

Claudia M. Stanek

Unquenched

A woman drinks
from the well of adversity,
her life a style of movement
from one hardship
husband to another.

No one covets her
husbands. No one meets her
at the solitary well.
No one stops her
from lowering her vessel

to the well's very bottom—
where her thirst began—
or offers a cure
for her lonely afflictions.
No one wishes to embrace

the contagion of catastrophe
she draws into the drought
of her vessel which, once
again full, she withdraws.
The heat of movement

wears her weariness
to the ground. With no man
in sight and none to speak
of or for her, she bears
the hard weight of water

on her shoulders alone.
She shudders in the sun
and in walking reflects
upon each hardship's anchor,
thoughts so wet with weight

she buckles under.

Siblings

I

Black lung needed no help
from three packs a day.
As if one hundred cows
to milk required too little.
As if forged steel were
not needed after the war.
Younger brother's patterned
scars denied him sixty.

II

Three-time widow
who knew death well
though it ignored her
pleas. Older sister
who cooked for the state
nursing home, like the one
that housed her, diapered,
in her last unwanted years.

III

The little one, so conscious
of appearance, always
calculating equally the weight
of those she loved and those
she could not like. Her mind
sparkled as her body left
her—who knew how little
one could weigh at death?

IV

Elder brother, city-dweller,
not meant for plowing
ground. Educated businessman
in love with roses of all hues
that bound him to the earth,
their beauty not enough
to keep his memories
from escaping his mind.

After

It is after a routine of sigh;
the fatigued men
of grinding boots and gunshot
have passed through.
No one lies
wounded in view. You
come out into the courtyard
for relief, step
your calloused feet
into the tracks they have left,
as if treading on fossils,
though you know
the hardening isn't in the dirt.

She scurries out
behind you, soundless
as you've taught her to be,
her feet erasing
the pattern of stiffened soles
which she will never wear.
You sit in the exhalation
of the moment as others
follow, grasping hands until
the openness fills.
They fall out and dance.

You watch them
in this moment but
she, eyes round
with wariness, cannot feel
the rhythm with her
dusty feet. She sags
between your skirted legs,
where you hold her in
the inaudible music of now.

Prairie Girl

After the composition by Susan Stoderl

Centered on a grown-up continent,
a girl dreams while water
drips from a tin can.
Her shuttered eyes envision
waterfalls beyond barbed wire
borders, in the vertical world-scape
her father loved.
At noonday on the prairie,
illness sets dream's fences.
Her straw-stuffed Grandma
stalks the backs of her eyelids, crops
journeys to boydom
before wandering thoughts can harvest
birdhouses and replaces them
with imagined trips to cities
where girls don't hammer
but tap on keys
and dress for the opera.

Forward Six and Back Eight

After the barn dance composition by Libby Larsen

As if swinging the gate
to a corral of wild horses,
 you whirl the girl on your
arm, steer her and stroll past all the
 cowboys and their prizes.
She's the one broken to your legs'
 movements. Though you rein her
neck, she thinks she is your equal,
 not sensing the saddle
on her back as you split the ring
 of pairs around you, man
and woman, rider and horse. You
 chassez off together
but the dance is never a chase—
 your pursuit ended when
the breaking began. Next, other
 cowboys will take her for
a spin. You'll parade another
 yourself, but even when
separated, yours will return
 to you and as one you'll
mimic the serpent's glide, tracing
 its figures in the barn.

Claudia M. Stanek's work has been turned into a libretto, has been part of an art exhibition, and has been translated into Polish after a writer's residency in Poland. Her chapbook, *Language You Refuse to Learn*, was co-winner of Bright Hill Press's 2013 prize. Other poems have been published in print and/or online in *Modern Poetry Quarterly*, *Bitterzoet*, *Ithaca Lit*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and *Ruminate*, among others. She lives in western NY with her rescued pets.