CARDINAL
by Alison Thumel

Was born west
at a fingertip,
was growing. Was fed
garlic soup by a Polish nanny
(for health!) and pierogi fried
with onion to keep me warm.
The nanny led me,
pink and fleece-lined
through the cold and sang.
When the buses stopped
running I walked
a mile and listened.
Nothing but a crackle.
Tuck toes under
and hear how the wind
trapped the waves
after all, nature
and culture at her feet.
All motion ceased
but the flightpaths
of birds, and the blues
of the Chagall window
that seems to glow
and flow on every day
but today. In the summer
you would return
to run through the steps
in the park with the brass
and drums that swing us
along with the beats
when our hair grows
wild when the city chokes us
with heat that seeps
through our soles.
In the fall I returned
to a quiet blaze,
nothing but a crackle.

Down here it is still
dark at night,
no neon streets,
no five-star joints,
but if it’s clear enough
you can see the moon
through your window
glowing like the Chagall window.
Was born west at a fingertip,
was growing, was led
by the hand to the porch
every night to say goodnight
to the moon. Was living
on porches, now living
inside. Down here,
we tell stories—
My father’s landlady
gave him pierogi
on rent day. Twenty-four
of them, oily, dripping.
My rent includes heat
and a kitchen ceiling,
oily, dripping, but I can see
the lake and the moon
from my window
as half-moon dumplings
crackle in a pan.

Everyone’s just looking
for some warmth,
heads tucked under BEWARE
OF FALLING ICE
and duck between
a subway above and streets
below. The cardinal rule
is directional, and I’m caught
between: drawn
and quartered.
Was born west
at a fingertip, grew
north, ran south.
Lost myself in the middle.
You can only walk east
up to your neck
and only on clear days—
the beaches are bare
nine months of the year.