ANNIE WOODFORD

Wild Strawberries

—for your grandmama, after Alice Walker

The first heat is a calling.
Wash the blue laundry.
Thread a melody

through a penny whistle—
a song of swallows,
of wash tubs, of a girl

learning how to sweep,
snipped buttons kept
in a Hav-a-Tampa box,

her favorite story
the one about the North Wind
blowing the bowl of grain away.

Harvest, hard times,
crowder peas & cracked crocks
held together with copper wire—

interrupt this poem
with grief. Here’s a garden
dрапing foothills’ sway,

pole beans snapped & translated
in pressure cooker steam.
Here is a repetition of scissors,

cutting thick fabric to cover
wingback chairs,
the pattern knotting the hands,

tacks held in teeth,
varnish breathed in,
white bread sandwiches bleeding

Better Boys & German Pinks.
Chatterbox on the break room radio.
Shift work, short shrift—murmurations
in the midst of clamor.
The soul’s a throng of swallows,
shape shifting against factory ceilings.

Meat was stretched with milk gravy,
beans seasoned with bone.
A white bird—

transient as the soap bubbles
beat to peaks, rinsed
from a child’s brow,

churned in a mop bucket
before laying to worn linoleum—
calls from out a bare bush,

cleaving cold with a song,
its breast a cloud weighted with snow
& our grandmothers would say

birds bring messages.
Don’t let one in the house
or take a baby from the nest—

the warble in your palm
certain to be abandoned
by its mother once you touch it.

A bedspread made
for a marriage bed,
hand-tatted by big-knuckled hands,

sweeps over all of this.
Wings of white eyelets
seine the landscape,

gather up birds & starlight,
gather up mountain ranges
still raw from the last ice age,
gather up a name hidden
in the stem of a wild strawberry
twining the edge

as well as
the eiderdown grass
your grandmother foraged as a child.

She is holding out a handful now,
a spill of small berries,
missapen & tasting of rain.