

FAITH & WORSHIP



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PREGNANCY IN THE APOCALYPSE



WORDS BY HELENA GEILINGER

In a world burning at the edges, women are still getting pregnant. Helena Geilinger asks what it means to create life while everything else seems to collapse.

at in the hospital waiting room, I look around at the other women also holding cups of their own urine. Newcomers sheepishly disguise theirs in wads of tissue, whereas seasoned attendees leave their yellow vials on the seat beside them to secure space to splay. I examine leaflets on the table next to me: 'Why Breast is Best!', 'Hospital Bag Essentials for Mummies & Daddys' and 'Beat the Post-Baby Blues: Mental Health Meet Ups'. The information feels abstract and alien, as do the stock photos of beaming mothers and babies embracing on white sofas or locking eyes in front of sunsets; each image warped by the NHS employee who compiled them on Microsoft Word. These printouts seek to prepare me for motherhood's inevitable scenarios: to offer an illusion of control against the act of faith that childbearing demands.

A nurse calls my name. I am brought into a sky blue room and asked to lie on a gurney and expose my belly. On the wall next to me hangs a cropped picture of snowdrops stretched over a canvas, less pixelated than the lilies and lavender I'd seen on other walls. Each plant is clearly chosen for its soothing effect. Nothing tropical or thorny, the flowers are always English and serene, suggesting spring and new beginnings. The room is filled with a

selection of mismatched chairs in mauve and turquoise: some with arms, some on wheels, all impressively uncomfortable. They are covered in cushioned plastic, ready to wipe away the bodily excretions that will define the next nine months of my life. Everything you see and hear in a hospital feels as though it's been discussed extensively in corporate focus groups, as if the right colour palette might dissuade you from suing them for any mistakes. The spaces are all intentionally anonymous; meaningless rooms poised to facilitate meaningful moments.

The lights dim, "cold liquid!" the sonographer announces, as she spreads clear jelly across my stomach like jam on toast. I've always found it odd the way healthcare professionals articulate the feeling you're about to experience, like the words "sharp scratch!" might soften the prick. Apparently, anticipating pain makes it easier to manage. I was intrigued to learn whether this was true of pregnancy: if knowing that it was hard would help me cope with the journey. In my experience, it's been more like running a marathon – you have less licence to complain because you willingly signed up for something so notoriously difficult.

I had recently discovered that I was having identical twins. With no genetic history in mine or my partner's family, and the pregnancy being

a "spontaneous conception," I was told the likelihood was about 1 in 15,000. The news floored me. I laughed hysterically (manically) during the ultrasound, unable to comprehend the information. I was astounded that my doctor could explain how the embryo split in two, but not why. This was another lesson in the ways that women's bodies are still a complete medical mystery. As with all healthcare relating to the uterus, I had anticipated research to be lacking. Yet, the many uncertainties about how babies are grown and carried felt deliberate, as though even doctors treated it as an act of God, not to be questioned. There seemed to be no appetite for better understanding; it was a divine process that shouldn't be interfered with.

It was now week eighteen and I had started to grapple with the news. I had even begun imagining a lucrative Olsens-style film and fashion career for the twins that could help me retire before 80. Maybe having two babies at once was a good thing; it was productive, efficient even.

Back on the gurney, the lights flicked on and hushed words were exchanged. The atmosphere shifted as the doctor wheeled over and told me in an undelicate manner that one twin was growing bigger than the other, meaning one or both might not survive. Words from Molly Young's *Privacy* rang in my mind, "the best-case scenario is to extrude a healthy baby and then spend the rest of your life worrying that it will die." It now seemed I might not even make it that far.

I came to realise that pregnancy required a great deal of hope and worship, as you learn how little control you have in determining its outcome. The nine month journey follows a similar formula to many religions. You are encouraged to live a moral life—abstaining from alcohol, cigs, late nights, junk food, illicit

behaviour—in the hope of making it to utopia. However, despite the tools available to monitor your baby's development, a successful pregnancy ultimately happens to you, not because of you. Its trajectory can be managed but rarely rerouted. Once you're in the boat, the current carries you forward and you become a passenger, vulnerable to nature's will.

Given how destabilising and uncertain pregnancy can be, I am surprised by how many people—myself included—decided that now was the moment to try it. It feels like there has never been a worse time to have children, as the disastrous future

they'll inherit can no longer be ignored. With a backdrop of global war, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the rising far-right movements, economic and political instability, the dissolution of trans rights, and an ever encroaching climate catastrophe, the world feels full of hate and doom and the outlook is bleak for the coming generations.

Yet this year, more and more swollen tummies have been popping up on my feed. While this is likely a combination of my age, algorithm, and hormonal attunement to this news, it seems that our increasingly apocalyptic environment has been fertile ground for aspiring mothers. My question is, why now?

When trying to understand, process or decide something, I turn to my familiar rituals of reading and writing. However, as soon as I became pregnant, I immediately struggled with both. Diana Kole claims there is "no great writing on pregnancy", as motherhood is so all-consuming that the journey of

