

Her Head

by Joan Murray

Near Ekuvukeni,
in Natal, South Africa,
a woman carries water on her head.
After a year of drought,
when one child in three is at risk of death,
she returns from a distant well,
carrying water on her head.

The pumpkins are gone,
the tomatoes withered,
yet the woman carries water on her head.
The cattle kraals are empty,
the goats gaunt—
no milk now for children,
but she is carrying water on her head.

The engineers have reversed the river:
those with power can keep their power,
but one woman is carrying water on her head.
In the homelands, where the dusty crowds
watch the empty roads for water trucks,
one woman trusts herself with treasure,
and carries water on her head.

The sun does not dissuade her,
not the dried earth that blows against her,
as she carries the water on her head.
In a huge and dirty pail,
with an idle handle,
resting on a narrow can,
this woman is carrying water on her head.

This woman, who girds her neck
with safety pins, this one
who carries water on her head,
trusts her own head to bring to her people
what they need now
between life and death:
She is carrying them water on her head.