

Boat People

Anna Scotti

People say I jumped overboard with my baby in my arms; not true. I sent her first, wrapped up tight in a rag torn from the hem of my skirt, because at that moment I wasn't yet certain if I would follow.

Serene had only three days of life, but those three days were spent beneath the golden sun, her head and my head in the shadow of my paisley scarf, her breath and my breath mingling. Her first tears hadn't come yet and my last were finished, so we were a pair. I held her in my arms and rocked her, as I was rocked by the blue sea. She had the cries of the gulls, flapping madly from the arms that lunged to catch them. She had the spray of the sea, the salted breeze, and her mother's arms about her. So that's more than some people get.

In the morning the men were saying we must throw everything

overboard – books, papers, dolls, shoes – whatever was nonessential, because the boat was taking on water and we were still many miles out to sea. The young man, the angry one, said that my baby had not cried in the whole of three days and so it was time to put her over, but the old woman who looked after me put her rough hands over my ears and shushed him. Then she tucked the rag a bit tighter around the baby, clucking her tongue at me.

When the sun was high over us, scorching my scalp where it shone through my braids, I set Serene in the water, letting it lap gently over her face, wetting the rag, loosening it. Her tiny arms fell back and moved like wings, and I saw that it was only water, where we all come from. It was like setting her free to fly into a placid sky.

When she'd gone, I stood up to stretch my arms, aching from holding her and from their emptiness. I thought about what the men had said, that we must throw everything nonessential into the water. I put my head back to feel the sun on my face again. I whispered to God that I forgive him. And then I stepped into the sheltering sea.
