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Extremity

Kathryn Stripling

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out on the Mojave.
Please.
Please, stop listening

to this sound, which
is actually the terrible
keening of the ones

whose hearts have been broken
by lives spent in search
of its source,

by our lives of failure,
spent looking everywhere
for someone to say these words.

Extremity / Kathryn Stripling

Pity my cold feet in bed.
The doctor says I need warm blood
down there, gives me a tonic
that burns in my guts
not my feet. My toes curl
in the blankets like French knots
I used to pull so tight

the thread broke. My fingers dig
into my stomach. Small wonder
my dreams are of frost-bite,
my toes dropping off like ruined berries,
my fingers strewn over the snow.

When I wake I work hard until noon.
I collect every nail paring,
skin faint as snow on the pumice stone.
Even the hair woven into my comb
I can spin into strong, silver thread,
and I gather the stubs

of the candles from every long evening
like eggs in my apron. A cup of tea

and I sit down to sew
nothing. I watch the gray sky
through the eye of each needle
my fingers have ever held up to the light
and I wait for the mousetrap to spring

in the pantry where peaches still cling
to their stones. I have made my house ready
for ice. Every hole's stuffed
with cloth. Every window's nailed shut.
When the sun sets I turn the key
twice in the lock, blow
the candles out. Nothing can come
to me now. I have no blessings to count.

I count my cold fingers and toes.

Afternoon / Kathryn Stripling

If these leaves between

the light and where we lie
together almost sleeping, burning
themselves out the same,

the same as always
though I stroke your thigh
that lies against my own

until its dark hair warms
my palm like pinestraw kindling, if
this should be too much

on my mind, the fading
not the fire, for me to dare
to wonder what will happen