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-crusted 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.