Imagine a place far away, a farmhouse with rain-speckled windows and a woodstove, where a woman bakes breads, stews vegetables, and cooks all of her family meals. She has long buck-wheat hair that meanders down her back like a river. To her five-year-old daughter, she’s an angel, a fairy creature, who gives life to everything she touches—flour, cloth, soil she tills with spellbinding ease and ardor. Seedlings thrive under her touch, dough swells and rises into mountains, chickens lay twice as many eggs. The woman has a sweet, lilting voice that splashes over her daughter like sunshine over the earth and causes golden tremors to run up the girl’s body. She springs from her bed as her eyes behold the dear face, arms unfolding in sheer tenderness.

It’s dawn, a scratch of a new day on the horizon, a lick of reddish light. The air is damp, bare. The sun yawns from a tangled patch of trees behind the barn and creeps up the sky, an egg on a skillet. The mother nudges the girl to get dressed and feed the pigs, one of whom will soon have babies. From the porch, the ash-blond air lies above the hay bales like clouds, and the sky now is curdled milk. A fidget of crows in the trees. The pig’s distended belly drags low as she waddles to the feeding trough filled with corn and bread mush, occasional grains leftover from dinners. The pig’s raw-pink nipples are swollen, and just two can fill up the girl’s slender fist. Last year, when another pig had babies, it scooted on its side, next to the trough; her wrinkled brood latched on, huffed and switched places. The fact that a pig has so many nipples and is capable of nursing five or six babies at once fascinates the girl, but also disturbs her, urging her to peep inside her dress to discover two slightly asymmetrical buttons of pink flesh. She pats the front of her dress in place and aids her mother to pour water in a large tureen.
As always, the day whirrs with chores and the shared closeness, the cohabitation of two females, their skin and labor, their thoughts, which pass between them like sunrays and strike smiles, a flow of energy. So many things need and deserve their attention, there’s hardly time to stop and ponder over trifles. A tug and squeak of the well-pump, the rusty mittens it leaves on their hands, or those crunchy beads of ice that float in the water; or how many logs it takes to stoke the woodstove and warm up the house where the windows fog from their breath. The kitchen window has no curtains but old cut-up sheets tucked in the frame; a candle melted in the bottom of a jar and a box of matches on the sill.

Sometimes, after breakfast or in the early afternoons, as they sort grains together, separating black hardened granules from the rest of the kernels, the mother sings and the daughter listens or croons along. The mother’s voice is soft and dreamy, the girl’s is light and tingling, a river joined by a brook. All songs are crude folk songs, in which a woman is most always addressing a man, either assuring him of her eternal love and devotion or soliciting his. The songs are fraught with longing that, the girl senses, could never be replenished or fully grasped. It spreads like dust about the cabin or lingers like that peculiar fleshy odor snarled in the folds of her mother’s skin, her hair.

The girl is only five, but one song particularly strikes her because of its caressing tune and measured rhythm. It’s simple but also unsettling, a tease of callous fingers on her ribs. She understands the words, their designated meaning, yet can’t comprehend the speaker’s urgency, her baffling desire to trail after her beloved. The girl usually sings the first couplets, impersonating a woman:

You are my dear, dear,
take me with you there.
In that far-far-away land,
I’ll be your faithful friend.

And the mother answers for a man; her voice deepens, acquires coarseness:

You are my dear, dear,
I would have taken you there.
But in that far-far-away land,
I already have such a friend.

The song stretches into five or six more couplets and the speaker continues to offer herself to her beloved in every imaginable role: a wife, a lover, a neighbor, a sister, a housekeeper. Each time the man rejects her by saying that all of those roles have been already filled by other women. The girl is confused by the song, by the implied humility of a man-woman union. It’s the kind of feeling she gets—deep inside, in the bud of her body—from the dark, harrowed fields; or a cry of a soon-to-be-slaughtered animal; or the dumb panic of chickens, their pleading glare and already-sliced necks. Perhaps it is also in those moments that the first intimation of danger is conjured, the first apprehension of sex and the paralyzing inescapability of a woman’s fate.
The girl lets the mother finish the song before venturing to ask, “That woman? Why can’t she be alone? Why does she need that man?” At first, the mother doesn’t reply, but keeps scooping the dry rice off the table into a tin bowl. The grains fall and swoosh like rain against tree leaves. The mother says, “A man shouldn’t leave his woman. If he goes, you go. Or you make him stay. That’s just how it is. It really is very simple. You’re a tree—he’s the roots. If the roots break, the tree dies. Understand?” The girl nods, although she doesn’t, doesn’t understand, not at the moment and not for many, many years, but she’s never heard her mother talk so seriously about anything.

The water seethes on the woodstove, boiling over. The dishes are piled in a pan, rags draped over the sides, a sliver of soap in a cup. While the mother washes plates and skillets, yolk-crusted spoons and grease-gloved knives, the daughter dries them, standing on a rickety bench and stacking the dishes up on a shelf.

The girl follows her mother step by step, from the kitchen to the pantry, from the pantry to the bedroom, where they shake blankets and amass a snowdrift of pillows against the metal railing of the bed. They brush each other’s hair and rub oil on the tips before plaiting; the heavy braids swing at their waists.

After a while, the roast simmers in the belly of the oven, and the girl and her mother are taking a bath in a large washtub filled with sudsy water and a handful of plums too sour to eat. They arrange the plums like purple gems around their wet necks. They laugh and hook toes and glance out of a steamed window, making fist-size clearings to glimpse their man, who should be coming home just about now. He’s a barn of a man too, with a roughed frame and calloused hands. His hair is the color of rust and his skin is mushroom-brown from working in the fields all summer. His square figure looms large and larger with each advancing step. Both, the mother and the daughter, know the man’s features to the last mole, the furrow between his raised brows, the finger-thick veins on his neck, or how he sometimes pulls to one side when he walks, limping as he ascends the hill. They can discern, even from afar, a wedge of tension in his prickly jaw, a hard, unpleasant certainty in the familiar drag of a stride as he places his feet a bit too close and sturdies himself, then staggers along.

For just a moment the air holds a keenness, the silence close and deep. They hear the man stumble through the yard and enter the cabin, yelling out their names, capsizing a chair, and another, the fruit bucket.

The thunder of apples on the floor.
The narrow country road is chocked with bushes and trees, a sweep of junipers, a grip of shaggy pines, century-old oaks and maples, whose single red leaves dangle like tongues from thick sprawled limbs. For miles around, the fields are cluttered with boulders in waist-high weeds, the orchards abandoned to crows. They migrate from tree to tree, a pack of raucous resentful birds, flapping their black wings at a silver station wagon as it tears through the brush. When the couple pulls up to the farmhouse, they are surprised to discover, in a dapple of yellow light, a row of horseshoe pits and rusty stakes tufted with grass like old graves. The yard is large, strewn with random objects: an upturned child’s basin, a faded plastic pitcher, a cracked-in-two flower pot, a lopsided sandbox made from a truck tire, a wheelbarrow overflowing with rainwater and bird droppings. Not far, a tractor squats in high weeds, the seat is missing. A short walkway from the house, where the sun slices off the tips of pines, there’s a sunken barn and the remnants of a coop.

The station wagon halts, the engine revs and dies.

“Something went wrong,” the woman says before sliding out of the driver’s seat. She’s been eating her favorite Angelino plums and her lips are tinged with juice.

“Nice guess,” her companion says. “Why are we here? This place gives me chills.”

“You love the chills.”

“If you say so.”

“Let’s snoop inside,” she offers.

“What for?”

“Curiosity.”

He shrugs, his foot rising over a busted stone.

The house is cold and vined with shadows; a few dusty rags are forced in the window frames. On the kitchen table a stub of a candle inside a jar. A massive woodstove occupies a better part of the room, blackened with soot and grease. Next to it, they discover a shelf with pots and cast-iron skillets wrapped in dust. A bit higher is another shelf with tools: shears, a three-pronged weed hacker, an ice pick, and rat poison, a box of nails. The tin sink is rust-eaten. Floorboards are warped and creaky.

The man saunters after the woman from the kitchen to the pantry, which is separated from the main area by a filthy curtain that could’ve been an old sheet or a part of a nightshirt grazed with holes. Behind the curtain, the couple finds canned tomatoes and beans with squares of jelled fat, a shelf of plum preserves, as indicated by the barely readable labels.

“Do people still can?” the man asks, his words echoing through the shadowiness of the empty house. “I mean not in the cities. I know they don’t in the cities.”

“Yeah. They also have gardens, grow things.”
“Grow and kill.”

The woman stops short, turns to face the man. A trace of discontent on her weary face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean cows and chickens. Pigs.”

“Oh,” she says. “Right.”

The bathroom has an old oblong washtub like a dead body ossified in the middle of the floor. A chamber pot sits next to the commode, both are blotched gray. The sink, originally eggshell color but now also gray, is square and on a heavy pedestal that reminds the man of a colossal erect penis. He thinks of another woman, somewhere in the city, getting dressed for a dinner he won’t be able to attend, not unless he leaves now.

“Why are we here?” he asks, impatiently.

“I told you.”

“I forgot. Something about your new poem.”

“A sestina. I can’t decide on the last word. You have to select six end-words for the first stanza. Like farmhouse, plums, babies, angel, song, and one more. The words repeat in the remaining five stanzas only in a different order. And then, of course, the three-line envoy has to include all the six words—three at the end, three mid-way. It’s complicated.”

“I’d say. I thought poetry was fun.”

“To read, not to craft. The sestina originated as a love poem somewhere in France. Troubadours sang their verses and were quite competitive, each trying to top the next in wit and the complexity of style. Then the sestina migrated to Italy.”

“Of course. All the world’s greatest pleasures come from those countries—love, sex, wine, food. What’s left for us?” He curls the woman’s hair around his finger, taking a step closer, her slim body is fitted against his. She has small tight breasts that poke through her shirt; as always, she isn’t wearing a bra, but a camisole. His breathing changes, and so does hers.

There’s a game they used to play when they first met and sex was as welcoming and mysterious as a night sky beaded with stars. They would crash parties, pay surprise visits to their friends and neighbors, invade summer cottages or vacation rentals locked for the season, finding a spare key or an unlatched window. They would sneak in people’s bathrooms or closets, retire to empty balconies, live in strange homes, make love on nuptial beds. She had always initiated it, of course, seduced him with a thin tremor of her voice and hops of phrases like dream potions brewed in the dark.

“I found this article a while back,” the woman says and pulls away from his kiss. “About a farmer’s wife who killed her five children and arranged them in bed in the order they’d been born, from the youngest to the oldest. She then undressed and lay next to them, which was how her husband found her when he came back from work.”
“Jesus.” The man blinks, and again, trying to erase the image.

“When I did some more research, I found out that she was pregnant when that happened.”

“The postpartum and another pregnancy?”

“Yes. But also something tragic occurred when she was five.”

“Abuse? Sexual?”

“Maybe. Or domestic violence. I couldn’t find out exactly.”

“And the child?”

“They had to perform an emergency cesarean at seven months, afraid she would harm the fetus.”

“It lived?”

“Yes. A girl. A female.”


“The farmer’s wife, in her sixties, just died in a mental hospital, choked on an apple. The bizarre thing, as you put it, is that no one admits to giving her the apple. She never had any visitors either.”

The man rubs his eyes, gnaws at the flesh inside his mouth.

“But there’s more.” Now the woman has slipped behind him, and her voice has gone soft, curled to a whisper. His neck tingles with her breath.

“More?” he asks.

“Yes. This place, this farmhouse—it’s her childhood home.”

The man finally turns around, observes the woman, flecks of crimson in her dark eyes, as when she’s finished one of her poems and can’t wait to share it with him. He senses the heat her body radiates under the tight clothes. She inches closer, and he leans against the sink as her upper lip sweeps across his lower one. Her hand caressing the hump of flesh inside his jeans. “Let’s stay here,” she says. “Pretend being them, a farmer and his wife. There’s food in the car, and the pantry.”

“No,” he says. “Are you mad? I have to be at work.” His fear rises, but also his desire. He wants the woman to stop, and he doesn’t, her hot fingers slipping through his zipper, forming a ring around the base of his penis.

“What if I were to tell you there’s no gas in the car and the closest station is miles away? It’s getting dark,” she murmurs. “So very dark.”

“Look, I get it—the farmer’s wife, she was crazy, depressed, pissed off at her husband for giving her all those babies. But what do I have to do with it? You aren’t pregnant, are you?”

The woman’s other hand is reaching inside his shirt, tugging at the little coils of hair on his tan muscular chest. She pinches one.

He trembles. “Don’t do that.”
“Suppose she wasn’t crazy?” She pinches another hair. “Suppose she did it out of love? Suppose he was about to leave her and she wanted him to stay? She was hurting so badly, yet couldn’t express herself. She had no words—nothing sufficient enough.”

Suddenly, the man has no desire to have sex, his erection is nothing but a habit, an involuntary response of dumb flesh at the moment of dirty provocation. He thinks about the other woman, who knows nothing about this one or her unfathomable poetry, her desire to bend and forge words, to stack them up and break them apart like wooden blocks.

“That’s horrible,” he says, fully engorged and breathless. A tremor runs up his thighs, his anus tightens.

“Isn’t it?” the woman says and slides away from him, just in time, then shakes her long coppery hair. She walks toward a squalid window and rubs it with her fist, allowing the dim glow of the evening sun to creep over the floor.

She begins to whistle, then hums, then croons. It’s a love song. Soft. Lullaby soft. The heart stills from such softness.