

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  
draping 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,

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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,  
misshapen & tasting of rain.