

Tam Lin Neville

A Plain Story

From my window I see them
bringing their babies through the dark.
Under the porch light, the early air
is cold and the dirt under the house
seems to be working itself, something is making holes
in the sides of holes. The smell of wet dirt exposed
when rocks fall out of place, comes up to the mothers
where they stand, chilly on the landing, shifting

from one foot to the other. The babies smell
to the mothers like something wonderful
they are always too tired to name
which is why I hover over them
hearing them thump the drum skin
wrapped around the baby's back,
crooning a name which they got from a mother
or an aunt who still takes the infant in
if they have to work late at the packing plant.

Five-month-old baby, I know how your mother
spent those months, trailing the walls
like someone else's sister, with a hung blank face
avoiding the mirrors and windows.
There is always the smell of urine
that must be moved from your skin
and kept in a covered pail.

But every night when she puts you down on the flannel sheet
sprinkled with ducklings taking their first
dazed steps, your sleep is sweet

and this morning she woke before you
and felt the first blood seeping from its black lining
to the warm sheets where she wakes alone. She is alone
but you don't know that.

In the room next to yours her face grows weary
with her blood's long effort
to make its way from her body

and she smiles. In the hollow of her bed
her bones relax into their other skin,
the one she knows, the one that wakes her
now singing to herself. The splash of the first cars
in the dark melts through the glass of her window.

Now she has gone away in her mother's old car
while you stay with the others at my neighbor's.
The T.V.'s on. The day passes slowly for all of us.
At the factory your mother's head is bent
with the others in a line, so sleepy, she can't fit
the doll's head into its neck fast enough
to tie the bow and start the next.
You and I, we long for her return.
During these hours of waiting
I write for you this plain story
that she will never tell you.