Russian Matches

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Russian Matches

The water heater has its caprices:
first lift this wrench, then turn the handle
just enough to light, strike the match,
catch the flame, turn the handle up.
Turn it all off in the opposite order,
not forgetting any step — lest the gas
seep from the pipes, lest something
overheat and unsolder and spoil.
At night I lie (it's my turn on the couch)
and imagine I smell the thinnest stream
of gas, while the fridge rolls and rumbles
through its cycle of helicopter noises.

But there are compensations: matches
strike on the first stroke, however
hesitant or clumsy, as if made
for lighting cigarettes on a windy corner,
with no shelter but one cupped hand.

And that gesture once the stove lights,
as the wrist pulls back, to shake it once
and toss the flame back into non-being
like a Countess laying sovereigns on the cards.