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Daguerreotype Portrait of Woman and Bird

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Alsop: Daguerreotype Portrait of Woman and Bird

WINNER

DAGUERREOTYPE PORTRAIT OF WOMAN & BIRD

Maureen Alsop

A woman, a soldier, a bird—all born
within cages, learned quickly to pipe songs
which rose wildly upward
into the sky's orange skirt, & changed
into liquid. They were narrowed, eventually,
by the weave between clouds.

* * *

In the mind's well-lit alleyway, a wavering
billboard holds
the image of an 8-year-old girl
& a bicycle that she is yet
unable to ride. The wind pulls her leeward. She

is crossing now over crosswalk dust, &
a shadowbroken shoreline.

When larks fall from the sky, an indiscriminate sound,
a bellow, ruptures in the reeds—scrape
of coccyx & lull. Wakeful wing-beats
alternate with short periods of sailing.

* * *

The heart's iris dilates, machinery lips
swell. The monkey inside the child
peddles madly to maintain motion's
steadiness.

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How does she measure her motive
to meet unconscious wing? She studies
herself, steadies the mirror. She props
her nipple into the cup of her palm;
beneath her left breast, a nest
of cartilage & wing exposed:

tremor & breath. Half dressed
by moonlight, gazing, she sees
her face backward.

In the unfurnished room, windows
warped with winter frost, she glances
the tremble & slip of leaves from the pin oak.

* * *

The woman inside the girl
will never know whether she's seen
herself. She will grow from the radiance
of the girl's warmth; the girl will depart
without contemplation or shade. The woman
will lie down with a soldier

who carries a letter in his left hip pocket—a letter
from his brother who fell down the stairwell
of the Osawatimie Sanatorium, during the war.

She has forgotten
his face
he is nothing but a wave
capping at sea, or a stain in the linoleum, something
occasionally referred to. Each winter

he unfolded the cramped paper
& read to her. His ink thinned annually

bits of gravel drop from her pen. Horses are pulled
out of her body blown open
& spinning from the lungs . . .

Knotted faces in the box elders
twist into the horizon. Filament
roots silence her. A serpents' whistle
advances through the glowing dust. The slack
softness in the woman's jaw was the light
turning its anchorage. Into what
does she not sink? Slagheap & shoal

at the edge of town—a field where cicadas crackle
from the treetops & the stars rattle.