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LEARNING TO FLOAT

Janet Ruth Heller

Rixie taught me how to swim
When I was five and she was seventy.
She held my frightened body
In her marathon arms
And promised me that I would float
In water eight feet deep.
"Your body's like a boat,"
She said and turned me on my back.

I gazed up at her wrinkled face
And trusted her dark eyes.
"In a minute, I'll let go.
Just relax for now. Remember,
Your body's like a boat."

I lay still and thought of the ships
plying the blue and green waves of Lake Michigan.
I had never seen one sink.
"I'm letting you go."
I floated quietly in the pool
And Rixie's serene face smiled.

Fifteen years later,
I taught poor children to swim
Using the same metaphor
And the same honesty.
"Your body's like a boat,"
I told them and held them gently
Until they could relax and float.

Forty years later,
I face crises every day.
I lose a friend, I lose a job,
And I let despair drown my hopes.
But then Rixie's words return:
"Your body's like a boat."