

MELANIE DRANE

Winterreise

A Belgian innkeeper watches his wife
pull a feather duvet over her body.
He turns out the light, walks his fingertips
back into the darkest compartment
of his oak desk, finds the picture he's hidden
for fifty years: he's a prisoner of war,
working for the Germans
in Brandenburg's rye and turnip fields,
his arm wrapped around the shoulders of a girl
with long blond hair. Their faces are pressed
together as if they're trying to stay warm.
Minutes later, she follows him into the poultry shed.

Since then, whenever he's been with a woman,
he still senses the presence of birds—
chickens shifting their weight over eggs,
a duck slipping its head beneath a wing,
geese turning hoarse in the yard.
He can smell wood shavings and straw,
the small dark nests of her armpits.

Now whenever he thinks of love
he'll always be on enemy land, snow
stiff over barley stubble, moist breath on the neck
of his shirt she opens one button at a time.
Button after button onto the cold pasture
of his skin and each heavy, yard-bound bird
suddenly lifting into the winter sky.