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One Dry Dress

WITH FAILING EYES, watch a crimson gyre in your corner of the map. Note the dramatic shape and color, reminding you of a tumor. Hear a redheaded anchor echo the commandment for your departure. Picture yourself at the bus stop, where on most mornings at five you nod to your neighbors before lurching to work.

Ask yourself where the buses are now, on the afternoon of your mandatory exit. Recall the car your neighbor owns, and the time you asked her what she paid to keep it running, inspected, repaired. Insured. Hear your slow whistle in response to the number. Recalculate the figures. Measure them like the ingredients for a buttermilk pie. Your monthly pay stub: \$824. Minimum wage for maximum effort, forty hours on the clock. Subtract six tablespoons of taxes, and Medicare. And Social Security, the flaky crust.

Observe that your neighbor's car is long gone today. A thirty-year-old Riviera without air or shocks, rusted by sea air. She filled it with regular, and seven children. Then headed for the desert. See yourself waving her goodbye, wondering if you could have hidden in her trunk.

Turn the channel and see ribbons of humans draped across a stadium. Sink as you guess how long it would have taken you to walk there, on feet that can barely carry you to bed. Watch Weathergirl disappear as the room goes dark, shutting its eyes on you. Pack like Noah while the wind cackles by: two boxes of saltines. Two cans of soda. Two tubs of cold cream. Just one dry dress. Your other clothes are swimming for their lives.

Recall the days when this house was full of life. The nights you drowned in iron skillet and hand laundry, with one child and one husband and one pair of hands with which to fry. Envision their friends in every nook: whooping like sirens and praising your okra. There were dogs too, for a while. A German Shepherd named Kaiser who lived to be twenty. A Dachshund called Happy despite all his cries.

Hear everyone barking at the blue-green screen, especially when the Saints were losing.

Think of mortgage payment number three-hundred-sixty. The final check after thirty years. Wish that your husband had been there to write it. Glance at his soggy recliner, then remind yourself he defended a gulf. Realize that you're in a gulf too.

Mourn for the groceries dying slowly in the Frigidaire. A package of gizzards ready to be breaded. Whole milk soon to curdle, peppered cream gravy no longer in its future. The many jars of mayonnaise, purchased when you forgot about what you already had, which was all right because there's always a need for remoulade. And more frozen pot pies than you can count; they'd been on special, just two for a dollar.

Feel yourself empty as the room starts to fill.

Hope that your son left his toolbox in the attic. Without a hammer's claw, you'll never break through to the roof. Imagine your boy on the day he left home. Hear the recruiter standing in your doorway: *And when he's through we'll take care of his college.* You gave him biscuits for the flight to Fort Hood, wishing you had thought of a drumstick. But he is the type who makes it through, now a high-class civilian with Blue Cross and options. Hear him on the phone just yesterday, all the way from Tulsa: *Stay dry, Mama. Can't see why you won't buy a cell. It's only twenty-nine a month.*

Find a marker that is black as granite, reeking with waterproof ink. Write your name on your forearm, then add your address. And your boy's phone number too, though they'll have to use long distance. In case you're not able to speak for yourself.

When the air is calm and only six inches remain between your nostrils and the ceiling to which you have floated, at last feel the release of the attic-stair pulley, which has resisted your orders all night. Sigh with relief, though you don't need stairs anymore, just a passageway to the empty breath of a triangular room. Acknowledge that this is where you and the vermin will rest for the rest of your time.

Never imagine that a stranger across state lines will lean across the dinner table and, between second helpings of meat and potatoes, call you greedy. Remain uninformed that others will conjure evidence to portray you as a looter, a trickster, a sniper, a murderer, a resident of Gomorrah who got what she deserved. Picture instead the mercy you have seen in the papers so many times before: bucket brigades and foster homes, habitats from a temple and meals ready to eat.

See all the treasures you stored up below for your son to inherit: his father's Bronze Star, and his three-sided flag. A rug that's woven through with every apron you ever owned. The photos of your offspring as an optimistic child, determined to leave no dream deferred. Wonder what is left for him to inherit. Wonder if the meek will inherit the earth.