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Troubled Water

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Troubled Water

How I'd like to say I've brought a secret
 from the other side. Some message from the ghosts who lumber
 through our sleep. But I have brought back nothing.
 Another child, wordless as a fish, smooth
 as a waxy petal. She is sleeping on a quilt in the middle
 of the lawn, white flower quivering
 through thick water near the bottom of the sea.

Those first mornings while the fat sun swam into the sky
 and I paddled back and forth across the shallow end,
 the child would sometimes bobble up inside the womb.
 Back and forth each morning, I would singsong beneath
 my breath, *Someone swimming in me swimming in . . .*
 Above the glassed-in roof a bird rowed through scuds
 of mist. All around us the watery world, the boom
 and splash of voices over the surface of the pool.

The sky turns gray. The walk outside the clinic
 just long enough to pace between each wave of pain.
 At one end, the deep lawn, fields, an orchard,
 the trees and rooftops of the city. Strips of cloud trail
 onto the mountain to the east: rain, at a distance.
 Wet wind swells across the valley, down
 from the upper slopes where water drops from pine-tips,
 sinks into the grass. Where rain slants through aspens
 into shoals of wild mint, of white columbine bobbing.

Once I forgot how to breathe.
Good, crooned the midwife, *groaning's good*.

Groaning's fine. But the pitch kept rising,
 filling the room with someone else's wail.
 A sound you'd hear at night,
 far from home, belling
 across the water. Not that the even, counted
 breathing absorbs pain. But without it,
 you lose your way. You circle somewhere
 in the middle. You never come home.

Today while this daughter sleeps, I watch the shadows
 sway uneasily beneath the trees. My body is still
 fragile. I've heard other women say they slid
 into eternity, that the hidden mother opened beneath them
 as they opened. I was too busy easing
 my way back to notice. Now, beneath the neighbors' car,
 a small white cat stretches its neck, eyes me as if I knew.
 Rolls itself into the dust, one paw in the air,
 gazes at me over its back. White tail, white head
 twist in and out, a flood of allusive gesture.
 All I can think of—tallest mountains floating
 like a frozen crust on molten rock, deepest sea a film
 of water pooling. Trees on the high ridge ride a wind
 I can't feel. They billow and ripple away
 from me. Already she closes her eyes when I come too near.

—MaryJan Munger

“Troubled Water” was the winner of the 1995 Eisteddfod Chair Competition.