

Napkins for a wedding

Gayle Gerber Koontz

Hemming is a comfort,
dusty blue, navy, purple, rose
colors of a prairie sky.
None of the uncertainty.
She folds the cloth once
twice
straight like a highway in Kansas.
“Will you marry me?” he asked long ago.
“Maybe.” She reminded him of the wind.
Where would the road lead?

The iron is so full of the past
steam burns her fingers
turning the hem for stitching.
She blows on them
shedding the small irritations
the arguments
misunderstandings
of forty years of marriage.
She leans on the hot fabric,
the authority of the iron
pressing her own faithlessness flat
forgiven
remembered.
Disorder constrains the soul as much as order
she thinks
and smiles.

She lets the machine needle the rows
faster than fingers
than her grandmother’s fingers

the grandmother who did not know
as her mother had not known
as she had not known
who they and the men whose hands they held
would become,
they whose faces they traced
imminent strangers
threaded so close
they could hear each other's thoughts.
Children would swell their bodies
so tight they could not bear the joy.

A piece finished, she stops to snip loose thread,
shakes cloth soft, holds it to her cheek.
Her son lanky with laughter
on his wedding day
napkins pushing up from the tables like rampant flowers
like flowers spilling from her new daughter's arms
like flowers arching in arbor
like flowers timid and wild
will take her
and she shaking red-gold hair at the evening sun
will set down her napkin
and rise to him
nodding yes
and yes.

About the poet

Gayle Gerber Koontz is professor emerita of theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. She is a lover of the power and music of words.