

Mary McLaughlin Slechta

Disappearing Act

for Prudence Crandall and the little misses of color

If you put your hand
in the hat of the right person,
you might pull out a little girl.

Listen, before the windows blistered
and the flames licked through,
the sky was a hand-me-down dress

with the belt too high.
And the little girl was a nail,
back then, in a scratchy collar.

Some in tall hats liked to say "The Nail,"
in quotes, with the future of the school,
the whole United States, balanced on its head.

But she was only a simple nail,
kissed from the carpenter's lips
to make the worm work a little harder.

Only later, the books and maps
lighting up the ridge and the wolves
hollering for the little girl to come on out

and get eaten up this very second,
did that nail start to prove
the blacksmith false.

What, with Papa aiming at shadows
and Mama pointing them out,
nothing they threatened could keep the alloys

of metal and lace and book learning
and faith from de-evolving into fur
and teeth and claws and spit.

It took Mama and Papa, both pulling,
to trap that feral creature
between the flat iron of Nana's palsied arm

and the board of her chest.
And if there was any rocking,
you were seeing things,

for that good woman
hadn't lifted a bucket
or stirred a pot

or even had a decent conversation
in a score of years.
What you thought was rocking

was just a rock.
And what you thought was a child
was a rabbit in torn lace,

asleep in a hutch of stone.