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Leaving Emelia

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LEAVING EMELIA

Two sons, her husband gone,
she shakes the seam of her dress
and lies down with the Bible, the comb,
the glass of water beside her.
If she searches the bed for hairpins,
for the lean man who braided her hair
in the dark, and the hands
that were both sides of her head,
both razor and soap at once, she holds
the burnt edge of her breath
and asks, where is he.

In the next room
you wake from the ten fingers of sleep
to the sound of a train
rocking through badlands, the sky,
an absence of cinders
already baked and eaten, a landscape
of stars and horses locked in your fist.
Remember the night in Chicago
she took you into her bed, crooning
the world like a bad map of your face?
You think there are hands
you have not praised enough,
behind you, distance you never touch.

Morning, the hoarse cry of quail,
an old dog’s death nailing itself to the house.
Emelia brushes the hair from her neck
and calls for bread, pears,
for Joyce, for Lydia, for nothing of darkness
in the yard hammered with light,
for Joseph and the sons in Albany
who bow their heads, forgiving themselves
again and again.
This leaving, a denial
fixed in the heart's soft beat
and the blue flame of the stove, in her name,
Emelia Sophia, inventing a home
and the fear that was never a home.
Even now it passes between you
like salt shaken from hand to hand,
one for the sons and daughters
silent as guests, once for the odd bones
of your face, and the moon,
creeling with light,
counting itself among them.