

Three-Year-Old Rules

The fountain called them like honeysuckle calls bees,
spilled sugar, ants.
Their mother, fussing, outnumbered by her
three small responsibilities
buckled to the bench,
Giving in to their pleading
and her tired feet.

They knew the rules, each according to her age,
the one-year-old, as worried about placing
one fat foot before the other
as about the chug and whoosh and splash that spattered
hot pavement in the market square.
Her sister, seven, and gone
a little past her prime
dabbed toes and looked back, prim, to mother and then,
longings at war, to the beckoning stream.

But oh, to be three,
with three-year-old rules!
She went from girl to otter in a flash,
Shed clothes and modesty and fear,
plunged naked, screaming, challenging the font
to baptize her again, and pure again herself.

She flowed and danced and drank, and once
I swear, she stopped to pee,
as any otter would—
and squealed herself into a stomping frenzy.
Wild girl, celebrating nothing more than water,
And Right Now.

And mother met my eye,
and shook her head,
and lifted hands, “Oh well—” and smiled,
as we sat together and remembered
three-year-old rules.

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