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In the Silence Following

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In the Silence Following

After a freight train lumbers by,
hissing steam and grumbling curses,
metal screeching against metal, it passes
into the night (which is the empty
shadow of the earth), becoming soft
clinking spurs, a breathy whistle, low
bells clanking like tangled chains,
disappearing as if on lambskin wheels.

Something lingers then in the silence,
a reality I can't name. It remains as near
to a ghost as the thought of a ghost
can be, hovering like a dry leaf spirit
motionless in a hardwood forest absent
of wind, inexplicably heraldic. It is closest
to the cry of a word I should know
by never having heard it.

What hesitates in that silence possesses
the same shape as the moment coming
just after the lamp is extinguished
but before the patterned moonlight
on the rug and the window-squares
of moonlight on the wall opposite
become evident. That shift of light
and apprehension is a form I should know
by having so readily recognized it.

After the yelping dog is chastened
and a door slams shut on the winter evening
filled with snow and its illuminations,
someone standing outside in the silence
following might sense not an echo

or a reflection but the single defining
feature of that disappearance
permeating the frigid air.

When all the strings of the chord
are stilled and soundless, the hands
just beginning to lift from the keys,
when the last declaration of the last
crow swinging down into the broken
stalks of the cornfield ceases, when
the river, roaring and bucking
and battering in its charge across
the land, calms its frothy madness
back to bed at last, then suspended
in the space of silence afterward
may be a promise, may be a ruse.