

## Winchester Poems



### **Ammunition, Or Sarah Winchester, 23 Years Dead, and My Grandmother, Newly Widowed, Speak**

The men were paid extra: danger money.  
No metal buttons on their clothes, no cigarettes,

*In his letters from the South Pacific, he always  
called me Honey, made me promise not to forget*

no matches. No hairpins for the women—  
So many precautions: fire brigades waiting,

*to smile for him in the beveled mirror  
he'd bought that Christmas—home on leave—*

deep wells, until there were hydrants.  
Around the factories, even the horses wore

*bells everywhere like the sound of ice cracking  
when he drove the lake. I'd hold my door open—*

brass instead of steel underfoot. Less chance  
of sparks. The men worked overtime—

*frightened. The months he was gone were  
like that. The children in the back of the car,*

gearing up for each new war, or maybe  
war. Their shirts couldn't have pockets.

*holding the shells he'd sent them: speckled around  
a tiny curve of breath. Until the telegram,*

No stray bits of metal. And still—each year—  
explosions, fires spreading until

*I kept my promise: smiled as if he could see  
my reflection in the bevel of the South Pacific.*

they couldn't count the bodies.

*Before his ship was only splinters, smoke*

As a child, I thought guncotton sounded

*soft—like the cloth for a veil.*

## **Sarah Winchester Remembers: Artizan Street, New Haven, 1850s**

There was always something being built  
in my father's shop and sawdust tracked  
onto our floors: a shimmer like the boards  
were becoming mist, like on the Quinnipiac  
where my parents met. You could walk into  
rivers then and come out with new beliefs.

In the clock shops, time divided, shifting  
us forward notch by tiny notch. People  
crowded the Public Bathhouse—vapors  
and lye and seawater. Small salvations.  
From my French tutor: *pere* and *bois*.  
What paid for my lessons: fine houses  
ornamented by my father's careful hands.

Carriage works, mills, the boarding houses  
spilling into the streets. We lived comfortably

then. My sister, the only one buried. I carried her name, like the rail tracks carrying Hartford outside its skins: the elm-lined, sooty Green, the custom house. Factories for shirts and guns.

In their rooms, new girls from Ireland cut stacks of pieces—collar and breast, left right, back—then stitch by stitch, created a more perfect wholeness. The country was coming apart. Rumors. Repeating guns. But also beauty. New planed maple.

Everyone wanted spindles and tracery, moldings copied from Queen Victoria and The Crystal Palace. History turned against its lathe, shaving us loose. On my father's floor: pedals for organs waiting for the music to be built around them. No one told me to want a more solid world.

## **Stereoscope: Annie Oakley and Sarah Winchester**

It began with necessity:  
hunting rabbits behind  
that mortgaged house, then word spread out:  
snow on the fields, glinting off  
sky, and everything  
narrowed to hard wood and steel,  
and me the small miracle  
at the trigger men bet against:

How can I explain  
windows designed from guns:  
levers and latches aimed at  
the gazing ball in the garden,  
not for safety but because that's how I  
knew to build. Not a spider,  
silking out her body's web,  
but a woman standing

cards riddled like windows  
on a train that will take you  
over oceans if you want it to;  
the prince of Senegal sending  
offers of tigers, and the German  
kaiser sitting rigid as a portrait: ash  
of his cigarette streaking the bullet  
as it crumbled that one speck

where the wind's eye watches  
without sleeping—*safe as houses*  
they say, but what is safe about  
this world with holes shot through,  
with empty safes and chairs—this  
dust and light on the piano, the smoke  
and no one else to warm at the hearth  
now: only my own body

of fire. Such trust in common  
stranger's (woman's) hands;  
the legends made them safe  
the way they do: *the little sure*  
*shot*, dressed to kill, meaning  
dressed to shoot at nothing  
alive now. I became  
something to be braved, boasted

glass—between me and the day:  
not ghosts, but not the living either.  
The legends grew like hedges  
tangled and vined around me; words,  
the spirits I started to believe in  
because what else is a house but  
something that holds time,  
something to forgive us,

as any woman should—  
holding her gun naturally as a baby  
slung from her body. Love  
has nothing to do with that  
or it does, but also  
wanting to trust something—  
also our bodies bare as skinned  
rabbits, and the floor cold

sleepless walks through rooms  
held in some other world  
we've built board by board; the window  
open or closed and us still standing  
waiting  
wanting someone to see us  
wanting—something soft as  
silk, so maybe we are spiders

where the bed isn't, and all  
the pretty ways later we sell  
to the world what began

with necessity

after all—this web around us,  
plums in the orchards, morning  
filling up the glass: something beautiful  
in every corner. How can I explain it?

## **Sarah Winchester Visits The California Midwinter Exposition, Golden Gate Park, 1894**

Surely you did not see the woman dancing  
nude at the new aquarium—a thin black veil over  
her face, not so unlike your own. The cracking

of chairs as the police came to carry her off—  
like a spider in a cup—to somewhere proper.  
Were there even fish yet? Were there seals caught

beneath Cliff House—so thick, the papers wrote,  
*you could shoot them from the veranda if it weren't illegal.*  
They wrote everything then: back at your farm

you named a hill *Strawberry* for here—invited  
the neighborhood girls to its slope to eat  
real French ice cream. That woman, surely,

nude by those glass walls, danced tarantella,  
trying to survive the bite of her own skin:  
just that veil between the gawkers and

grief. At the grand Egyptian revival pavilions,  
a ferris wheel of oranges turned by electric  
motor. You could stand underneath—watch

a hundred suns revolve at once: an eccentric  
belief that the world stood still here, one room  
could hold everywhere. The Court of Honor.

The Prune Knight with his armor: a bloom  
of produce bristling from his chest. Sphinxes  
with soft plaster noses. Germans—painted

and dressed like Japanese (who refused to be  
servants)—running with rickshaws by *Dante's  
Inferno, House of Horrors*, where you could  
pay—for a short forever—for your past.