

For My Daughter's Twenty-First Birthday · *Jeanne Murray Walker*

I stroked her cheek with my finger
and she began to suck for dear life
like a fish in the last stages of suffocation above water.
When I poured my voice down to revive her
she grinned and graduated from college
Summa Cum Laude, schools of minnows parting before her.
“You are not a fish,” I said to her.
“You are my daughter, and just born, too.
You should know your place.
At least we are going to start off right.”
Like a woman whose hand has just been severed at the wrist
but who can still feel pain winking in the lost fingers,
I felt my stomach turn when she moved in her crib of seaweeds.
“Last month at this time,” I said,
“you and my heart swam together like a pair of mackerel.”
But she waved goodbye from a moving car,
hanging onto her straw hat with one hand,
light reflecting from the car window
as from an opened geode.
I wonder if she knows how I have stood for years
staring down through the fathoms between us
where her new body swims, paying out silver light.
It is as though I am still trying
to haul her up to me for food, for oxygen,
my finger in her mouth lodged like a hook.