

The State of the World

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.