

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A USEFUL SKILL

—after the painting *By Lamplight* (1890) by Norwegian Harriet Backer

The woman is alone with her thoughts.
Her thoughts and a treadle sewing machine.

The woman's pin-straight back leans forward and away
from the chairback's curve, her rump slightly raised off its seat.

A plain woman, her hair gathered in a neat bun above
the nape of her neck—is she thinking of last night's tender kiss?

Her clothing is homespun: a fiken-colored blouse
and brown ochre skirt covered with a shadowed apron.

The woman's hands are raised and cupped,
left thumb and forefinger touching, perhaps threading a needle.

Did she prick her finger? It is dark now, and hard to see.
She and the treadle machine are near a large window reflecting

a honeyed glow cast from the light of an unseen lamp—
as if the seamstress is preserved in amber and 1890.

Holmestrand, Norway, still exists as it did long ago.
Looking at the painting, I imagine this Norwegian woman

is sewing one baby blanket after another, the way my father's
mother, Magda, earned her keep after coming to this new country.

The woman could be my grandmother's own mormor, stitching
a useful skill into the fabric of her descendants' DNA, blissfully
not knowing that someday (not so far off) her frayed heart will split
apart on an Oslo dock when she waves *ha det* to her daughter.

I imagine this woman as my unknown great-grandmother who returned
to an empty home, and consoled herself by taking out needle and thread.

She crafted whimsical red-capped felt and yarn rag dolls my cousins and I
find decades later in a sewing basket on a table in our mormor's basement.

Treasured gifts sent over the ocean long ago, from loving ancestors known
only through her stories. "They are nisse," Magda said, "or 'dear little relatives.'"

—Robin Michel



Harriet Backer, *By Lamplight*, 1890