

Irresistible Burdens

The children would be asleep
by the time we pulled away from the jammed parking lot,
the AC blasting. In numb, exhausted slumber,
they'd congeal in lumpy masses, separated
only by the dreams that swaddled them.
Gone for another year: the tidal wave, the fun house,
the log flume, the jet star they'd have to earn,
with inches, the right to ride. Just a dream: the shave ice,
the cotton candy risen like magic from paper cones.
Home again, their dad and I would saddle over our shoulders
the youngest two, little boy bags of storage wheat or puppy food,
and lay them, still deep in sleep,
on their bed beneath a 40-watt puddle of light.
In turn, we'd pull each dead arm through its sleeve,
each limp leg through its wrinkled opening,
each wobbly head through the top of a soiled shirt.
Remove each closed-toe shoe, each damp, odorous stocking.
No baths those late nights, just soaped washcloths
over salty, sun-smearred hands and faces,
under fringes of moppy forehead hair,
soap on their spongy, spent feet. Then jammies
over the irresistible burdens of their abandoned bodies,
their delicious relentless helplessness
that defined our then young lives.

—Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

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