

J.V. BRUMMELS

*Grass Widow*

The sun finds a notch in the ozone  
and burns through a lens of humidity.  
Every pickup fishtails at every gravel corner.

I drive south across two counties,  
the wet-paint splatter of drizzle  
on the four-lane enough to idle  
the chemical rigs in miles of fields,  
earth no longer turned, simply  
sterilized for a new crop no one wants.

To a courthouse, monumental  
above the fastfood arches  
and cars lined up for coffee  
and some egg and pigmeat sandwiches,  
maybe some flash-fried potatoes.

Past deputies and metal detectors,  
the new terrific security,  
to stand beside this young mother  
at her arraignment. Her men are gone,  
the first to a new woman north of the river,  
the next to the place junkies go in lieu of jail.

What's behind it all? Some handy  
farm or household chemicals  
distilled and needled to the blood.  
I witness her sign away her children.

The hanging judge harangues.  
The silent reporter keeps it all in shorthand.  
The marshal clasps his hands behind his back.  
This present carries the weight of the past  
like a heavy pistol high on the hip.

Back years: in the day  
of zero tolerance and just say no,  
thank you, I hold this woman  
a girl no bigger than a whisper  
on my lap while hand joins hand  
joins hand as the joint is passed  
around the kitchen table.

Back years again: WPA workers  
finish pouring the counted tons  
of concrete of this courthouse,  
paint the halls and offices,  
scatter ashtrays and spittoons  
around the courtroom  
where they'll be handy  
for snuffdippers like me.

And again: just a meeting of two rivers,  
some plank shacks on a mud street,  
prostitutes waving from spindly balconies,  
grass waving from the treeless hills above.

And somewhere anchored on that green sea  
a young mother waits at a table in a soddy,  
dust sifting on the fine-haired heads  
of her toddling children, for a husband  
gone after gold or the herds, his distant death  
by drowning or bad horse or lightning bolt  
bad news the wind is whispering.