Bedtime

Ellen Wittlinger
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.
We meet first over the crib,
 fussing in whispers about fans
 versus blankets, the chance a cold spell
 might wake her if the shouting won’t.
 Finally we drop our clothes over chairs
 and enter our own bed from our own sides.
 We each tell one story we’d forgotten until then,
 or one dream from morning,
 shady without the spell of waking.
 As our daughter rustles in her crib behind the wall
 I call you “Daddy” or something silly.
 You lay a hand between my legs.
 Not for the first time I hear you softly swear:
 “It seems impossible she could have come from there.”

**Mother’s Incurable Wish**

Not yet three, you play in the back yard
 with an itinerant tribe of neighborhood kids
 all four and six years old, wise sisters
 you chase madly but can never catch
 until they turn sharply and you slam
 off-balance into their arms.
 Even as they call you “baby,” grab
 the shovel and pail from your hands,
 you beg them to stay in the sandbox with you.

“What did she say?” they yell at me
 as I pretend to be busy with my first garden.
 But they’re too impatient to listen
 to my interpretation of baby talk —
 there’s a wide sidewalk out front
 and they’ve covered barely half the length
 of the block — they have roller skates
 and bikes and an inspirational need
 to move on. Never quiet, they burst shrieking