

Early Morning, Downtown 1 Train

by Rebecca McClanahan, from The Georgia Review

In this car packed with closed faces, this tube
of light tunneling through darkness: two sleeping boys, so close
I could touch them without reaching—their smooth brown faces,
planed cheekbones like Peruvian steppes leading from
or to some beautiful ruin. Boys so alike they must be brothers.
And the small, worried man they sprawl against, too young to seem
so old: father. How far have they come? How far to go?
They sleep as only loved children sleep, wholly, no need
to tighten or clutch, to fold themselves in. Their heads are thrown back,
mouths open—no, agape, which looks like agape,
the highest form of love, some minister told me long ago.
As if love is a cupboard of lower and higher shelves, and why bother
reaching if you have hands like the hands of this young father,
cracked and blistered, stamped with the pattern of shovel or pick.
For someone must do our digging, and rise in the dark to dress
the children carefully, as these boys are dressed, and pack their knapsacks,
and ease out of the seat without waking the open-mouthed
younger one nor the older whose head now rests fully
on the emptied seat . . . but, “My, God,” I think
as the brakes squeal and the father moves quickly to face the door, “he is leaving
these children, a father leaving his children.” The train slows at 50th
and he presses his body against the door, lifting his arms
above his head—a signal? surrender?—as the door slides open
and a woman steps in, small and dark like the father, her body
lost in a white uniform. She touches his sleeve, something
passes between their eyes. Not sadness exactly, but ragged
exhaustion, frayed edges meeting: his night her day, her night

his day, goodbye hello. She slides onto the seat, lifting
one son's head to her lap. His mouth is still open, his body limp.
She smooths his collar. Her small hands move to his lips,

closing them gently the way one closes the mouth
of the recently dead. But the boy is not dead. Just sleeping,
an arm thrown over his brother. His mother near.