

Her Spirit Lingered in JCPenney

They closed the mall in 2003,
cut off the body and left one limb.
Anchor store, JCPenney,
with its taupe-tiled floors that cut through
carpeted departments—
blouses, hosiery, big & tall—
the yellow brick road of my youth—
that got to stay.

A suburban time capsule, Penney's lingered,
changed only by the cuts and rises
of the denim it sold.
Brown metal stalls still stuck unless slammed,
toilet seats behind them peeling, rough,
barely flushing, and begging for replacement.
Escalators still hummed, crisscrossing through jewelry counters.
Trifold mirrors still bookended dressing rooms,
ancient gum hardening and black on their floors

until 2020, when they sealed the doors shut.
The building, fenced off and empty,
sat for two years waiting for demolition.

I cried the day I drove by to see drywall
crumbling from the jaws of bulldozers as they
smacked suspension grids and acoustic panels.
Another place I had felt my mother,
gone.

Years ago, I lost her in intimates.
Suddenly alone among the full bottoms and double Ds
I panicked and began to wander, each turn
of the taupe-tiled path leading me past
what would normally excite me—
fake food in the home displays,
phone-book-thick catalogs chained to cubicles in returns—

An employee led me to an office
and paged my mother.
I was relieved, but she was mad.
Why had I left her?

Shortly after her death, my father found a nanny
who drug me to Penney's for my first bra.
Someone will measure you there, she said.
Mortifying. Surrounded by spandex and nylon,
encouraged insufferably by a woman who still
felt like a stranger, I hated everything in
that moment.

Undergarments purchased and back at home,
she headed to the kitchen to start dinner.
Without knowing why, I grabbed the glasses
from her pocketbook, and hid them in a vase
in the living room.