

HEATHER DOBBINS

In the Low Houses

He asks, *Is it even?* In his hands, the frame, sure
as he held me that morning. That bed was a box

where we could hear each other breathe, mouths reddening
despite winter. We carry a grave to the low houses, sealed

and poured into. A feeling stays put there, lies alone to itself.
Our bodies sometimes align. Said and skin, open and close.

Mostly we age, botch and buckle, make difficulty
where there doesn't have to be any.

He stands on a chair, ready, and I follow his
heels on the edge like I did into sheets.

I imagine he falls: I'd brace the back of his head
against the hardwood floor and hurt myself. I could heal,

sewn in silver and bone, but would my body be able to cross us?
I used to believe in shelter, the dead

and what's too late sharing the same tone.
He uses a blue ribbon to align the nails.

I pace the floor with worn voices for what is still undone.
I say, *Move your right hand south.*

This room is a box we can leave, but I can't see through his body:
Where we don't touch. Where we do. Salt and flank.

The threshold to *together* is between our legs, a split
for heat, where we know what we cannot in the low houses.

Can I go to him again? It is both *I miss you*
and *I miss you altogether*. The pull to keep, to keep.

I look at the cemetery through the window.
He asks, *Are you minding the headstones?*

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I read the white wall behind him: *No* then *Yes*.
After the climb, how do we stay here in pause

above the low houses, the ones we walk over and do not acknowledge,
stone above marl? Nowhere else to go but down, the fallen in clay.

He asks, *Will you hand me the hammer?*
I keep the nails in my mouth, hold my breath as he hits,

hoping for no plaster pocket, a crack in the ice.
In his hands, the frame, a matted sky, four lines

in shadow and glass, each spine a ladder from the quiet.
The wire indents the beds of his fingers, where

I am used to resting, a strain for two bodies
in one house. Control and pitch. Old voices

still tangle in my hair: in my left ear, I hear timing,
and in my right, *No one can fix this but me*.

This box is a room for the living.
I make sure to touch their hair in the coffins, what was always dead.

Sometimes how hard we try doesn't matter.
The pine has to fall. It will be made into a house for men to carry.

The needles are weak, know only how to burn.
Once I asked why they placed a penny on a grave,

not touching the other pennies. They said a woman is not allowed
to be a pallbearer. In his hands, the frame, an inside

dimension for touch and tame, comprehending as line does form.
A force. Meeting my eye over his shorn shoulder, he asks,

What about now? Do not look away like you are used to.
For once led, an unfurling iris, I do not flinch.

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Now I say, *Come closer, I have lost count of the lines in your lips.*
My chest to his: an amplifier and a low chord.

I want what everyone does, so taken
with touch and fingers that taste. Contain, try and try.

Fail. Wait. A lopsided gait. He says, *Nevermind, love.*
No one will notice but us. Crooked, I get it a little wrong.