

PAULA C. LOWE

THE PERPETUAL MELANCHOLY OF PAULINE LARSON

*Slayton, Minnesota, 1945*

On the flat palm of prairie, you were born to wail  
in a muffling dark of broken sod and barn stones  
cobbled from the land like potatoes  
peeled with a knife into a white  
tin basin.

You were a blue girl inside a ring of desperate trees  
circled with their backs to the northwest wind,  
a daughter darning socks by a brother  
whittling sticks while a blizzard  
drift-locked your doors.

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Pauline, how did you carry on in that county  
of perpetual melancholy, wear wool washed  
in muddy water pailed from Beaver Creek,  
wear stains of silt that wouldn't beat out  
even as you stretched your skirts  
over chokecherry?

Busted banks and world wars took and broke men  
and sent them back to fields and streets of Hadley  
with no wheat to feed them.

How did you lift despair in your hands and learn  
to drink its tea? Marry a road maker  
back from the trenches, bring up  
babies in a caboose at the back  
of his mule caravan?

How did you raise your only boy to let ships make him  
a man, dress him in sailor whites  
washed in bleach to blur  
his fear sweat?

And more war? And then war in your chest,  
a knife in your breast.

How did you roast your last Easter meal, carry high  
a platter of ham in your swollen arms  
to your son come home in uniform?  
How did you live that long?