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The Chore

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I want to believe the teeth still chatter,
from winter cold or summer passion.
I want to believe in an ardor as keen
as the homing pigeon's, who reconnoiters, banks,
lands, and coos like a fool in the dark.

FIXING THE WINDOW

It is the way some vandal left it,
like a spider's web askew—
a spin of shards, the spaces themselves
all hunks within the piecemeal shatter.

I tape the lines of it, follow them
as though they were the window's silver bones,
edgy in the sunlight. Then
I cover all the pane,
cellophane row on row, horizontal,
vertical—inside and out.

Serviceable window, light shedder
of slanted rectangles, kerosene rainbows,
and out of which I watch the school children
at play, rough-housing, tumbling,
half unclear through the distances
between us, the wishful scrim of repair.

THE CHORE

The night we arrived home from our trip, father knew
something was wrong in the root cellar.
It was September, very late, tomorrow would do

for us to see, but I saw his light later
on move quick across the yard,
down the low near slope, and disappear.

In the breeze at the window I lay and heard
nothing. The room was stale with absence.
I waited to see him again, and when I did

he was right below me, having crossed to the fence,
to the shadowy bulk of the house
in the dark, shoving now the dry pins

of his light in my eyes. He could not have missed
those pupils, gaping out in the moon-lack,
riding down the wires of the ears

toward any sound, any hiss or shuffle in the dark.
I know now, as I knew then,
that I had not done some awful work

he'd given me, some chore when
baseball was at hand, or that
whatever work I had done

was slipshod, slapdash. In his hand the light
shone. I squinted but could not see,
though I tried, though in the wash of guilt

I kept looking, as if there could be
mitigation in the dew-stunned grasses,
some excuse I was blind to, some plea.

Imagine yourself on that lawn. Your son's face
looms and shies. You feel your own
harden, empty. And it is not the mess,

of course, the slug-infested rot and doom
in all the year's hardy tubers. What you feel
is the humiliation in love, the wrench,

the yank and twist and hopeless pull
toward rage and forgetfulness. You have done
nothing right yourself, you love and you fail.

And I was home from school, in a mask of muslin
and moist sponge, sick with my work
for a week of hard labor, the dumb

grunt and slop, the stomach-rending lurch
in the gray soup and mold of rotten
vegetables. Shovel, wheelbarrow, pitchfork.

Brush and rag and bleach. Carton after carton
of disinfectant and lye. My mother
said the stench in my hair was wanton.

I could not eat potatoes after that, though there were
plenty the next year. Onions, too, and carrots,
my father every meal holding out to me more.

TAPERS

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My mother owned candles she would not light.
“Tapers,” she called them, thin shafts
in assorted colors. “Red for Christmas,
yellow for Easter, mustard gold for Thanksgiving.”
They came out for a week then went back
into their boxes for another year,
stored in the refrigerator,
away from the limp, midwestern heat.

I wondered at the light they’d give.
Would it be thinner somehow, somehow cooler
and quiet, a gold whisper in lieu of the sun?