

## Emily Dickinson in the West of Iceland

I sock-skate around the mattress and back to the living room with black-and-white TV teetering on cracked vinyl. First time in weeks, alone. Sunday, respite from questions, from afternoons of explaining, of flattening myself like a map. I slide to the window facing marsh. *Púfur*. River. Wind picking up, and a wail that eddies under eaves and between walls. The outcast's wail. *Útburðarvæl*. The howl of an infant abandoned on boulder. To counter that wail, I turn on the television. Iceland's state-sponsored station, a silver flicker. The Old West. Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman. *Only work I know is doctorin'*. This muttered as she enters the saloon to break up a brawl. I study the set of post-Civil War Colorado. Grim portraits hang on the wall. I recognize a face. It is Emily Dickinson's face enlarged to the size of a painted portrait. Serving as the generic nineteenth-century female "look." I crouch at the TV. Wait for Dickinson's face to appear once more among Hollywood Cheyenne. The face—a calling card. The face—a prop. Reluctant portrait of Supposed Person. It's necessary to forget the face to hear the creak of floorboards beneath one's feet. I reach for threads caught in splinters of a door frame. Find frost in a wardrobe. Now, this: face behind the face.

~

My bottom lip is puffed and twisted. I do that when irritated. Look like I'm chewing tobacco. "Smile!" That's the command. Mother's. Not smiling is like a "dirty face." But, in Iceland, smiles give one away as foreign. Try it on, the Icelandic face. Set my features into surface that doesn't crumple or pleat at sight of others. *Ekkert mál*. "No problem." That's the response to sympathy. Apologies. Gratitude. Thank-you for kleinar and coffee. *Ekkert mál*. Thank-you for writing the words down for me. *Ekkert mál*. Thank-you for opening the archives. *Ekkert mál*. How is it with your daughter? *Ekkert mál*. Are you tired? *Ekkert mál*. Are you angry about something? *Ekkert mál*. Can you tell me what says the sign over mirror?

~

Ekkert  
mál do  
you Ekkert  
have enough  
mál are  
ekkert are  
mál writing  
ekkert mine.  
Et þú?

And you? I am not  
my face mál  
ekkert my face is  
not a letter ekkert  
nothing mál

~

I watch a  
woman apply  
make-up in the  
public bathroom. I  
want to quickly swipe  
my lips with gloss but can't  
look at myself in the mirror  
when others are around. I  
wash my hands, slowly,  
hoping the woman will  
leave so I can look in  
the mirror. I take my  
comb, but don't look  
while smoothing my  
thinning hair. I can  
not make eye con-  
tact with myself  
when others  
are present.  
To be seen

looking at my face is like being  
caught peering through a keyhole.  
Can't be seen staring at the thresh-  
hold, wondering why I  
don't look like myself. Unlikeness  
feeds figment likeness. I dine while  
watching a poet's face morph into age-  
progressed transcripts. A forensic exer-  
cise. Once there had been faces of girls  
like me—on milk cartons—aged—like-  
nesses imagined forward so  
we might recognize the  
missing.