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SM4AL

Much as I had looked forward to reading this book,  
I'm not certain I can go on.  
Not that the writer has failed me so far  
—in fact, at only page sixty,

I feel on intimate terms with the narrator.  
The last thing I want is to abandon her here,  
newly married, just come to Kansas  
which is still a territory, pre-Civil War.

But there have been readers before me  
who had little mind for those who would follow.  
There were signs from the beginning:  
a gooey smudge on the flyleaf,

reddish-brown, centered precisely,  
and dropped one-third of the way down  
on the otherwise blank page.  
Chocolate, I prefer to imagine.

Yuck, I thought, but turned the page quickly  
and began. And for the first four chapters,  
I read on, uninterrupted, until,  
early in chapter five, small oily

stains appeared, butterfly-style,  
in perfect opposing-page symmetry.  
Potato chip crumbs, stuck and pressed,  
and brushed away by subsequent readers.

Then, for six consecutive pages,  
dry brown broken things, tucked  
into the gutter, puzzled me completely—  
until I found a cluster better preserved

—the bud-stems of grapes.  
By mid-chapter, pages no longer lay flat:  
a reader's hand, pressed against  
or smoothing down the right hand page

would detect bumpy presences beneath.  
Someone ate a lot of grapes for a good  
long while and then got a taste for  
—there was no mistaking it—bright yellow-white

hunks and strands, flattened now,  
curlicued and well-stuck to the pages,  
still held the fragrance—oranges, oranges,  
oranges, until I could read no more.