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Aria

Lisa A. Neilsen

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Aria

Lisa A. Neilsen

My grandmother tells me
of my mother's birth,
how the nurse forgot
to teach her, an opera singer,
how to breathe.
She says the labor lasted three days,
because with each contraction
she held her breath and prayed
she wouldn't scream.
Finally, they pulled my mother out.
Now, my grandmother says she understands
giving birth is the same as singing opera.

When the pain starts, you breathe deep, low,
the way you sing a middle C.
Round, open breaths.
You take the pressure from inside you,
pull it up till it vibrates in your vocal cords,
let it rush from your mouth
the way Italian adds agony to the love scene.
You keep the sound moving to the final moment
when you hear the doctor saying "Now.
Now. Here is the baby."
Then you open your lungs,
push your breath across a straight plane of sound
that moves higher to the highest A.
You roll your tongue into a fast trill
until, on the decrescendo,
your voice fades into the newborn's cry.