

Devotions

Every night, every morning, she holds
her finger beneath the baby's nostril
and waits for the warm slide of breath
across her finger, the moist, infinitesimal
fluttering. She hangs prostrate on a sign:
a grunt, a fart, that sweet involuntary sucking
where the lower lip vanishes. *If it rises
and falls, if it rises and falls...* She cannot
believe the child will live. She watches
her daughter's chest, the small waves
of her breathing—

It's 1973. They're so poor
it's a crisis when she breaks a jar of honey.
A lemon tree spreads at their bedroom window,
and at night, around the patio the young
husband made, driving to the chaparral
for stones then lugging them back
in the old VW van, bamboo groans with growing.
Let's not speak of what's wrong between them,
this husband who's so anxious and thin
he can suck his belly like a cavern
to his backbone, this wife who stayed in bed
all spring, scarcely daring to lift her head
every time the spotting started, since that day
in the mountains at four months when she bled
and the nurse at the emergency clinic
told her, Yup, I heard of a woman who woke
after a week of safety and the whole
bed was a puddle of blood.

Let's just say poverty
and terror can break a marriage.
Let's not speak of the sorrow
this child and her sister and brother
will inherit; instead, listen to the story
their mother tells them, how all the babies
line up in the sky by the baby ladder,
and slide down when they hear their future
parents say, This one... This one... This one...
How they are the chosen babies of all the world.