

Prayer

by Keetje Kuipers

Perhaps as a child you had the chicken pox
and your mother, to soothe you in your fever
or to help you fall asleep, came into your room
and read to you from some favorite book,
Charlotte's Web or *Little House on the Prairie*,
a long story that she quietly took you through
until your eyes became magnets for your shuttering
lids and she saw your breathing go slow. And then
she read on, this time silently and to herself,
not because she didn't know the story,
it seemed to her that there had never been a time
when she didn't know this story—the young girl
and her benevolence, the young girl in her sod house—
but because she did not yet want to leave your side
though she knew there was nothing more
she could do for you. And you, not asleep but simply weak,
listened to her turn the pages, still feeling
the lamp warm against one cheek, knowing the shape
of the rocking chair's shadow as it slid across
your chest. So that now, these many years later,
when you are clenched in the damp fist of a hospital bed,
or signing the papers that say you won't love him anymore,
when you are bent at your son's gravesite or haunted
by a war that makes you wake with the gun
cocked in your hand, you would like to believe
that such generosity comes from God, too,
who now, when you have the strength to ask, might begin
the story again, just as your mother would,
from the place where you have both left off.

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