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Climbing a Mountain under the Ocean ·
Melinda Mueller

In front of the picture window is a lamp
with a white shade, flanked by two
upholstered chairs. All up and down
the block it's the same. Except that,
in this window, a seventeen-year-old girl
sits sideways, cheek against the chair's back,
legs dangling over the armrest. Everyone,
her family most of all, imagines
when she sits looking out like this,
she's dreaming of love. But really,

all the usual problems of climbing mountains
are reversed. It gets warmer as I go up.
I climb closer to sea-level. The snow
of detritus is deepest at the bottom, fathoms
of snow, like the winter I was five in Montana.

I imagine the difficulties of breathing and pressure
are taken care of. How this has been done
is passed over lightly, the way it is in dreams
when I never ask, "How did I get here in this field
when just now I was in Jenny's basement?"
Much less worrying, or even remembering,
that my cousin lives in a house that doesn't
have a basement.

Will the water be silent, or full
of sound? Whales, voiced fish, a squid's clacking
beak, from miles off, and I call *sherpa*,
sherpa pa pa, and it carries for miles. In flurries
of calcium back at the mountain's base, we were surrounded
by stars with teeth longer than our fingers, sharper
than our ice axes (but of course, there's no ice).
Each fish wore its own particular constellation
behind its gills. This sort of thing

can't go on endlessly, can it? To say,
"St. Sophia skating along a frozen river," for example,
just because it sounds lovely, is an indulgence,

and all that follows won't be taken seriously.
Even, "The partisan stands in the snowy forest,"
while plausible, is too romantic. But the imagination
loves its playthings, and wants to be the magician
who knows what's in everyone's pocket.

The partisan has a potato in his greatcoat
pocket, that he'll roast over a fire tonight
for supper. From a string around his neck hangs the icon
of a saint with a frozen, transfixed face.
The partisan becomes baroque with endless
embellishments, which must all be carved
away again, leaving only

what? The potato? Something yellow-white
inside, crumbly, like a limestone cliff.
Something implying hunger, but not starvation.