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This Beginning of Miracles

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This Beginning of Miracles

Daily, my children come scraped and howling:
Blood brimming lavishly in their magnificent
Fear. And there I am at my best: cocooning them
In my calm, my words water and honey on their skin.
Panic, that luxury renounced at childbirth,
Finds no place in me. I scrub at bloodstains,
Knuckles red in the cold water: at my back stand
Generations of sturdy Danish farmwives
Brandishing their washboards with callused hands.

But at odd times the deferred fear returns,
Surprising me in the lamplight as I sing
Above small heads. I keep losing moments,
Days snatched into the jaws of weeks,
Small limbs lengthened, cheeks roughened—
Changes only visible when, my guard up,
I see my children with a hireling's neutral eye.
Just so quickly, they heal; and the new skin?
Well, it is their own, of course, just as the old.

Bloodstains can be whitened, God and the farmwives tell me.
But although I hate to mention it under their upright gazes,
Their ample arms and bosoms—Still, what of the irreversible:
The soul transformed, the water into wine?
Yet what myopic weakling (they would marvel)
Looks back longingly at water, when good wine is ahead?
And who would begrudge water its new status:
“Rich, fine, full-bodied; notes of oak and earth”?
True, I can imagine the slow change: clear drops

Filling and deepening: reflection and darkness,
Shadow and glimmer: until at last the color spreads,
Deeper than blood. As soon mourn birth, or flight;
As soon regret the sunrise. As soon mourn the raw skin,
Healed. And yet it feels like loss, seeing it—
These spreading spirits, their oblivious unfurling,
Stepping delicately from their broken shells:
Filling their lungs, turning their faces up,
Seeing the sudden dawn.

—Marilyn Nielson

This poem won first place in the BYU Studies 2012 poetry contest.