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Wolf Lake

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SHIRLEY STEPHENSON

WOLF LAKE

Her head is smaller—green scarf,
mosquito netting wrapped closer
to smooth scalp. Silent, the lake
and my father sleep, cabin door
eased over its hinges as I watch

my mother wheel the tandem
from the shed, pedal past a row
of cedar, 5 a.m.'s empty seat
trailing. She rarely sleeps now,
feels too much like practice. Last

summer she'd let the screen door
clap, waking me to ride behind her.
Synchronize. *Let us build a fire.* Haul
branches. *Let us visit.* This year
she moves past my door, slips

rosaries between our sheets. I wake
to their snaked imprint across my thighs,
stomach—impression of beads recalling
a Belizian winter. Each morning rash
coiled our wrists, ankles, throats—

redness traced veins toward the heart
until we found the right tablets—
antibodies foaming water into
champagne. We stayed three weeks
after my father left for Maracaibo.

Exhausted, trailing always three,
four phrases behind. Too slow
to catch humor, the final nod.
We rolled our r's, lilted,
trilled until our tongues ached

and the Bolivian cattle rancher,
his hand on her hand, said
he had a cure for sore tongues,
grinning at mother and daughter.
I thought we should be offended

or at least look it, but she
wasn't sure. After all, *tongue*
and *language* share the same
Spanish. *La lengua*. She smiled.
Maybe he was offering to help us.

But here, this sequestered week,
we lack such uncertainty.
There are no gaps in meaning
and my mother cannot assign
preferred truths to the words

three more months. She returns
from her ride, insists we all
portage to Spider Lake. A pair
of dragonflies rests on the anchor.
They mate in flight, she explains,

*the male hovering above the female
until she flips upside-down, catches
the sperm in mid-air*. I will dream
about my mother this way, head
tilted to the sun. What is it like?

My father turns and for a moment
I wonder if I've spoken aloud.
I resent this, that she will be
outlived. In the yellow light
of a kitchen she tries to reassure,

but still I'm certain some loss must
be traced back to me. *I've decided,*
she tells us, *I'd like to wear the blue*
dress. Blue silk with white flowers.
My father nods, crumpled hat bent

over the tackle box, then leans
and slips off her scarf, brushes
the patch of dull hair. It's coming
back auburn. Different. His hand
pauses, cradles the globe of her

skull. She wants him to catch
a fish and they talk of strategy—
banana slugs and double-hooked
frogs and fear strewn across his lap—
golden, barbed, translucent.