

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.