



Infanticide, 1880

Your brother and sister died natural enough
 On the ship over
 They were so small
 And I had many children
 To mind on that grey, hungry voyage
 Out from Scotland to this better country.
 Sea passage and overland journey
 Cost plenty and my husband
 When I told him I was
 Again in the family way
 Said 'Eleven brats is enough'
 And he was right
 'Though he needn't have said it
 So cruel.
 It was always my way
 Not to be cruel.
 So hush wee girl-child
 Who'd have thought you'd the strength
 To thrash so
 Under the smothering pillow.
 We were all so hungry
 As you grew inside, I was certain
 You'd starve in the womb and be stillborn.
 But it's me that's near starved instead and I know
 My milk will dry up like the last time
 Before you learn to smile at your mother.
 The midwife's gone.
 Your father's sleeping.
 He won't be surprised
 When I say you just never
 Lived through the night.
 'Nature takes the weak ones,'
 He'll say.

Maybe we'll prosper
 In this new land
 Then we will replace
 The wooden marker
 With a fine granite tombstone
 Such as the well-off folks would have,
 Saying maybe, 'Our little angel'
 And a bonnie carved cherub
 That's how I'll see you
 Puttin' in a word for me
 With the Father
 Or Jesus, who'll maybe take pity.
 What more can a mother do, after all,
 Than risk her soul that her baby
 Might grow plump in heaven?

Anne Miles