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Velveteen

This night, knee-deep in ice-slicked snow, my feet
fit themselves into the sunken shapes of earlier footfalls.

The shagbark hickory sways as I wade through the cold,
compost bucket swinging, handle hinged to chance.

It must be the stillness makes me think of a woman
I barely knew suddenly slumped forward

in her living room chair. And I'm barely into my sadness
when a small shape explodes from the thicket

not five yards off, cottontail statted in moonlight,
balanced now on hind haunches, motionless

as the illustration in a child's book, recalling the story
and a world of hard questions: what is real, what it is

to be alive. At night, the strange child I was
would lie awake, afraid I was someone else's dream.

Heart racing, panic rising, I'd pinch myself,
chanting, "I am, I am." That same old poem.

When the backyard rabbit zigzags away, I slog back
to the house, back to crackling logs, smoke in the air,

back to a man who almost makes me believe I'm real.
Clacking the computer keys in the next room,

humming an old gospel tune, he stops abruptly,
and a glacier of silence settles in,

the garden frozen deep against the spade,
my throat thick with last year's oak.