

Girl on a Scaffold · *Carol Frost*

Her neck in a noose, the girl stands  
on a scaffold with two officers and her lover.  
She looks at the pale orchard or twilight  
or the limb where a bobwhite's whistle  
seems to originate. Whether the others hear  
this fluting ahead of the wind can't be said  
by the look on the girl's face.  
The officer who is tightening the thick cord  
watches the girl's brown eyes blink  
several times and admires her courage  
as well as her eyes which are brown as burnt loaves  
of bread. Her neck is long and white,  
and for a moment he wishes he could release her,  
lift her into his arms and forget  
how this day will end, but as he dreams  
of their embrace on cool sheets, he sees himself  
encircling her neck with his own hands  
and realizes he has twisted the knot  
at her tender nape too tightly.  
As for the lover, he is no coward but  
his throat is strangled and he is afraid  
he will make a noise when she dies,  
so he begins to hum a patriotic song,  
the song stammering him; his hands are tied.  
The other officer slaps him, and that is when  
the bobwhite flies up where there was a knob  
at the end of an apple bough. The bird  
seems to blossom in the dying light,  
and the girl's craned head lolls to one side.  
With eyes shut she sees the hand grenade  
leave the partisan's hand, then the colonel  
leaning against the baked earth wall  
putting on his socks. He was smiling  
as if he knew how simple life is. Within her now  
a feeling rises like the soft clashing of wings  
to be free of red clay and the world twisted  
by intent. Barefaced, in a soiled dress,

she stands on the trap door, heels together,  
and listens for the last note of the bobwhite,  
as if it was her dignity she strained for.  
Shadows drain from the orchard  
and gather at the base of the scaffold  
as if a crowd of vague angels  
had come to watch her fall.