

NANCY BOUTILIER

Sweeping

His root beer sweats on the Formica table.
Her eyes fix on the frosty mug and the bubbles
rise like little prayers she once sent up.
The small apartment shrinks.
She stands and walks toward the kitchen
but pauses in the doorway and turns
because nothing will do.
Chairs on spindly legs remain upright.
She leans against the door frame,
hoping the wall will open up and take her
into another world. She notices where the cat
has clawed upholstery.

Smelling of aftershave and cigarettes,
he speaks of honor and sacrifice. "I regret."
Hands dutifully folded in his tidy lap,
eyes down, he pronounces a city name,
a time, a date, and a list of circumstances.
Man of starch and medals, he does not use words
like *bone* or *flesh* or *brittle*,
but she hears them anyway and thinks of her grandmother
on too-thin legs, falling because of a breaking femur,
not the other way around.

Her husband's bones are in a bag or narrow box by now.
His flesh beyond her touch. In the belly of a plane.

And the wars keep coming,
bodies breaking to bone and flesh.
Cats scratching sofas.
Now his hands are moving,
sweeping, clearing the air.
It's all she can see—
his fingered whiskbrooms.
“When are you due?” he asks.
She feels her body pressing
against the door frame
rectangular and narrow.

NANCY BOUTILIER is the author of two Black Sparrow poetry collections, *According to Her Contours* and *On the Eighth Day Adam Slept Alone*, both finalists for the Lambda Literary Award. She currently teaches writing at Oberlin College.