The Milkmaid *by Sally Russell

In response to 'The Milkmaid' by Johannes Vermeer.*

At dawn I am in the cattle shed, milking Gertrude,

skirts bundled up, free of cow pats and straw.

I sweat and pull at her teats. Her stench engulfs me.

A half-bucket is all she releases—

it will do for the master's bread pudding.

I scuttle across the yard to the cool kitchen,

an eye open for the master.

I drop the latch on the inside of the door.

The master has provided a foot warmer—

he likes to place it under my dress.

Sunbeams splash the walls with light;

apple tree branches play shadow puppets.

Baskets of stale bread await my attention.

I roll up my sleeves, adjust my white cap, push

cerulean skirts to the side. I lean into the table.

I grip the handle of the jug, steady its weight. Warm,

sweet milk trickles into an earthenware container. As I stir

the pudding, my thoughts wander to my master's

duck-down quilt, the tumble between white sheets,

scent of my mistress on the pillow.