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The Emigrants

by Helen Fallon

Mother talked of them at the kitchen sink,
as we scraped carrots and washed potatoes,
soil, still warm, clinging to their pink bellies.

Pots boiling, she pushed the window open,
let the steam out, she said, but I knew
it was to let them in.

Kitty was good with a needle, Lily could knit
Aran sweaters without a pattern, Hannah was strong,
and the churn lay idle after she left.

They carried cardboard suitcases crammed
with cotton vests, flimsy slippers, starched blouses,
a woollen work skirt, a Sunday dress.

Armed with rosary beads and miraculous medals,
they set out on maiden voyages, prayed on rough seas,
thanked God when they felt their feet on solid ground.

They were swallowed up by big houses, hotels,
later factories. They learned to look down as they walked,
to creep about quietly as they swept and cleaned.

Nights, drinking stewed tea, they tore open envelopes,
that led, farm gates opening, to news of potato
gathering, haymaking, cows calving, who had died,

who was at the Novena to the Little Flower,
the laying patterns of the new hens - a Leghorn, three Silkies,
four Bantams - bought with their English money.

Beneath naked bulbs they wrote their stories
steering the pen between narrow black lines
careful lest any sorrow spill over.

Places they went on days off, the red buses,
Irish people they met, the chapel (the priest,
a Kerry man), where they got mass on Sundays.

A one pound note placed between wafer thin sheets,
SAG (Saint Anthony Guide) written on the sealed flap,
then the walk to the red post box that tethered them

to rush-choked fields, hemmed by hawthorn hedges
smelling of rain - a woman opening the envelope,
silently sliding the note into her apron pocket.

Now, I push the kitchen window out, try to coax
their ghosts back. The wind rattles the warped frame,
branches, like a crone's thin arms, flail against the glass pane.