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Photographer in a Small Town

Siobhan K. Phillips
Dickinson College

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I.

At night sometimes, they shudder just shy
of waking, his children, shaking off sleep
like a setter, he thinks, come out of a pond,
then paddling on instead through the deep task
of rest, their moist mouths slack;
or strain their warm chins for a drink,
eyes still half-closed, fingers
not quite touching around the glass.

II.

For days, the season about to turn,
middle-school halls still calm in their waxed swirls,
counters scraped of grime, displays
of laminate praise still clear,
down in the tall, draft-echoing gym,
faces one grade further along the line—
restless, cleaned, fiddling, pressed—wait
to have their pictures made.

III.

Packing up, he sees, in the wave of trees
beyond the field, a shade of almost-yellow
ready to raise its gleaming head. He is tired.
(Focus and light take nothing; work
is the quick moment of coaxing,
the grasp at a joke so frayed it distracts those eyes
from worry or blink.) He stops to watch
currents of dust rise from the fresh-raked track.

IV.

His busiest month. When he finally locks his room
it's as dark outside as in. The street is blank,

his vision calm from the red-gray haze
in which he cautiously drew the children's prints
from shallow pans, their features
wet and gathering color. At home,
he kisses the girls goodnight; their noses twitch
from the chemical smell on his smoothing hands.