

Edward Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1931
by Larry Levis

The young woman is just sitting on the bed,
Looking down. The room is so narrow she keeps
Her elbows tucked in, resting, on her bare thighs,
As if that could help.

She is wearing, now, only an orange half-slip
That comes down as far as her waist, but does not
Console her body, which fails.
Which must sleep, by now, apart from everyone.
And her face, in shadow,
Is more silent than this painting, or any
Painting: it feels like the sad, blank hull
Of a ship is passing, slowly, the stones of a wharf,
Though there is no ocean for a thousand miles,
And outside this room I can imagine only Kansas:
Its wheat, and the blackening silos, and, beyond that,
The plains that will stare back at you until
The day your mother, kneeling in fumes
On a hardwood floor, begins to laugh out loud.
When you visit her, you see the same, faint grass
Around the edge of the asylum, and a few moths,
White and flagrant, against the wet brick there,
Where she has gone to live. She never
Recognizes you again.

You sell the house, and auction off each thing
Inside the house, until
You have a satchel, a pair of black, acceptable
Shoes, and one good flowered dress. There is a check
Between your hands and your bare knees for all of it—
The land and the wheat that never cared who
Touched it, or why.

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You think of curves, of the slow, mild arcs
Of harbors in California: Half Moon Bay,
Malibu, names that seem to undress
When you say them, beaches that stay white
Until you get there. Still, you're only thirty-five,
And that is not too old to be a single woman,
Traveling west with a purse in her gray lap
Until all of Kansas dies inside her stare...

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But you never moved, never roused yourself
To go down Grain Street to the sobering station,
Never gazed out at the raw tracks, and waited
For the train that pushed its black smoke up
Into the sky like something important...

And now it is too late for you. Now no one,
Turning his collar up against the cold
To walk past the first, full sunlight flooding
The white sides of houses, knows why
You've kept on sitting here for forty years—alone,
Almost left out of the picture, half undressed.

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