

EMILY HARMAN

Danbury, WI

The auctioneer wears an oily cowboy hat, stands
on the deer-trodden game trail running through the backyard.

Behind his fist you can almost see
the long, flattened patch of dead leaves

where the canoe rested on its gunwales each summer
and beyond that the lake where the same loons return year after year.

Mostly I remember the quiet. My father watching the end
of his fishing line for a bite. The still, glassy hours before dawn.

More than once, a bird ran white beneath the canoe
as we paddled, sticky eyed, across the lake.

I tried to hold my breath,
ruddy and gasping for air

by the time the loon appeared, soundless,
shaking water from her wings.

By ten, I knew each looncall
by heart:

the soft hoot of mother to chick,
the yodel of defense,

the wavering warning,
the haunting cry of loss.

The line of cars stretches half a mile down the road.
The cicadas hum thick in the afternoon heat

and my grandfather's lathe goes once, twice, sold.
I used to peel papery strips of bark from the birch trees

lining the woods until he told me
it hurt the trees. I never asked

how it felt when he carved them to the core,
but I played for hours with the horses he chiseled

from their dimpled limbs. The last time
I saw her, my grandmother pulled at her fingers,

set the table for six, said a mother should never lose
a child. Said it does something to you.

Each square of butter on the same spot
on each plate. Each napkin folded just right.

We sat, then, the five of us.
Bowed our heads.

The hollow wail through the dark.
We knew exactly what it meant.