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Visiting possum brings tidings of joy

We had heard parents say that their life did not really begin until after the birth of their child. What then had we been living so far if not life? It was hard to know what to feel about a child. It was hard to know how the future could be as different from the past as life is to the absence of life. Had our life to this point only been something less than life?

For a time we doubted even the strongest sensations of life: happiness, laughter, love. Then one day the future reached out to us — from its own strange world, a heartbeat beyond the present moment — and delivered us into a life, new and unknown.

Sometime over the silent hours of the last night before my wife and I were finally to become parents — completing the long journey to adulthood — a brush-tail possum came down our chimney, with pad-prints as soft as the breathing of a quietly sleeping baby.

By dawn’s light we discovered a drowsy ball on the dresser, nestled amidst delicately disturbed willow pattern: a teapot was tipped forward onto its spout; three pig-tailed men were crossing a bridge shaped like a smile; pagodas hung upside down from the sky.

China had been ransacked most considerately. Still, this sleeping wild thing couldn’t be allowed to stay, and so, donning my thickest gloves, I made preparations for its departure.

The dervish woke in my hands. Such good-byes as it shrieked were brief. As if to regain lost dignity, however, our nocturnal intruder almost immediately proceeded to saunter along the verandah, and descend the stairs calmly, before dashing madly for the safety of a gum tree. From high above us, it looked down upon the world and all her inhabitants.

‘It’s a sign,’ said my wife. ‘A sign of new life.’ And she touched her swollen tummy.

Living on the rural edge of the city, as we were at that time, provided myriad opportunities to reflect upon the symbiosis between nature and impending parenthood. While our unborn daughter rippled a limb beneath her mother’s skin, turned and twisted within the womb, we were noticing all the other ways in which life begins and persists.
One windy afternoon, when a baby owlet fell to the ground, we scooped it up, and were much relieved when the mother once more accepted the nestling into her care. After we brought our daughter home from the hospital, we found next morning that the same owl had stood guard outside her nursery window all night, as if returning a favour parent to parent.

Life reaches out to life. One freezing evening, the pony in a neighbour’s paddock followed us along the fence line in hope of an apple, and softly nuzzled my wife’s belly.

‘We’re all animals,’ the midwife told us during the antenatal classes. It’s true. We struggle into being like them, have systems hardwired for survival, defend the ones we love.

Noon came and went on the Saturday of our possum’s auspicious visitation; still my wife’s waters hadn’t broken. The studios of local painters, sculptors and woodworkers were open to the public that afternoon. Might culture succeed in coaxing our slowcoach daughter into the world, where nature seemed to have failed? We decided to go visiting.

First stop was a painter in oils. The contractions were coming faster now. ‘No need to be concerned,’ my wife told the artist. It helped to keep moving. Pictures of desert and ice were displayed on every wall. Tobogganing penguins slid silently across impasto snow.

‘Did we know,’ asked the artist, ‘that some oil paintings never completely dry?’ But my wife wasn’t listening.

Through the clear coldness of early evening, soon we were driving across the river to the local hospital.

At 7.23am next day, Mothers’ Day, the best day of our lives, she joined us.

Life can be fragile – the shimmer of vitality in the sheen of a fox’s coat glimpsed at dusk. Or it can be tough as an eagle spearing through the sky with preternatural speed. Our daughter is precious but powerful. Giving her her first bath, I was initially tentative – almost too gentle – until she surprised me with a kick like a leaping frog’s.

We have called our daughter Lan-Tian, which means Blue Sky in Chinese; for the heavens that shine over the home turf of our fair-omened possum, a refuge for everything from peacocks, to pet goats, to the echidnas that rustle through the grass when the long shadows fall. Lan-Tian: a name of China and of blue-skied Australia. A little girl to ransack us most considerately with love.

Now together, we have no need for visits or drop-ins. Our own welcome stranger has already arrived.