



Hope is the thing with feathers

Hope is the thing with feathers

An interpretation of Emily Dickinson's poem

by Nanna Hauge Kristensen

A Falling Tree Production

for Between the Essays, BBC 3

First broadcast: February 3rd 2020

Length: 13'47"

Front page illustration: Kirstine Sørensen, mother of Ingrid

That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

00'38"

HEARTBEAT

Imagine
you are in a cave
Thick, soft walls
a darkness you know
Maybe you are slumbering
cradled by fluids

Suddenly
the walls are cut open
A splintering light
and a firm grip
pulls you out
into a boundless and unfamiliar world

BABY CRYING

01'21"

“Ja, du er så dygtig.”

They call it the golden hour, the first hour after a premature birth.
It determines how the child will manage.

“Det kan være, far skal hen... Og hvad vil du have lagt af drop?”

A doctor, five nurses and the little girl’s father stand around the incubator.

”Så! Hun er så fin.”

”Ja, hun er.”

“She is so delicate”, the doctor says.

“Yes, she is”, the father answers.

The father is still wearing the blue pants and cap from the operation room.

“Ja, se nu er far lige her.”

“Look, daddy is right here.”

Through a hole in the incubator the father reaches the little girl with his index finger.
She grabs it with her hand.

“Hvor er hun fin og livlig, hva?”

“Ja, hun er endda kommet to måneder før.”

“She even came two months before her time”, the father says. His eyes are wet. He steps back.

“Jeg skal bare lige pudse næse”

“I just need to blow my nose”, he says

03’08”

WHEEZING BREATH

In another room, Bertram is sleeping on his mother's chest.

“Han har rigtig mange lyde.”

“He makes so many sounds”, the mother says.

“Det er meget beroligende, så behøver man ikke stå op om natten for at tjekke, at han trækker vejret.”

“It's calming. Then we don't need to get up at night to make sure he is breathing.”

MONITOR BEEP

Above Bertram's cradle, a monitor measures his heartbeat and the oxygenation of his blood.

“Det er én af de mange lyde, vi har rigtig stor fornøjelse af herinde.”

“It is one of many sounds we have the pleasure of”, his mother says.

“Vi har haft en højtaler herinde, så vi kunne spille lidt musik for ham. Så han kunne høre lidt andet end det her.”

“We had a loudspeaker here so we could play music for him. That way he could listen to something other than this.”

“Hvad har I spillet for ham?”

“Jeg har spillet sådan noget som Bach... Bach Goldbergvariationerne...”

“I played Bach, the Goldberg Variations. That works quite well. Metallica he is not too fond of yet.”

“Ja”

BABY BREATHING

Bertram and his mother have been here for three months. They've been away from the clinic once.

“Det er da hårdt at skulle gå op og hente mad her...”

Bertram's mother talks about how they get their meals upstairs on the maternity ward.

“... Og så ligger de dér på tre et halvt kilo og er velskabte og egentlig ikke de store problemer her, mens ens eget barn ligger nedunder og kæmper for livet.”

There, she is faced with grown, healthy babies while her own child is down here, fighting for his life.

“Eller man møder forældre, der er på vej hjem...”

Or she meets parents on their way home with their newborn...
and all she can do is pick up a cup of coffee and go back.

“Det er barskt.”

“It's tough.”

“Men vi tager det én dag ad gangen og en eller anden dag, så er vi lige pludselig hjemme, ikk?”

“But we'll take it one day at a time and one day we'll suddenly be home, right?”

05'58”

MUSIC, GOLDBERG VARIATIONS. MOTHER WHISPERING

A pregnancy is set to last 40 weeks.
The smallest ones here are born in week 24.
Their skin is porous,
their organs and senses immature,
their nervous system is fragile,
and it can be hard for them to breathe, keep warm and digest food.

06'44"

WHEEZING C'PAP

"Se her. Først lidt luft ind, og så træk tilbage og se om der kommer noget..."

A mother is trying to feed her little daughter.
Breast milk is taken from the milk kitchen, dosed in a small measuring cup and heated to body temperature in a small water bath.

"Så siger vi velbekomme."

"Ja" (laughs).

A nurse is standing beside her.

"Jeg er lidt fumle fingret her."

Carefully, the mother pours the milk through a disposable syringe down a probe.

"Ah"

She spills a little.

“Ah, f... Det går nok.”

“Ah, it’s okay”

“Det lyder, som om hun kan mærke, der kommer noget.”

“It sounds like she can feel something coming.”

BABY SOUNDS

Ingrid, the little girl is called.

COUGHING

“Aj, du hoster.”

The wheezing c-pap in her nose helps inflate her lungs.

Earlier today Ingrid was moved from the respirator to a cradle.

“Nu kan jeg ligge lidt tættere på hende, det er ret hyggeligt med vuggen her.”

“It’s cozy, now we can be closer”, the mother says. She holds Ingrid’s hand. It has the size of a thumbnail.

“Så har jeg købt en ting til hende i dag. Den første ting. En lille mærkelig bamse” (laughs).

“I bought my first thing for her today. A strange little teddy bear.”

“Fordi det har været så dramatisk, så når folk har sagt tillykke...”

“Because it’s been so dramatic, when people have congratulated me I haven’t even considered that there was anything to congratulate for.”

“Altså... Jeg skal hele tiden huske mig selv på, “nåh ja, der er jo kommet et barn til verden” ...”

“I have to remind myself all the time that we’ve brought a child into the world, and that it’s a joyful thing. And she deserves congratulations.”

“Men jeg kan mærke, jeg har hele tiden et forbehold - ja, nu må vi se...”

“But I keep having these reservations – like, let’s see if there’s any reasons to congratulate.”

“Jeg vil gerne hjem med hende, før jeg tror på det. Det kan jeg mærke.”

“I’d like to bring her home with me first – before I can believe in it”, she says.

“Er du ved at være træt af at holde i hånd?”

“Are you tired of holding hands?” The mother asks Ingrid.

09’59”

CELLO

“Jeg hedder Sebastian, og jeg er 13 år...”

Sebastian is 13 years old. On this day he pays a visit to the unit to see where he spent the first months of his life. And to play cello for parents and staff.

“Og jeg vil gerne spille et nummer. Og det er så Svanen...”

“I would like to play “The swan”” he says, and refers to the fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling” by Hans Christian Andersen.

“Vi er jo lidt nogle grimme ællinger, når vi bliver født, os for tidligt fødte. Men jeg synes, at vi bliver til nogle svaner, når vi så bliver ældre.”

“We, the premature children, are like ugly ducklings when we are born. But I think we grow up to become swans”, he says.

CELLO, THE SWAN

11’20”

Two months earlier I visited the neonatal unit for the first time. That day, two twin boys were born after 24 weeks and two days of pregnancy. One of them weighed 530 grams, the other 70 grams more. The family is still here — in the same room even.

WHEEZING C’PAP

“Oh. He just opened his eyes. Does he have a name?”

“He has a nickname. We call him Alvis.”

“Alvis?”

“Sorry, Alvin.”

“Alvin?”

“Yeah. The other one is Alvis.”

“The other one, Alvis, was his brother?”

“Yes. He is no more.”

Alvis lived for 15 days, before the doctors turned off his respirator.

MOTHER WHISPERING

Every time I'm in the room, Alvins mother stands next to his cradle, glancing at the monitor above her little son.

MOTHER'S VOICE

"Do you talk with him a lot?"

(Laughs) "Yes."

"What do you tell him?"

"It's mother tongue. I'm saying that everything is fine, you can sleep now."

MOTHER WHISPERING

"Close your eyes for a bit. Sleep now. Just close your eyes."

"Okay, okay."

Alvin falls asleep to his mother's whisper.

"Okay, okay."