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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.