

## Troubled Water

How I'd like to say I've brought a secret  
from the other side. Some message from the ghosts who lumber  
through our sleep. But I have brought back nothing.  
Another child, wordless as a fish, smooth  
as a waxy petal. She is sleeping on a quilt in the middle  
of the lawn, white flower quivering  
through thick water near the bottom of the sea.

Those first mornings while the fat sun swam into the sky  
and I paddled back and forth across the shallow end,  
the child would sometimes bobble up inside the womb.  
Back and forth each morning, I would singsong beneath  
my breath, *Someone swimming in me swimming in . . .*  
Above the glassed-in roof a bird rowed through scuds  
of mist. All around us the watery world, the boom  
and splash of voices over the surface of the pool.

The sky turns gray. The walk outside the clinic  
just long enough to pace between each wave of pain.  
At one end, the deep lawn, fields, an orchard,  
the trees and rooftops of the city. Strips of cloud trail  
onto the mountain to the east: rain, at a distance.  
Wet wind swells across the valley, down  
from the upper slopes where water drops from pine-tips,  
sinks into the grass. Where rain slants through aspens  
into shoals of wild mint, of white columbine bobbing.

Once I forgot how to breathe.  
*Good, crooned the midwife, groaning's good.*

*Groaning's fine.* But the pitch kept rising,  
filling the room with someone else's wail.  
A sound you'd hear at night,  
far from home, belling  
across the water. Not that the even, counted  
breathing absorbs pain. But without it,  
you lose your way. You circle somewhere  
in the middle. You never come home.

Today while this daughter sleeps, I watch the shadows  
sway uneasily beneath the trees. My body is still  
fragile. I've heard other women say they slid  
into eternity, that the hidden mother opened beneath them  
as they opened. I was too busy easing  
my way back to notice. Now, beneath the neighbors' car,  
a small white cat stretches its neck, eyes me as if I knew.  
Rolls itself into the dust, one paw in the air,  
gazes at me over its back. White tail, white head  
twist in and out, a flood of allusive gesture.  
All I can think of—tallest mountains floating  
like a frozen crust on molten rock, deepest sea a film  
of water pooling. Trees on the high ridge ride a wind  
I can't feel. They billow and ripple away  
from me. Already she closes her eyes when I come too near.

—MaryJan Munger

"Troubled Water" was the winner of the 1995 Eisteddfod Chair Competition.