. I am bed bound, wired in, oxygenated.
Even so, as tears flow, Gemini I am now also Mother of two.
Be strong for me, little ones as I will for you.

We wait days for our first touch, ventilator free
intravenous lines still in each of us three.

It comes, pinnacle of my hopes. The nurses place each of you
side by side, skin to skin warm against my breast.
Your little fingers curl together and I wish the moment would last forever.

Sepsis

I try to make milk for mouths too small,
too young even, to know how to suck.

None comes. Hand expressing fruitless bounty,
failure in the first attempt of mother's colostrum.
Trembling, aflame and frozen.

V/O

12.20 Suddenly shaking and feels cold, temp checked 38 degrees. IV paracetamol.

15.35 Rang call bell - is shaking. Feels cold although temp 39.2 degrees.

Involuntary movement as
heart beats loud as walls bend,
paint patterns snake and
sleep waves come and go
atop thumps.

V/O

18.00 Temp remains 39.2 degrees. Commence IV paracetamol.

IV antibiotics.

*01.45 Mum feeling shivery again, temperature 38.4 degrees. Pulse 125. Registrar to review,
commence IVAB.*

02.30 Temp 39.4 Pulse 104. Dr coming to review.

I want to step outside and walk to see you
but I cannot stand.

V/O

09.00 Still spiking temperatures. T 38.8 Pulse 120

11.30 Temperature 41.5 degrees C!!

Score 1 x red (temp) 2 x yellow (RR HR)

Transfer to HDU

The high dependency unit.
One on one nursing care.
Someone with you all the time.

So little ones
I cannot come now,
I cannot pump now.
I cannot do anything.

V/O

CRP now 125 (was 13). GFR 79 (was >90)

Sepsis pathway initiated.

O2. IV Fluids, paged microbiology registrar.

Will I be strong enough?

Time now spaced by IV drips,
in collapsing veins.

So many medicines I can no longer count.

For six days, fevers spike high,
but relief as they rule out MRSA.

In between drip bags when I can
I try to pump for you.
Still nothing comes.

Days later, when it does come,
it has to be thrown away -
medication residues.

Forest morning

We lie catching light through glass on the bed.
You feed content, eyes shut, whilst your brother
already full enjoys the little snores of morning's sleep.

We lie snug in a blanket of forest sounds, winter
birdsong crisp as dog's bark, sensing weekend walkers'
clothes pristine in the mud that cakes our lane.

We lie all three in forest's island,
no cars to wake us— just sunlight bright,
winter warmth for sodden earth.

I listen, approaching chatter
riders out, through horse hooves
and mud patters, you both now sleep.