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Baby's Breath

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Geralyn Macklin  

*Heyward Street*

The first baby I hold is my mother's sixth.
He rests his head weightless on my eight-year-old breast.
His eyes are full of me.
My neck is stretched to cracking, for I must hold his gaze,
his unforgiving faith in me.
I rock and rock and sing in whispered creaks
of a beautiful morning, a beautiful day,
until he drifts to the haze-covered meadow.
My mother chases four others as I roll my neck out and sigh.
She caresses, laughs, scolds, and gasps
for air in a tiny house spilling over with children
where the roof is always caving in or blowing off.
She races past and throws a glance at me.
There is magic moving as her motion is suspended
and I watch the harried lines uncrease themselves.
She reaches out of her careening orbit
and with one finger dots the end of my nose
and winks her eye into mine.

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**Geralyn Macklin  

*Baby's Breath***

Listening in the dark for the baby's stilted breathing,
holding your own breath, stopping your own heart, straining to hear the rhythm.
When you still can't hear it, you slide across the rugless floor
to place a quiet, terrified hand on her back and ache to feel the movement.
Twenty minutes later you feel the man who lies next to you
hold his breath, stop his heart, and pad across to lean
over the cradle where he heaves a sigh full of everything that whispers.
You surrender to jerky sleep and wake to find you missed the moment.
The jagged rhythm stopped, the cradle empty,
and your hearts are splintered sharp and cut each other on their way to mending.
But Jesus, you cling and cut and sting because he is the only one who knows
how your throat swells shut without warning you first
that you won't be able to breathe for a lifetime.