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Bearing Witness

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Five-year-old Derick has fallen asleep
under the church pew, thumb in his mouth,
eyes red from the disappointment
of a paper airplane that won't fly.

Down front, his parents, aunts,
uncles, grandma, and cousins,
crowd in prayer--a stutter of tongues,
dance, tears--raising their hands
in a chorus of spastic acceptance,
in a letting go of what holds them
down, weightlessness somehow tied
to acceptance, forgiveness.

They call it a "leap of faith," an ecstatic
float above logic, "A covenant
of levitation" I call it to myself
as I sit at the back and, like Derick,
feel the sting of grounding.

One of the teenagers is trying
to get the Holy Ghost, the circle

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around her coaxing. I squirm,
readjust, the wood underneath
the padding an evangelism
of the solid. I settle into it.

My Aunt Helen stretched her hand
across the television screen
one Sunday afternoon in 1965,
“I’ll do that for Mama” her answer
to Oral Roberts’ call to prayer
and healing, sudden hope
folded around despair.

I stood in a living room quieted
by the grief of Grandma’s
empty couch and felt a new envy
of the adult who could forget
the earth, the underneath,
the in-between.

Flood waters came up to their front door
that year, mounting slowly like the dread
of old age. Even the uphill back yard
where I went to breathe stood sloppy,
hopscotched with pools and mud-slick grass.

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I imagined I could see a path, lines
connecting drier humps of grass, lines
horizontal, vertical, diagonal--at once
static, upright and falling, a gameboard
that gave me comfort, not in the metaphor
but in the idea of clean movement up
the narrow rectangle of the yard.

I looked down at my white socks
and penny loafers, imagined them
blurs of determination.

I would use the gravity of Sundays,
jerk each foot before it had time
to lift up dark clots of mud and stamp
out a testimony of loss, my only object
to make it to the fence clean.

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