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Tapers

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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

1

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?

2

My father is laughing at the New Year,
at the sudden dark. I am crying
in my room, the night light has gone out.
Next to my bed my mother stands,
I can smell her. She strokes my head,
tells me snow, snow, snow, the absence
of roads, so many people stranded.

And so we are moving, we are in the hall,
in my sister's room. I am in bed with my sister
who sleeps through all storms and darkness.
I am kissed, my mother's face
flickers, she is holding in her hand
a yellow, wavery taper.

3

On that room there was no door.
I watched the chiaroscuro for hours
and was first awake in the morning,
in that new light half-dawn draws from snow.

Everywhere there were bodies, sleepers
in every chair, on every clear expanse of floor.
Something was in the air, a pall,
a haze of breath and sleeping.

And when my mother found me and hauled me
back to bed, there was nothing, she said,
she could do. There was snow, snow, snow,
people stranded, and the house,

the damned house, the whole damned house full of smoke.