

Aziz Journal

6/22/01

The fan drones as I listen with my son, his wife, and their newborn to a CD of ocean waves. It is hot in their apartment over the Finn Bar in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, this day after the solstice. Right now Aziz is nursing, nestled in a sling that is like a womb. You can see, through the light blue polka dot cloth, his form—bumps and ridges. My son Levin said when he feels Aziz through the cloth, it reminds him of feeling Amina's belly when she was pregnant. The midwives at Elizabeth Seton Birth Center in New York City had taught them how to palpate her belly.

Before the events of Amina's pregnancy, birth, and Aziz's breastfeeding get silted over with the accumulation of days, I want to start writing things down. Aziz will already be two months old tomorrow. He is a long baby who grows "wide and then tall" when he has a growth spurt, which happens sometimes right in the course of a day. He is caramel colored with silky black hair, abundant, that was there from birth. His hands and feet are large and shapely and his feet are as expressive as hands as he opens his toes wide or curls them over as he reacts to things around him. His whole body speaks; he holds nothing back and this wonderful vulnerability, for a baby who is respected, or terrible vulnerability, for a mistreated baby, is a lesson in openness. When Aziz is excited over you speaking to him, his breathing grows loud, his nostrils flare, his arms and legs, fingers and toes become active, and his eyes look with rapt attention. Sometimes his brow is clear and smooth; sometimes he frowns as he concentrates hard on something. His full, wide mouth is wavy like a line of Arabic calligraphy that hangs on the wall in their apartment. At times, fleetingly, like the shadow of clouds passing over mountains, he looks like Levin and sometimes like Amina.

Today, we took a walk before the day got hot. Aziz was upright, nestled against Amina's chest in a Bjorn baby carrier. Even though he rode low in the carrier, he kept his head turned to the left and watched the procession of buildings we passed. The neighborhood of Carroll Gardens is leafy with brownstones in rows, many of which are surrounded by graceful iron fences and small gardens. Aziz tried to keep himself awake, though his eyelids drooped from time to time; in the effort not to fall asleep he frowned, drawing his delicate dark eyebrows together, which puckered his forehead and gave him a thoughtful expression.

Yesterday, Levin, Amina, and I talked about how memories of childhood are vivid and short, like the mini-videos that Levin takes with his digital camera. Amina remembers, from before the age of two years, lying in bed next to her mom and hearing the sound of pigeons outside the window. Levin remembers the "junk truck" that came to the stable in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where his dad and I had boarded a horse. Levin was three years old. He remembers hay everywhere, a silo, a dirt road, fencing, and the truck with pictures of the variety of pops the ice cream man sold and how there was a hole in the truck to throw garbage away. Levin asked me if I had any memories, which was unusual. Usually he doesn't seek out knowing things about my life, which is entirely fair. I told a good memory of being in my father's arms, held securely against his chest so that his heartbeat and his breath seemed to pass right through me. Levin said of Aziz, "he's never alone." He and Amina carry him everywhere; author John Sears calls it, writing about attachment parenting, "baby wear." They hold him in the sling, in one of the carriers, or they lie with him in bed, and of course there is the frequent nursing. When Levin and Amina took Aziz for his first pediatric visit, Levin wrote on the medical form—where it foolishly asked "Occupation"—"Breastfeeding." A month ago, in May, we were sitting at the kitchen table with Aziz in the sling, sucking on Levin's finger. Levin said, "Soon milk will be coming out of my fingers." What a beautiful impossible image of abundance—ten fingers, ten father's fingers, spouting milk.

But back to the idea of how close up and immediate the world is to a baby. Psychoanalyst and author Daniel Stern explains that for babies the part stands for the whole; they perceive the world metonymically. This ability is characteristic of babies from 0-2 months, when babies possess what Stern calls an "emergent sense of self." He says that we never lose this way of perceiving; it remains with us throughout our lives, especially when we fall in love and become preoccupied with close-up features—the lover's eyes, or hands or hollow where the neck meets the shoulder blades. Stern believes that this close-up entranced perception is the seat of creativity and the source of all genuine learning throughout life. I think that's why writing or reading poetry touches us so deeply, because it returns us to that early emergent sense of self when the world comes in so vividly.

So because of how the past gets silted over with the accumulation of days,

I'm wondering if I can write mini-videos like the ones Levin takes, ones that resemble the way babies perceive the world. But where to begin? My journals have tended to be as detailed and narratively as long as the life experiences they describe, so writing them takes as long as living them does and then I have no time to read them. A man I once heard on PBS records every single thing he does every day, including how many liters he pees each time. When asked about traveling, he said, "Oh no, I can't really go anywhere, there would be too much to record."

When Aziz was two days old, Levin gave him to me to hold for a long time. Levin put on "The Harder They Come," an album his dad and I had played all the time when he was a baby. We even had taken him to the movie when he was six months old, during which he mostly nursed and slept, but Levin attributes his love of reggae music to that outing. I was dressed in a long khaki skirt with a white shirt and khaki vest and I stood on the futon in the living room so my feet wouldn't be sore due to rheumatoid arthritis. I swayed back and forth. Eric, Levin's dad, stood beside me and a breeze moved through the room and I felt taken back to the time when I was a new mother. I was grateful to Levin for putting that music on; perhaps he, too, was revisiting his time as a young baby in my arms. I became very relaxed, really for the first time with Aziz. Up until that moment I found myself unexpectedly like Tolstoy when he first saw his newborn, the little tomato-colored baby with a scrunched up wizened looking face. Not that Aziz looked like that, but what I shared with Tolstoy was a feeling of strangeness, as if Aziz were alien, not kin, an unexpected emotion because normally I love babies. I realized at the Elizabeth Seton Birth Center (I had arrived by plane from Vermont, missing the birth by a few hours) that those alien feelings visited me because Aziz wasn't my own baby. Later that first day, I had discussed this odd turn of events with a friend and she understood entirely. I needed her understanding because everyone I had talked to before I left Vermont said, "You'll see, it's better with a grandchild, it's so much better than with your own." I think that hormones have a lot to do with a newborn's appeal, that they draw a mother and father to their baby. When Aziz was a day old, Levin said to me, "Smell his hair, isn't it amazing?" I bent over to smell Aziz's dark hair and discovered that the damp, warm odor was nothing I recognized or was drawn to, although I said, "Oh yes, it smells wonderful." Levin's hair as a baby intoxicated me and I couldn't smell it often enough. So the music Levin had put on acted like a door or a wave or a stream that swept me towards my grandmaternal feelings from the memory traces of my maternal feelings. Aziz, meanwhile, eventually became so relaxed as I held him that one arm dropped down and his mouth opened. I discovered that I didn't want to give Aziz up to Levin's dad; I'd become so attached, but eventually my hands and feet began to hurt. It had been about an hour and I remembered that I'm not that young mother I used to be. This became plain to me when later I saw a photo of these moments and I saw the lines on my face, especially the frown furrows, and my swollen knuckles.

The second time I connected with Aziz I was sitting on the futon in the bedroom, holding him so that his head was on my left, the side near the heart, and he put one little hand on my chest and kept it there. The third time was the strongest, but the least obvious. I noticed that when Aziz sighed, his expiration of breath had a double hitch to it—he took a breath in and just before his lungs filled all the way, he added another breath onto it. On my way back to Vermont I noticed that I sigh with a double hitch also. The last time I saw my father in the ICU (he died two years ago), I told him that I was breathing with him and that we are all breathing together and that breath is *ruah* in Hebrew, or spirit. And so it seemed to me that Arthur, Aziz's great grandfather, and Aziz and I were connected through the breath, one generation hitched to the other in the round of life.

6/25/01

Levin and I walked to the promenade along the East River in Brooklyn Heights, a ritzy part of the borough. Elegant brownstones with floor to ceiling windows line the street, some buildings have gaslight fixtures, big lanterns that stand alongside the stoops. The promenade looks out on the Statue of Liberty, who had her back to us; the Staten Island Ferry was chugging along as we walked, and I could see Ellis Island where my grandparents had disembarked in the early part of the last century. I could only make out a somber armory type of building, sprawling and indistinct in the haze. Suddenly I imagined what it must have been like to arrive there on a boat in steerage from Russia. And how it has taken five generations—five from Aziz to them—to arrive at this afternoon, Levin, Aziz and I, striding along, members of what I think of as a “breastfeeding ethnic community,” if such a thing exists. For membership, you'd either have been breastfed, have breastfed, or be breastfeeding a child. It is a luxury to be able to pay attention to the elemental details of how a baby is fed, to take the time to notice a baby. Infant research is no more than ten to fifteen years old and in generations prior to this, at least in the West, babies were maintained, but not treated or perceived as full human beings. Or they were “presented” to use Amina's apt term, like a baby we saw at a party, all decked out in a pretty white outfit with embroidered flowers at the wrist and a little white hat, dressed as if she were a doll. Babies as dolls or mindless bundles of organic needs.

A few days ago Levin said, “If you write anything down, could I see it?” or “Could you write stuff down?” This was a hard moment for me because the invitation was such a treat, since in the past Levin often would say, scornfully, if I was giving him too much advice or having a conflict with him, “Why don't you go write about it in your journal.” Then, too, Levin has not read my book, *Bearing Meaning: The Language of Birth* except for the first and last pages. Despite the temptation, I answered as I should have, “Actually I haven't been writing in my journal for a while and anyhow this is your story to write, not mine.” I wasn't even at the birth, although I'd been invited, and only knew about

it through Levin's and Amina's stories.

Levin's passion that Amina breastfeed was wonderful and I'd say rare in this culture. The night of the "crisis" he called me after turning the house upside down to find their childbirth class folder. "I need, I need help," he said. A little later he called and said, "This is Aziz's last night of nursing and he's only three weeks old." In my heart I was full of despair, especially after reading in the LLL book that all the founder's children successfully breastfed their babies and I'd nursed Levin for three and a half years. I had put the childbirth books away after Aziz's birth, relieved that that act was accomplished in a fulfilling way—not even ultrasounds, and a water birth at a free-standing birth center. Now could it be that Amina would bottlefeed? This crisis came exactly in the same week that Amina's mother had stopped breastfeeding her. I'm proud that I was able to tell Amina that I supported whatever she decided to do; the important thing was that she and Aziz have a good, loving relationship. But when I see Amina and Aziz now and watch the subtle interaction between them, I don't see how it could have been the same had she not breastfed. Amina was relieved that I supported her right to choose because every pep talk I gave her just made her feel guilty. It all came down to sore nipples, and a lactation consultant helped Amina learn how to get Aziz to latch on the right way with his mouth wide open, for Amina to position him close and to hold her breast, push it forward to him, and for her to nurse one breast at each feeding instead of two so that the milk supply could go down and her breasts soften.

6/27/01

The first time I came home from Brooklyn I felt flayed for four days. Flayed like the herring I once had seen on Cape Cod. They had swum upstream to their breeding ground, a pond that spilled over a lip and down into the river or stream. I stood just at the place of the runover that sluiced down with clear water. A fish would emerge in the clear place and flip itself up over the lip and into the pond. I saw it through the water, eye staring and skin flayed by the rough passage, hanging off in tatters.

My upstream journey began with my high forceps birth that etched a resentment in my mother like the faint forceps scar on my cheek, through Levin's birth where I pushed him out myself after three hours effort, through the years of social activism on behalf of childbearing women, and through Amina's pregnancy in which the medical system hovered at the edge ready to take over. At each prenatal visit, the midwife would ask politely, "Would you like an ultrasound today?" But Amina kept true to herself and gave birth in the water, floating in between contractions, letting Aziz find his own way down through her body, eyes closed, a smile on her face as she dreamt (she told us later) of having an Afro hair style and wearing bell-bottom pants and three inch heeled boots. Amina floated in the clear place because my generation had built infrastructures so that she didn't have to swim upstream, but could simply arrive from home and shed her clothes and step into the tub. Yet Amina had to be

brave during the pregnancy and birth to go beyond her mother who had a cesarean, but the infrastructure (an ugly, but useful word) was there to use. And my generation had built it. That's why on the Saturday after I got back from New York that first trip, I wept harsh tears for the difficulty and accomplishment, grief and joy and relief that Levin and Amina had the kind of birth that would forever enrich their lives.

The second time I came home I felt good and not at all drained, but like a cell with two nuclei, one with them and one with my dog Laska. And I got mixed up—should I be in Vermont? Should I have a dog who limited my flexibility visiting? It took several days to believe that it is all right to have a life of my own.

Aziz has given me the immense instruction of seeing how open a new baby is and so completely at the mercy of grownups. He helps me get the narrative of my own babyhood in order so that I can complete it and put it aside, although of course that story lives on in me and always will—but not with such power as in the past. This instruction didn't happen with Levin because I didn't know so much about my early life then, consciously, I only knew that I wanted his childhood to be different and I could see things, by a mysterious gift, from the infant's point of view. With Aziz, even though we are separated by two generations, it's as if my babyhood and his inform each other. There is, to use a cliché, something very healing about this. As if my baby self can see, through him, how it ought to have been and that makes the past less unalterable somehow. Similarly with Aziz, I can so easily picture how it would be with other parents, or my parents, and that also makes the past less tyrannous. My parents stand as shadow images to either side of me as Aziz and I gaze at one another, but they never will have the chance to mistreat him. Like Amina, he too has arrived in the clear place.

On our trip yesterday to Prospect Park on the subway, the train went above the ground at one point. Levin was keen on me looking out the window to see the leafy hill of Carroll Gardens. I also saw Manhattan from a perspective, just like at the promenade, I'd never seen before—the East River downtown side of Manhattan (I'd grown up in midtown Manhattan, on Riverside Drive overlooking the Hudson River). It felt like a liberation, this new perspective. As if I were a planet, I'd rotated to a new position. I was in a new orbit and it almost felt heretical to dare to gaze elsewhere than where my parents had looked out.

7/26/01

Levin and Amina had sent me home to Vermont with the placenta that I froze and transported in my backpack on JetBlue airline. The placenta, densely bloody, compacted into a heart size shape, glistening amnion and chorion wrapped around part of it, umbilical cord frozen against the body of it—this I placed in a hole in the ground and Nate, who helps me with gardening, planted a magnolia tree above the placenta, a young tree that looks of all things a little

yellow, just like the newborn Aziz when he had a little jaundice.

I told Nate the story of how the soul is said by the Kabbalists to be an upside down tree with its roots in the heavens and branches on earth. To me this mystical image describes the placenta—upside down roots, since most placentas implant in the upper part of the uterus. It does seem that patriarchy draws its most powerful images from women's procreativity.

The dark red moist bloody object felt warm, even though it was frozen. I placed it in the dry, light brown, sandy soil. It didn't seem to belong there, so shiny and full of bloody tissue that gave life to Aziz, but where can a placenta go? Such profligate waste. People in the flamboyant 1970s used to make placenta stews. My midwife friend claims to have prepared some. "How did the stew taste?" I asked. "Awful," she replied. Animals eat placentas and that seems the thrifty thing to do, I thought, as I looked at that nourishment consigned to the dry earth. The moist vivid, red, shiny placenta compacted together and looking as if it could release into the big bang, the origins of matter.

8/8/01

I called Levin to find out how they are holding up in this heat wave.

"He's teething," Levin said.

"He is?"

"He chews on my fingers, drooling, and he looks so happy."

"So sweet," I replied.

"He's also learning to laugh. He goes 'he, he, he'," Levin imitated an awkward sound, like the braying of a congested donkey. "He doesn't quite know how to do it yet."

"He loves when I play the drums. First I played castanets and he cried and screamed. Then I played the drums and he became quiet."

"How interesting," I said, wondering whether Mozart was a lost cause. Probably.

"Amina just came out of the shower with him. They were in for fifteen minutes and he loved it. He showers with both of us. That shows he trusts us, doesn't it?"

"Oh yes," I said vigorously, thinking sadly of my own childhood.

"Trust, that's the first emotion, I read about it," Levin offered.

"Yes," I said, "trust."