

Sister Berdie

She and her twin brother were born
prematurely on a cold November night
on my parents' bed in our Iowa farmhouse.
Doc Maris thought they were both dead
but then Berdie gasped and moved her arms
into the lantern's light.

Her first crib was a cigar box
and her head could fit in a teacup.
Too small to suckle Mother's breast,
she was fed with eye-droppers for months.

Berdie survived as my big sister
who gathered eggs, hung the laundry,
carried lunch to me in the field
and washed my back and heart at day's end.

She would lead her family
into our pew every Sunday morning.
She always sat with Mom, right behind the cheerleaders,
at all my basketball games.
Grandpa really did love her best.

But in school I heard the vocabulary of darkness:
"God, your sister is ugly."
"She talks like a pig."
"Is she as dumb as she looks?"
I wanted to pop them bad.

She wept when I left for college
and I swallowed hard
when we hugged goodbye.
"Are you coming back?" she asked.

Later she told Mom
she could read me like a book.
Much later, when the undertaker
and preacher were not looking,
I slipped this poem under her cold arm.

By Arlin Buyert