

Ironing: a Devotional
for Anna

Each Saturday, beside the Vulcan furnace
in the basement, my grandmother's
bunioned feet shift side to side along
the board's extended tongue.

Her right hand dips into a dented saucepan.
A snap of wrist and silver rains
across the shirt. I watch her lay each sleeve
across the chest (dip and flick),
fold shoulders to their mates (dip and flick),
then tightly roll each shirt from tail to collar.
The hot iron hisses. Stray drops kiss
the mirror of its gothic face
standing upright on its metal plate.

With each dip and flick the sagging
skin below her housedress sleeve waggles
and I see again her right hand's
middle finger, one joint short—bitten by a mangle
at the laundry where she worked.
In turn, each shirt's unrolled and snugged
across the silvered board.
She lifts the iron with its cord, the tail
of a contented cat, rising
to the outlet in the light above her head.

Her tuneless hum accompanies
the iron's skating glide,
its soothing strokes transforming
and restoring my father's wrinkled shirts.

She does the cuffs and collars first. Then sleeves,
a knife-crease pressed hard down each arm
from shoulder to the fold above the cuff.
Then deep and even strokes along the back.
Puckers in the pocket's top-stitched square
are flattened smooth across the chest. Last,
the wrinkled button placket: carefully she jiggles
the iron's tip between each pierced
and polished chip of shell, an artist dabbing final touches
on the portrait of the shirt.

All day the basement is perfumed with clean,
bleach-scented steam. One by one
each shirt is hung on water pipes above our heads;
a pastel bank of cumulus that floats,
devotion—pressed and buttoned at the throat.