

Learning to Be a Woman

We watch our mother empty pockets for the wash,
slide cookies into the oven,
vacuum the avocado carpet,
wipe dust from the kitchen sill, all
with cube steaks frying,
(baby sister tucked under her ribs)
and singing a hymn front to back.
She reigns in a cotton dress; smells
of soup, shampoo and bleach.

She knows where it is,
whose turn to be first,
how to spell *amnesia* and *cooperation*,
that carrots brighten our eyes.

We see her butter the edges,
set one more plate,
thaw chicken parts under the tap.

When an aunt or neighbor stops by
and Mother must sit,
her hands reattach a black snap,
shape meatloaf, measure paper for lining the shelves.
Sometimes we're shooed away.
Little pigs have big ears, they say,
but they laugh, and the house swells
with the happiness of women.
They hug both arms, bob forward and back,
pink with glee.

Sometimes Mother wears lipstick,
rubs lotion over her legs, dances her flesh
into an elastic girdle.

Sometimes radish roses and little cube cakes
dot kidney-shaped plates.
The club ladies say *Oh! Shirley, your house is NEVER
a mess, or Now, which one is this?
Is this one the twin?*

Somehow we drew the straw
(while our brothers sweat loudly outside)
to be framed by flickering curtains
or stiff winter ice on the glass,
to sit very still on a kitchen stool
while Mother dips a comb in a glass
and persuades our hair into curls.

—Marilyn Bushman-Carlton