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Water

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Sheridan: Water

WATER

Brooke Sheridan

On water days we take the empties
to the spring, park the truck in the clearing.
I let my son toddle in the tall grass,
watch me ferry vessels along the trail.
Familiar ritual, stand on a makeshift platform
over the hand-dug well, crouch down
and push a worn milk jug into the pool
until the surface stops resisting
and I feel the weight on my arm,
the cold in my hand.

Generations before me a woman
with my hands rode a coffin ship.
On land she watched her husband
lose to the fever, she watched
one child fade, disappear
and she vowed to save the other,
almost learned to understand
how a person can die trying.
On the wharf, the last of her family
clutching her skirts, she sold what she could:
a kettle, a shovel, her husband's tall hat,
other things that don't survive
the telling. She emptied a pocket
and secured one berth.

When I've filled every jug and bottle
I guide my son to the well and show him
how to cup water in his hand
and bring it to his mouth, sip it,
lips pursed like a fish. He laughs and splashes
and licks his palms while I drink.

A woman who had never seen more
than a pond rode three months
on the sea. She let her daughter
lean over the rail, put her face in the wind,
told her to breathe deep this air above
because below it's shallow breaths
that keep out the stench of death
and life, such as it was.

In the one pot she saved she caught rainwater
to boil, stirred in the meal which often left the fire
still grit, hard to the tooth. She fed this
to her daughter who ate it, grimacing at each bite
and never quite full.

Home again, I haul the jugs inside
and give water to the dog, the plants,
fill the teakettle and make a shallow bath
for my son. He splashes again—
water on the walls, the floor—
and emerges flushed and rosy,
clean and thirsty.

The rest is the same, on the boat—
weeks on weeks. No pirates, no storms
or icebergs. She stepped onto solid
ground carrying her daughter. She
did not look back at the boat
and did not grow nostalgic for her days
at sea, even in the tarpaper tenement,
where water came out of a tap.