

Bildungsroman, 1999

—*Tysons Corner, Virginia*

It was late in the empire of concrete.
Vultures liked to perch on the austere ledge
outside my window, scouting the horizon.
Think of angels, then think their opposite:
all the things we ache to hide flung open,
soft, too soft, like a newborn barely formed.
They were cold, I think. Sun dried their feathers.
I was lonely, a head above a desk
ready to plunge into the glinting river
below my office called the Beltway, catch
like a pebble in a wheel's stainless spokes.
This was before the towers fell. Before
the dot.com bubble burst, before Gitmo,
Dodd-Frank, Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*.
All language to me then seemed violent,
all metaphor poignant, even suspect.
Driving to work: was that a metaphor?
Falling asleep on the couch work paid for,
stumbling toward the bed in my work clothes,
stripping in the dark, which was the old dark.
The man who was my tailor, a Korean—
I remember how he'd squat beside my feet,
pushing pins into the fabric here and there,
how he'd raise a stick of chalk, press firmly:
a hyphen, a hash mark snowy on the cloth.
How he'd pause to look up, from time to time,
and catch me standing still in his mirror,
the image of me staring at the mirror.
Everything is worth your look, I'd like to tell
that self, everything is still beautiful,
even if you have no words to say it.