

Sheep Ranch Near Hillspring

Helen Walker Jones

She never speaks to him anymore. Her tongue
is as bone-dry as an irrigation ditch in winter,
her ankles grimy as a crooked ewe's. Dribbled
wine and spots of sour milk stain her blouse,
and now his lead sheep has given up the bell.

His wife's pantlegs dip ragged against the floor
as Hunter, her old Aussie dog, howls night for night
beside their window, duetting with the baby till its
mother bundles the infant close to her nipple. Such
polar Aprils—the rancher sees mirages of mermaids

riding pond-water billows, his lambs losing the snow
battle. By June, his wife has stooped to wearing his own
clothing: tattered army fatigues and denim overalls.
Dressed as a refugee, she spurns his affection. This
woman gave birth at home, clips and shears, mixes feed

and dungs out the pens, her breasts leaking milk onto her
camouflage tee shirt, the baby unsatisfied until her coming.
He—her husband—coasts through daylight hours,
doting on his trembling, newly shorn, pink-skinned
flock, hoping to outlast the slow-witted beasts.