

Carriages Wait In Long Rows

by John Riley

In the town by the weak river, where men work the forges inside smoky buildings, plunge newborn, blood-red forms into barrels of black water, she wakes from a stranger's sleep. Knows that for another day her thoughts will be of coming apart. That the mind is a scythe the few can wield without slaughter.

There are needs to serve. She waits by the church's double doors, hands clasped behind her back, her mouth sealing a story. Inside the story she thinks of the sun easing down a sky turning to gold, of licking a pear passed from a lift going down to one going up, of the man who was not hers, of his face inches above, of the tongue behind his clandestine teeth.

A strand of hair comes undone. She tucks it back beneath her bonnet, joins the mourners wearing black veils, dry lace handkerchiefs tucked into the sleeve of their Sunday blouses. Later they will file into a too-small house, each one bearing the awe that death expects, to stand too long by a hardwood casket. She hates the men who have little to mourn.

In her house there is no casket. A young workman, more handsome than the world will ever notice, his neck squeezed inside a new store-bought collar, will kneel to punch and feed the fireplace. The house will be warm for her return. She will remain cold.

She who is not a widow had once listened to the river repeat its story. Watched thin autumn ice lace along the brown banks, slow summer eddies lick the river stones. She wishes her feet were balanced there, on a stone that someday will be powder. That the sin

she knows she will not miss forever sealed her to the stone. That the river would begin to rise.

