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Endurance Test

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Endurance Test

by Lorna Van Gilst

My brawny-muscled dad
has gone inside himself;
he sits alone
though we are all around.

Oh, Papa, don't you know?
You can't just slip away.
Remember all those choretimes when you said
I must endure—
Those cold nights in the barn,
 my fingers icy prongs wrapped in knit wool.
“We'll warm them up,” you'd say,
 and together in the hay
 we'd stand on bales and flap our arms
 like gentle whips around ourselves.
“Farmers must be tough,” you'd tell me.
“It won't be long till suppertime.
I need you here.”

You'd go on dumping pungent bales into the bunk,
And I'd pull off the twine
 while hungry Herefords nosed into their meal.
They'd snort and bawl and drool
 while you and I did stiff-toed jumping jacks
 to move the blood congealing in our boots.
Then walking down the row,
 silently we'd count
 the mooing, chewing faces 'cross the bunk.
And when our count agreed,
 we'd linger just a bit,
 turn collars up,
 tuck pantlegs into boots.
“My little farmer ready for the blast?” you'd ask.

In one quick swoop you'd pull
 the spider webby string to turn off lights,
 clasp shut the door,
 grab my numb, mittened hand,
And pull me through the cold
 from barn to basement door.

And once inside, we'd smell
 Mom's fried potatoes on the stove.
And pulling off stiff boots, you'd say,
 “Good farmers must endure,
And we're good farmers—you and I,”
 because I hadn't slipped away
 and gone inside.