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The Past

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The Past
by Elizabeth Oakes

(after a fourteenth-century painting)

Someone painted this for us, this woman leaving her infant at the city gate.
Someone today has written a book and included this painting. So we know.

The child seems to be slipping out of her again; that's the way the artist painted it, like a second birth. The rich are bigger, even though in the picture they are further away. They wait, as the rich can do. They are inside the gates. All the artist had to do was paint it. All one has to do is see it.

It happened. This book documents it. People gave up children they couldn't care for, and others took them, sometimes to a better life, sometimes not. But the artist isn't painting that.

The child is wrapped in a blanket the color of clay, of blood, as the mother lets go. She is looking at us. With one mark of her mouth the artist shows the sorrow of the ages. "Take my child," she seems to be saying, "Take my child." And somehow we do.