

Wyoming

Rain insisted at the edges of the cloth flapping
At the hungry ribs. The trail passed through the swollen
Wagon howling at its exit like a half-born child.
Wet, brown calico glued the woman
To the wooden seat, her neck a blue vase,
Thin, delft. Her baby was a troubled poem
Sleeping on the floor. She felt like rain, she was
Becoming drops of water, the drops were streaming
Through her flesh. Oxen held the water
On contracting backs. She felt the left front
Wheel slip on wet rock she'd seen
Glistening ahead. The left rear hoof
Of the left ox slipped on the rounded edge
Of the rock and his haunches dropped as the hoof scraped
Down the glinting surface. The baby cried.

[In this space there are no words,
Only wind and rain and edges,
An infinity of edges, of planes
That overlap and slide across each other.
They are the color of the desert.]

And then the world stopped.
The rocks beneath the wheels softened then disappeared.
The wagon became a boat on smooth water
As the falling ox floated up then forward.

She felt her milk come in,
Felt the hard fullness contract,
Felt the milk mix with rainwater
In the fabric of her brown dress.
The rain running through her slowed then stopped
As her flesh came together.

She drug her wet skirt over the seat
Into the back of the wagon.
She unbuttoned the backwards dress
And the baby climbed into her lap.

II

The night before, they'd stopped the wagons early.
She'd unyoked the oxen, washed clothes,
And eaten breakfast biscuits.
She and the baby had gone to bed in the wagon box
While hunched clouds simmered in the west.
Now morning light rubbed their fretted surface,
Fabric on a washboard.
Yellow clover, newer for the rain,
Fed on ground assumed by other wheels.
She held the baby on her lap
And pulled the smooth black shoe.
She hooked the five buttons,
The baby's flesh crowning
The top of the shoe at the final closure.
They stood.
She had never felt so tall.
Not even the mountains were taller.

—Kathryn R. Ashworth