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The State of the World

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On a night train. The cabins dark, all the couchettes taken, just a strobe of brown light as she prowls for someplace to recline. She’s alone, thrilled in a fearful way, sliding down so her cheek kisses leather, thub thub and sway. When did that man appear in the door? She is terrified by his flickering expression.

Did I say this is wartime, that she’s lost too much that she loves? And the rivers they cross are sludge, the fish below asleep or dead. Guards wait at the border with guns, checking papers: it isn’t hard to imagine his mouth as chancel and altar, that she is grateful for buttons, for what’s silky tumbled to the floor.

You would grant me this: prisoners somewhere are meeting eyes after swimming alone in a calamity of fear and boredom and finding corners and bunks and passageways where they offer relief to bodies once tethered to souls. Isn’t that how they reel in and check their lines? In the backseat of a car, in a bathroom stall. I’m thinking all this on my side of our beautiful restaurant meal after you describe the mess with your clients, the too-big mortgage, the housework impasse with your husband,
when you confess you are sleeping side by side
without touching, that you haven't made love in years.

You still love him, you insist, there's no one new—
I'm afraid to say how many times I've heard this—

*it's just desire that's gone.*
The life we've made is killing us and here's the proof.