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Last Gray Scene

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Didn’t the sky take all of it, the man
you’d slash your skirts for, night after night,
the room eating bowls of dust in a house
no bird needing a home would enter.
Someone was always leaving: father, husband,
the daughter with auburn hair
who’d brush and wind until the last pin flared
like a match striking the wall. In the papers
a woman confessed to stoning the face of her child,
the child, found beating her doll
with newspaper. For a moment it’s true,
the year a train slapped the life out of stone.
You helped your husband board,
measured your life by the straight cloth
of his back. You watched until his face dissolved
like soap and the tracks thinned to water,
the clear glass filled and emptied at breakfast.
You stayed on, at night slamming a window with two hands,
suddenly afraid to crawl the long corridor back
from window to bed. Dinners felt the cold
heart of an empty chair scrape the floor, the amen
lifting fork to mouth and all of you
tasting tiny explosions of meat.

Now a bird takes the empty house on its back
and you bless house, bird, the mattress dumped in the yard
refusing to burn. You rummage the porch
for a pirate’s dream of yellow brass,
gold sent home to a woman’s sunburned face, the parrot
mumbling in his cage. Ancestors gave you this
and you give it back, the scrub of rhododendrons
where, twenty-five years ago, a bloodied cat
stumbled into your arms. You give back the husband
wiping his hands in the kitchen, the great-aunt pitching
fruit trees and trunks of linen from a real train
in Custer, Wyoming. You give the horse traded for blankets and food, the leaf-mould scraped from his hooves with an iron spoon. Behind you a field coughs milkweed, stonecrop. Cattle drift toward a river pounded with snails and the river’s boom where you warm yourself in the foreign breath of animals. Close the gate. Ignore the boy leaning hard at the window as you drive away.