

Respite

ELLEN BASS

And then this morning, on the seventh day of crying,
a calm came over me like the one I remember.

I'd been laboring all night
and into the next afternoon, the white
room filled with doctor, midwife,
photographer, friends. Someone
suggested they all leave us alone.
I lay with my head in my husband's lap,
and in that quiet, contractions ceased,
pain stopped. A stillness
came over the enclosed world
like the cool emptiness coiled in a basket
of sweetgrass. Like the air
inside a bell. I couldn't stand it.
I thought I should get going again,
get back to my work.

Many times since, I've wished
I'd lain there longer:
a kind of Eden, a bestowed peace.

But today, when the respite came,
I didn't move. I lay limp as a lizard
on a lizard-colored rock, spent.
I didn't question it, this hush.
I felt my breath enter
and leave. The small wind of it
in the mesh sacs of my lungs —
like that too brief gap in labor
that I couldn't give myself to
then, hellbent, ignorant as I was.