

TWIN A

AMIT MAJMUDAR
TWIN A

A Memoir

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B O O K S

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Slant Books
P.O. Box 60295
Seattle, WA 98160

www.slantbooks.org

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Names: Majmudar, Amit.

Title: Twin A : a memoir / Amit Majmudar.

Description: Seattle, WA: Slant Books, 2023

Identifiers: ISBN 978-1-63982-139-6 (hardcover) | ISBN 978-1-63982-138-9 (paperback) | ISBN 978-1-63982-140-2 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Congenital heart disease | Congenital heart disease in children | Children--biography | Autobiography--Asian American authors

In the book of my memory—the part of it before which not much is legible—there is the heading *Incipit vita nova*. Under this heading I find the words which I intend to copy down in this little book; if not all of them, at least their essential meaning.

—Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*
translated by Andrew Frisardi

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I

BEFORE YOU

You Are Born

LIGHT IS NEW. IT SPRAYS DOWN, white and caustic, right into your eyes. The pressure on all sides, which you have felt your whole life, which grew firmer and firmer as your body swelled and stretched the walls of your mother—that pressure has dropped away, all at once.

Imagine a passenger in a plane, asleep under a blanket, with a sleeping mask on, his ears accustomed to the engine roar the same way yours were to the roar of blood in the womb. Now the cabin rips open. The sleeping mask and blanket fly off. The passenger awakens from dreamless sleep to find himself falling through a blaze of sunlight.

That's what this is like for you—only from your perspective, you're falling in every direction at once. No wonder you're screaming.

Your sense of gravity was always vague because you have never not been submerged. Your down and up used to shift, subtly or drastically, depending on whether your mother walked, or sat at a certain angle with her legs crossed, or laid on her side or on her back. Now you have one fixed Up and one fixed Down.

Hands hold you and pass you about, doctor to resident to nurse, but you don't know they are hands. Hands are new. They are thin, hard, slick, poky. You are too bewildered to process much about hands, much less the suction bulb stabbing your nose, much less the universe, other than that it is foreign and aggressive, one long sequence of invasions and violations.

The water you used to swallow and breathe is gone, replaced with something far less substantial. Air is new: It has no heft. You never had anything but silence inside you. Sound fills your head now, and the harder you cry, the louder it gets. It is coming from a spot very close to your ears, only on the inside, closer than close: Your voice, too, is new.

You are on a cloth now, under a hot lamp. Cloth is new, and startlingly coarse. Your back has never felt anything but membrane, smooth muscle, flowing water, and crème-fraîche vernix. The hot-lamp feels like something you know, but the heat is all in one place, not all around you, as it used to be. This is distance. This is separation.

Your mouth has never been empty before. Your hands seek out your face, the only things familiar from the womb.

This is the moment, with all the inspections complete—ten fingers, ten toes, pinking up nicely—that you’re supposed to be handed back to your mother. She would make a hushing sound, instinctively mimicking the womb’s blood rush. The pressure of the swaddling, and her steady hold on you, would stop your freefall into the universe outside you.

But that isn’t what is happening, because you aren’t pinking up nicely. Your body is strangely gray all over. You are being wheeled into a crowd of waiting hands, which descend from above and spider over you. Thin, slippery tubes with needle fangs snake up from the corners of the bassinet and sting you in the crook of your elbow, the crease of your groin. They begin to suck your blood.

Light, breath, voice, distance, and now pain: sooner than expected, your education is complete.

Welcome to the world, son.

You get inspected by people in different uniforms: long white coat, short white coat, bright green surgical scrubs, bright green surgical scrubs with a white coat over them, blue nursing scrubs.

You don’t see them very clearly. You have the stunned-blind eyes of a just-born kitten, glassed with ointment. Dark iris and darker pupil seem to fill the thin slit between your eyelids. You blink at these people, slowly, in a way that makes it seem you are studying them back.

What are they looking for? Right now, your doctors hunt your body for any problems that the ultrasound studies, performed before your birth, could not have picked up. The whole team has been briefed about the big problem with your heart. It’s that problem which has made them rush you straight from your mother’s body to the intensive care unit.

In all of these faces, scholarly excitement overrides, for the moment, compassion. You are a real live Fascinating Case—and the last thing you want to be, in medicine, is a fascinating case. The greater the rarity, the greater the fascination, and the greater the fascination, the greater your suffering.

These strangers are searching for what's sometimes called a "constellation of findings." In that implicit metaphor, every birth defect is a star, and together these disasters form the image of an Archer, a Bear, a Scorpion. The doctors and doctors-in-training scan your body like a night sky. They don't "want" you to have any of these other signs—like *micrognathia*, small jaw, or *hypospadias*, a urethra splayed open in a pink wet fissure along the underside of the penis. But they do want to *find* the signs, if they are there.

This wish—to see in real life the mythical babies of textbook photographs—will lead to conjectural, almost wishful documentation. So the notes on that first day claim your jaw is too small and the opening of your urethra stretches too far. They have searched you so hard they end up finding what isn't there. A list of Associated Defects, memorized off a flashcard when cramming for an exam years before, gets superimposed onto you. In a few days, these other, minor diagnoses will magically evaporate. But the big one will remain, stubbornly, catastrophically, at the heart of you.

Over and over, more often than any of the others, a face pops into your field of view.

Cheeks a little scruffy, dark eyes sunken behind thin-rimmed glasses, poofy blue surgical cap: This stranger is wearing a full body jumpsuit that seems made of paper, and light blue booties over his sneakers, though you can't see those right now. Occasionally, he puts a glowing rectangle to his ear and chatters into it. At other times, he just blinks at your blinking, or lays his Pirel-smelling finger on your palm to feel your fingers close around it. You recognize the voice as one you have been hearing in the womb, though then it came through amniotic fluid, muffled. Now it comes through sharp and raw, even though it's a whisper. Two syllables, as he points at his chest: *deb* and *dee*, *deb* and *dee*.

I know exactly what your alternate destiny looks like, without these wires and beeping computer monitors. Every so often over the next few days, I leave the intensive care unit for a different wing of the hospital. I pass the Einstein Brothers bagel kiosk in the glass-roofed too-bright foyer, the gift shop with the angel trinkets, the piano no one ever plays. I arrive at another bassinets, where a second newborn, identical to you, lies sated, sleeping. Your mother lies near this other you, recovering from her Caesarian section and periodically trying to nurse. It's as if the two wings of this hospital exist in parallel universes, one universe benevolent, the other abandoned to chance. I shuttle between the two yous, wary of shortchanging the you I am not with—two newborns in iambic alternation, one unstressed, the other stressed.

That room is quiet except for a classical *raga* in the background, the lyrics Sanskrit and sacred, the volume kept low. The iPod, nested in a speaker, glows. That faraway, unattainable room is full of family members. It pulses with daylight from the swept-aside curtains.

You should be here, too. You are not here. I am writing this to tell you, among other things, why.

Dear Shiv.

I started this out as a letter. I wanted to outline what went on in the first years of your life. I expected to get down a couple of pages I could put in an envelope, in the safe, along with your Social Security card and passport. When you got old enough to ask detailed questions, I figured I could take it out and let you read it—a letter from me now to the future you. Like the events it describes, the writing escaped my control.

Hook a circuit up in parallel
and the voltage—

equal, equal—
is a single miraculous energy

that cannot be created or destroyed,
only twinned, twinned,

as a life is
through a pair of umbilical cords,

your mother powerful enough to charge the sun,
your mother a hemo-electric power plant

illuminating twin cities,
illuminating my study lamp's

two light bulbs just above my head—
equal, equal—

floating there like two ideas
for telling the same story,

YOU ARE BORN

one in prose, one in verse:

Twin A, Twin B:

circuits in parallel,
cries from the heart

born from a shock—

I imagine you reading this years from now when you are a man, or maybe still a teenager—whatever age you are when you stop your life's forward motion to inspect, and marvel at, the obstacle course it has been. I know you will want details and explanations, and you deserve them.

Obviously, we plan to be there to tell you in person, but there is no guarantee of that. Even ignoring worst-case scenarios, I worry about the workings of memory. My own, at the very least: I confess I am already losing things. Anecdotes, bit parts, and peripheral characters, how things played out—these elements are already going the way they always do. The experience has been reduced to freeze-frames and elisions, the record of it scratched and skipping. Ten years from now, how much of my memory will still be readable if I don't write this down now?

Fortunately, your mother has a prodigious memory for every last thing. In her memory, the crisis years are clearly ordered, important details and conversations readily called up. So I have written a lot of this relying on conversations with her, and she is vetting these pages as I go, making sure I don't leave out anything important. I came across a study, as I was writing this down, that showed women possess a superior declarative memory compared to men. That means they are better at tasks like "the retrieval of long-term memories of specific events and facts...[and] thus better at remembering family history." Comparing your mother and myself, this is absolutely true.

"Dear Shiv" is how I began this when I intended to jot down some things that weren't in the medical record. My letter grew and grew into what you're reading now, with stories, and poems, and bits of medicine and anatomy, and some places where I'm just thinking things through with you. Not that I claim some great wisdom, some neat takeaway that will make what happened make perfect sense. All I can do is get down the facts of what happened. You live the wisdom. I observe...and take notes.

Suffer, my boy,
 no men of wisdom.
 You are twenty
 times a swami
 by surviving.
 Let the gurus
 cross-legged
 sit at the feet
 of Swami Shiv.
 You teach them: *Courage*
 comes from *cor*,
 the heart, and *pulse*
 means *seed* and feeds
 the rock dove's hunger
 every April.
 Blood is *sang*
 and *sanguine* spirits
 sing when no one
 else is singing,
 heartened by
 the hush, no tabla
 save your pulse.

In a sense, though, this is still a letter. Think of this book—with all its organs and vessels and bones and nerves, with its fables and explanations and anecdotes and poems—as one long fan letter from your dad, sent through time.