

One of the Martin Company

Dian Saderup

The cart was green timber that warped,
split, spilled her home on the silt
north bank of the Platte, the iron
cookpan, tentcloth, Mama's Welsh carved
music box tinkling in the mud
"flow gently sweet . . ." Then it stopped.
Herricks took the soiled stiff bedding;
hundred pounds weevil rotted grain,
fifty of beans, a shank of salt beef
she put in a company supply wagon,
carried the baby Etta
in a makeshift sling on her waist.
When the sand wore through her
thin-soled ankle shoes, rubbed the balls
of her feet raw, at night she tied
rags on them, tight to squeeze the pain,
whispered: "I'm going there, I'm going there,"
pulled the rags tighter. September
the air went frost. At night
the tarpaulin and three blankets
did not stop the cold; Etta cried
from cold. She kissed the baby
with cracked lips, warmed the forehead,
pressed the body tight between her breasts,
and listened to wolves. The first snow
came in skifts thin-crusting over frozen
wagon ruts and three opened graves
of summer immigrants, scattered
broken bones white with brittle snow.

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Then the snow came hard. She walked on
clubbed-numb ankles, Etta tied
to her waist, small fingers blue then
white, then hands, feet, the frost crawled
into knees, into infant thighs;
she rubbed the baby with a blanket,
with snow, wrapped her in arms
that night beneath the tarpaulin
beside the Sweetwater and listened
to the wolves cry till light when
Anna Herrick came, pried away the stiff body,
spooned the snow with a soup ladle,
buried Etta. Wagons jolted her
over frozen October Wyoming,
her mind in gentle spasms:
Going there, going there; down
the willow gullies of the Wasatch
to a desert not gone yet to roses,
where a City Creek midwife
and her husband sawed the white feet
turned black, wrapped the stumps in linen
that did not squeeze the pain;
“It is all right now,” the midwife said,
“Over.” And she sat close by for some days,
touching the woman’s hair, forehead,
spooning her tea and milk-sopped bread;
listening one morning she first spoke
whispering hoarse with voice cords raw
from that time in bitter air:
I lost my Mama’s music box.