

DEMON COPPERHEAD

Barbara Kingsolver

First, I got myself born. A decent crowd was on hand to watch, and they've always given me that much: the worst of the job was up to me, my mother being let's just say out of it.

On any other day they'd have seen her outside on the deck of her trailer home, good neighbors taking notice, pestering the tit of trouble as they will. All through the dog-breath air of late summer and fall, cast an eye up the mountain and there she'd be, little bleach-blonde smoking her Pall Malls, hanging on that railing like she's captain of her ship up there and now might be the hour it's going down. This is an eighteen-year-old girl we're discussing, all on her own and as pregnant as it gets. The day she failed to show, it fell to Nance Peggot to go bang on the door, barge inside, and find her passed out on the bathroom floor with her junk all over the place and me already coming out. A slick fish-colored hostage picking up grit from the vinyl tile, worming and shoving around because I'm still inside the sack that babies float in, pre-real-life.

Mr. Peggot was outside idling his truck, headed for evening service, probably thinking about how much of his life he'd spent waiting on women. His wife would have told him the Jesusing could hold on a minute, first she needed to go see if the little pregnant gal had got herself liquored up again. Mrs. Peggot being a lady that doesn't beat around the bushes and if need be, will tell Christ Jesus to sit tight and keep his pretty hair on. She came back out yelling for him to call 911 because a poor child is in the bathroom trying to punch himself out of a bag.

Like a little blue prizefighter. Those are the words she'd use later on, being not at all shy to discuss the worst day of my mom's life. And if that's how I came across to the first people that laid eyes on me, I'll take it. To me that says I had a fighting chance. Long odds, yes I know. If a mother is lying in her own piss and pill bottles while they're slapping the kid she's shunted out, telling him to look alive: likely the bastard is doomed. Kid born to the junkie is a junkie. He'll grow up to be everything you don't want to know, the rotten teeth and dead-zone eyes, the nuisance of locking up your tools in the garage so they don't walk off, the rent-by-the-week motel squatting well back from the scenic highway. This kid, if he wanted a shot at the finer things, should have got himself delivered to some rich or smart or Christian, nonusing type of mother. Anybody will tell you the born of this world are marked from the get-out, win or lose.

Me though, I was a born sucker for the superhero rescue. Did that line of work even exist, in our trailer-home universe? Had they all quit Smallville and gone looking for bigger action? Save or be saved, these are questions. You want to think it's not over till the last page.

It was a Wednesday this all happened, which supposedly is the bad one. Full of woe etc. Add to that, coming out still inside the fetus ziplock. But. According to Mrs. Peggot there is one good piece of luck that comes with the baggie birth: it's this promise from God that you'll never drown. Specifically. You could still OD, or get pinned to the wheel and charbroiled in your driver's seat, or for that matter blow your own brains out, but the one place where you will not suck your last breath is underwater. Thank you, Jesus.

I don't know if this is at all related, but I always had a thing for the ocean. Usually kids will get fixated on naming every make and model of dinosaur or what have you. With me it was whales and sharks. Even now I probably think more than the normal about water, floating in it, just the color blue itself and how for the fish, that blue is the whole deal. Air and noise and people and our all-important hectic nonsense, a minor irritant if even that.

I've not seen the real thing, just pictures, and this hypnotizing screen saver of waves rearing up and spilling over on a library computer. So what do I know about ocean, still yet to stand on its sandy beard and look it in the eye? Still waiting to meet the one big thing I know is not going to swallow me alive.