For the Woman Who Hugged Me in the Self-Checkout Line at the Smith’s on Sahara and Maryland

Emily Hoover

She had her own damn cart, wheeled it into the aisle. But she didn’t have enough money, so she sandwiched her body

in between the conveyer belt & the cart as I imagine she’d done at home, countless times, trying to close the door in front of her as he wedged

his hand (or fist) in the crack, a boundary he didn’t believe existed between his body & hers. He scoffed at the cart’s load,

waving his credit card in the air like some kind of petite flag you’d find at a parade for heroes—his voice smashed dishes, her face

a punched hole in the wall. She stopped loading her Wonder Bread, her cans of French-style green beans (or creamed corn),

feeling the eyes on her: the pity resting between our brows, the anger stuck between our shoulder blades. She gazed at the snaking line around her, & joined us, the ones who prefer to key in our own produce codes, bag our own groceries, curse

at the kiosks that gaslight us, insisting we place items in the bagging area though we’ve already placed those items

in the bagging area. Every one of us in line took a step back
to invite her to go ahead of us
even though her cart carried

more than fifteen items. She
and I ended up next to each other,
our kiosks chiming. Her
crow’s feet, tear-stained eyes,

crinkled dollars, collapsed chest,
& shaking hands an echo
of me just months before.
I watched her put what she
couldn’t afford back into the cart,
the grocery store employee hovering.
*You know, it’s none of my business,*
I said, *but I left a man who yelled*

*at me like that, & sometimes it’s hard,*
*but most of the time, it’s the best*
*decision I’ve ever made.* The exchange
of words stood among us, protracted.

Soundlessly, her small body
softened into mine, & she sighed,
like sliding into a hot bath after
a long day of labor. We held

each other, & I imagined her
remembering this moment, days
from now, weeks from now, years
from now—the memory perhaps

giving her the muscle to close
the door for good. A woman
I met in a bar bathroom once told
me, while reapplying her lipstick,

to stay away from men who hate
their mothers. Even though it was none
of her business. She eyed the dried tears
on my face. I wish I had listened then.