Pregnant pause

Tiffany Francis-Baker finds respite in darkness

One winter, we flew to the western shores of India to escape the lethargy of Britain in late February. Each day the temperature climbed to 30°C, and we spent our time slinking through the streets on a dusty moped, past stray dogs, and cows adorned with flowers, our senses consumed by sunlight and spiced turmeric. It was a beautiful and chaotic place, but every night, almost defeated by the noise and heat of the day, we would wander down to the shore and swim in the wild Arabian Sea. The waves pushed down in an endless rhythm, arriving and departing, embracing and withdrawing. We tried to stand against their force, running to meet them as they swept up and crashed down onto the shore, but resistance was pointless. We were thrown into the water and carried back to the sand like driftwood. Trying to stand against the tide was like trying to stop time; better to float through it, uncontrolled, and embrace the rhythm of the moon-powered water. We relaxed our bodies, and the sea lifted us high into the air and back down to Earth, ready to repeat that eternal cycle again and again.

I still think of those darkling sea swims on warm nights. This summer, I walked into the garden to bring the dogs in and felt as though someone were shining a spotlight on me. I looked up and met the gaze of a full moon, white and round, pouring down onto the Earth. To stumble upon a full moon when you’re not expecting it is one of Nature’s greatest tricks – the genuine shock that something not powered by electricity can be so potent and compelling. It becomes difficult to leave, to step out of the moonglow and retreat indoors to your brick and mortar bed. Something in that milky light calls out to our wilder selves.

This year, my relationship with the night took a different turn. My third trimester of pregnancy began around Beltain, the Celtic May Day festival that takes place halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. The pandemic put an end to the usual Beltain celebrations I enjoy at Butser Ancient Farm on the Hampshire/Sussex border, where each year I watch, cider in hand, as a 30-foot wicker man burns to the ground. But at least the lockdown weather was joyful. In fact, we were treated to a week or two of such high temperatures that I imagined I was back in India again. As lovely as it was, my usual afternoon dog-walks became impossible with increasingly squashed lungs, raised body temperature and a growing belly, so instead I waited until after sunset to stretch my legs and feel my heart pulsing down to the new human growing inside me. The night was cool against my skin, a welcome respite from the heat of the day. And there in the sky, caught in a glittering veil of stars, the moon lingered on to light my path.

There has long been a connection between women and the night sky, whether it’s in mythology, folklore, medicine or astrology. The moon itself is a feminine symbol, representing the rhythm of time and the eternal nature of life’s cycles, as well as encouraging us to embrace the darker side of the universe. In pregnancy, I felt connected to Nature in an entirely different way – the sensation of life passing through me, of growing something new. But at night, without the noise and chaos of modern life to distract me, my late-pregnancy nightwalks became a source of energy. There in the dark, I could absorb the sound of invisible bats over my head, the scent of damp grass, the velvet slip of shadow and the moon lingering on to light my path.

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