

Sitting Down to Breakfast Alone

Brachest, she called it, gentling grease
over blanching yolks with an expertise
honed from three decades of dawns
at the Longhorn Diner in Loraine,
where even the oldest in the old men's booth
swore as if it were scripture truth
they'd never had a breakfast better,
rapping a glass sharply to get her
attention when it went sorrowing
so far into some simple thing—
the jangly door or a crusted pan,
the wall clock's black, hitchy hands—
that she would startle, blink, then grin
as if discovering them all again.
Who remembers now when one died
the space that he had occupied
went unfilled for a day, then two, three,
until she unceremoniously
plunked plates down in the wrong places
and stared their wronged faces
back to banter she could hardly follow.
Unmarried, childless, homely, "slow,"
she knew coffee cut with chamomile
kept the grocer Paul's ulcer cool,
yarrow in gravy eased the islands
of lesions in Larry Borwick's hands,
and when some nightlong nameless urgency
made him seek some human company
Brother Tom needed hash-browns with cheese.
She knew to nod at the litany of cities
the big-rig long-haulers bragged her past,
to laugh when the hunters asked

if she'd pray for them or for the quail
they went laughing off to kill,
and then—envisioning one
rising so fast it seemed the sun
tugged at it—to do exactly that.
Who remembers where they all sat:
crook-backed builders, drought-faced farmers,
V-H'ers muttering through their wars,
night-shift roughnecks so caked in black
it seemed they made their way back
every morning from the dead.
Who remembers one word they said?
The Longhorn Diner's long torn down,
the gin and feedlots gone, the town
itself now nothing but a name
at which some bored boy has taken aim,
every letter light-pierced and partial.
Sister, Aunt Sissy, Bera Thrailkill,
I picture you some dime-bright dawn
grown even brighter now for being gone
bustling amid the formica and chrome
of that small house we both called home
during the spring that was your last.
All stories stop: once more you are lost
in something I can merely see:
steam spiriting out of black coffee,
the scorched pores of toast, a bowl
of apple butter like edible soil,
bald cloth, knifelight, the lip of a glass,
my plate's gleaming, teeming emptiness . . .

—Christian Wiman