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Flesh

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Three Poems · *Ellen Wittlinger*

FLESH

By March I can't wait, pull
the socks off the baby
to stare at his fat, unused feet.
Loving freedom, they kick and twist,
giving me a taste of spring
when the children shed their clothes.

The baby, wrapped up all winter,
will roll on his white tummy,
feel the sun on his arms
for the first time. It will be hard for me
to stop touching all that lovely flesh,
still mine to kiss and tickle this year
and maybe next. He will beat my face
with puffy fingers and I'll pretend
to eat up his hand, lost
as I am in the luxury of his skin.

The three-year-old who had no use
for swimming suits, preferring to slither
naked on the bottom of her scummy pool,
has turned four, wants privacy,
buttons her shirts to the top. This year
I dare not stare openly
at her long brown legs, so capable
of carrying her away. Even she
puts her face up to the sun and says,
"Let me take my shoes off forever."

Young bodies stretching in the sun
change skins more often than snakes.
Last summer a mole I'd always had
disappeared from my hand, then showed up
same place on her,
as though my own material
was still becoming her.

They came to me naked:
it's how I know them.
I long for the weather
that lets me see the flesh, carry it
in my bare arms.

BEDTIME

In separate rooms we close our books.
The familiar siren of a teenage couple
screaming threats from one end
of the block to the other
builds to a wordless wail,
then diminishes. I wait, hoping
the baby's rage won't follow,
then close the windows just a bit: I'd even
rather breathe city air than listen to it.
As you rattle cubes in your last
relaxing sip, I switch lights ahead of you,
close doors according to our intricate design
to keep the cats away from baby,
cats and baby equidistant
from our nuclear dining room bed.