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Herding the Chickens
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Two Poems · Carol Potter

Herding the Chickens

I think I thought if I could convince you that out in the country in 1958, it was common practice to climb up on the backs of horses and drive the flock of chickens to the upper pasture in order for the chickens to clean their beaks and to shake the dust from their feathers; I think I thought if I could convince you that each one of those 200 chickens wore a bell around her neck and that our cows had silver halters and the milk went in a white river straight from their udders into the cups of grateful school children, I think I thought if I could convince you of this we would both be convinced. No Problem. Nothing to worry about. But the truth was, I couldn’t sleep that night, the first night in your bed. At 4 A.M., I could hear a woman down on the street calling to someone, “Please, please, don’t leave me here.” You were asleep. I could hear the car idling on the street. I lay beside you looking at the light coming through your lace curtains.

I wanted to pull you towards me, wanted to ease my body around yours, but I stayed still, wishing I could fall asleep. The woman on the street, crying, called out twice, three times, then someone yelled, “Get out of here or we’re calling the police!” It was raining, the wet leaves flattening on the New Haven streets, and I felt like I was
in some brand new country, the way the sky stayed lit all night long and you lying beside me. The next morning I told you about driving the chickens to the upper pasture and we both laughed because at that moment it looked easy. I didn’t tell you I couldn’t sleep, didn’t tell you about the woman crying or the car idling three stories down or the rain falling all night. When you think of me, I want you to see me sitting tall on the back of a tremendous, dark horse— how easy I ride that horse while my brothers and I, laughing, herd 200 chickens into the upper pasture. I want you to look up and see the white chickens clucking through an acre of green—

400 white wings glinting in sunlight. The chickens, dignified. The children, beautiful.

**What We Did with the Chickens**

After eating Moo Goo Gai Pan at a table with two women we had never seen before, having heard about one woman’s heart condition and her husband’s difficulty with his neck, how it bent one way but not the other, then the other woman told of the dress she bought for her niece’s wedding and why they didn’t go skiing last winter, my daughter and I went out on the street and stood staring into the window of a Chinese grocery.