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Opening extract from  
**The Weight of Water**

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## Leaving Gdańsk Główny

The wheels on the suitcase break  
Before we've even left Gdańsk Główny.

Mama knocks them on some steps and  
Bang, crack, rattle –  
No more use.  
There are  
plastic bits  
Everywhere.

It's hard for Mama carrying a suitcase  
And a bulging laundry bag.

It's hard for Mama  
With everyone watching.

She's shy about the laundry bag,  
An old nylon one  
Borrowed from Babcia.

Tata took all the good luggage  
When he left us,  
When he walked out

On Mama and me.

‘There are clean clothes in it,’  
Mama reminds me,  
Like this were something  
To be proud of.

And she won’t let me carry a thing  
Except  
my own  
small bag.

‘You guard our passports, Kasienska.  
Good girl, Kasienska.  
And the money.  
We’ll need those pounds.  
Mind the money and the passports.  
Good girl, Kasienska.’

Mama prattles as I scuttle along  
behind her  
Dodging business suits and  
backpacks.

There is no one to recognise Mama

In the crowded station.

But all the same, she is shy  
About that laundry bag.

'Now keep close, Kasienka.  
Keep close,'  
Mama mutters as we leave Gdańsk Główny  
And step aboard a bus for the airport

While I cling to the belt of her coat,  
Too old for holding hands,  
Even if she had one free.

## Stansted

We weren't on a ship.  
Immigrants don't arrive on  
Overcrowded boats any more,  
Swarming wet docks like rats.  
It isn't 1920, and it isn't Ellis Island –  
Nothing as romantic as a view of  
Lady Liberty  
To welcome us.

We flew into Stansted.  
Not quite London  
But near enough.

At immigration we queue  
Nervously and practise English in our heads:  
*Yes-thank-you-officer.*  
I know I am not at home  
When talking makes my tummy turn  
And I rehearse what I say  
Like lines from a play  
Before opening my mouth.

At baggage reclaim  
The laundry bag

Coasts around the carousel  
And people look.

Someone points,  
So Mama says, 'Leave it, Kasienka.  
There's nothing in that bag but long  
underwear.  
We won't need them here.  
We'll need galoshes.'

Mama is right:  
The air in England is swampy,  
The sky a grey blanket.  
And rain threatens  
To drench us.

## Dwellings

Mama rented a room  
In Coventry.

This is where we'll live  
Until we find Tata:  
One room on the fourth floor  
Of a crumbling building  
That reminds me of history class,  
Reminds me of black and white photographs  
Of bombed  
out  
villages.

There is a white kitchen in the room,  
In the corner,  
And one big bed,  
Lumpy in the middle  
Like a cold pierogi  
For Mama and me to share.  
'It's just one room,' I say,  
When what I mean is  
*We can't live here.*  
'It's called a *studio*,'  
Mama tells me,

As though a word  
Can change the truth.

Mama stands by the dirty window  
With her back to me  
Looking out at the droning traffic,  
The Coventry Ring Road.

Then she marches to the kitchen and  
Plugs in the small electric kettle.  
She boils the water  
Twice,  
And makes two mugs of tea.  
One for her,  
                    One for me.  
'Like home,' she says,  
Supping the tea,  
Staring into its blackness.

Mama found the perfect home for  
A cast-off laundry bag.  
Yes.  
But not a home for us.

## First Day

Mrs Warren asks, 'Do you speak English, dear?'  
Crouching down,  
    Resting her hands on her knees  
As though summoning a spaniel.

Her voice is loud  
And clear,  
Her tongue pink  
    and rolling.

I nod and Mrs Warren smiles,  
Then sighs,  
Relieved.

'So what's your name, dear?' Mrs Warren asks,  
And I'm glad, because I was afraid she had mistaken  
Me for someone called Dear,  
And that I would have to  
Respond to that name  
For ever.

'My name is Kasienka,' I say,  
    embarrassed to use my  
    crooked English.

Mrs Warren stands up straight  
and stretches her back.  
She sighs,  
Again,  
And ridges appear on her brow.  
She looks at Mama  
then back at me.

‘Well . . . Cassie, welcome!’

I want to point out her mistake,  
Give her a chance to say my  
Name properly.

But Mama touches my shoulder.  
A clear caution.  
‘We’ll start you in Year Seven  
And see how that goes.’