Photographer in a Small Town

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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.