

Abishag · Shirley Kaufman

*. . . and let her lie in thy
bosom that the lord my king
may get heat.*

—1 Kings 1:2

That's what they ordered
for the old man
to dangle around his neck,
send currents of fever
through his phlegmatic nerves, something
like rabbit fur, silky,
or maybe a goat-hair blanket
to tickle his chin.

He can do nothing else
but wear her, pluck at her body
like a lost bird
pecking in winter.
He spreads her out
like a road map, trying
to find his way from one point
to another, unable.

She thinks if she pinches
his hand it will turn to powder.
She feels his thin claws, his wings
spread over her like arms, not bones
but feathers ready to fall.
She suffers the jerk
of his feeble legs. Take it easy,
she tells him, cruelly

submissive in her bright flesh.
He's cold from the fear
of death, the sorrow
of failure, night after night
he shivers with her breasts
against him like an accusation,
her mouth slightly open,
her hair spilling everywhere.