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Visitation Grade School

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VISITATION GRADE SCHOOL

Patricia Clark

A place I find without a street address,
no cross-streets either; instead, I move
with a kind of dead reckoning like a walk

in sleep or a route known by heart,
learned by a child stepping to schoolbells.
Some of the streets still without sidewalks,

how rainwater puddles and pools, reflecting
sky and one's own watery face looking down.
The woman's eyes in the office are flecks

of hazel scattered in gray; her eyes squint
and narrow: "Here's a nametag so we can tell
who is friend and who is foe." What I'd give

to exchange my past or, at least, to shake
this place out of my skin, the smells
of chalk and lemon-oiled woodwork;

in the lunchroom, that same reek of thin
tomato soup rolling out of dented pots.
Upstairs, the priest hands out report cards,

to third-grade kids I think, singling out
the slowest boy in class for reprimand.
And the nun, first grade, who came

nightly into dreams, her face white
and twisted with rage. Here's rage back
for the cruelties, petty meannesses, and all

the sins I didn't do but confessed to,
wanting so much to please. Imagining hell
now, this would be it—

repeating first grade, Sister Madeleva still
in front of the room, teaching without a face
or skin or flesh—walking as pure bone.