An Elegy for Leila

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AN ELEGY FOR LEILA

Because family set the tone for your life, what else could they have named you but Leila? When the Pattersons found you slumped over the phone, number half-dialed, past forgetting, it was the day after Christmas, nineteen hundred and seventy-eight, your coat hung on the hall tree, warming after one last walk to the barn before lunch, the smell of detergent and tea fading even then into unbreathed air. Lord, let us retire that notion of good people we should have been. Let us close the door softly on that grief and go home. Already, Leila, hearing the news about you is memory. Your house rushes toward a date with anonymous fields. Every Sunday I watched you beside Will during church, middle section, right aisle, two rows from the back. I remember how your skin felt warm. After that time, I learned every day I do something my daughter will try soon to imagine me doing. For that record, I got up this morning, read the thermometer: Zero. I write these words from Montana. I force myself to believe you’re dead. On my wall, I have a picture of you young, and in my mind I keep a picture of the room they found you in, kitchen behind you, oak sideboard on the far wall. The phone spills from your hand. Ice hugs the ground you’re part of. Once, I stood in that cold north window and turned away. I looked past forty acres of stubble and saw the dirt road to your house, this house, the view unobstructed, sharp and complete.