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Arms Control

by Mary Kennan Herbert

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My mother concocted a tale of her expandable arm that she could send into
the farthest corner of the world
to retrieve and rescue lost socks and shoes
and little kids in trouble.
At nap time we would ask her again and again
“Tell us the story of your magic arm,”
and so she would, sometimes,
to gain a little quiet time
while we lay sprawled on the big bed, on the quilt
our grandmother had pieced
slowly and carefully with her own plump hands, long ago on her lost farm.

My mother’s round arms were always busy
with babies, and bottles,
laundry and lunch, sewing and stitchery, ironing and mowing, weed pulling,
and pulling truth through a needle’s eye.
Her magic arm, she said, was stored on a shelf in the bedroom closet,
deployed only on those hot afternoons when she needed peace
and justice
and ten minutes of silence.

Next to our bed the old GE fan rotated, mumbling as it kept to its task.
The fan blades spun stories,
while Mom's arm slept,
fingers dangling, waiting for a signal to act.
I knew it was there,
it would keep.