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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.