

Between Two Thieves

The membrane tore into a rage
of red stars. The synapses tingled
with one great *pow*
then began to blink at random.

She fell backwards from the stroke,
an overexposed negative
gone white with shadow.
I try not to see this in her bath:

the weight of leaded bones
and the skin anchored there
like wet, twisted, sheets.
This is not the body I remember.

I remember the round, powdered cleavage,
how it made me think of the silver dust
clinging to the cleft of a dark plum.
I remember the smoothed pompadour,

the pumps, and the black patent
handbag that anchored her elbow
as her handkerchief rose to the nape
of her neck. That was my aunt—

alternate mother—walking me to the bus
in 1971. She could've just stepped off
a Max Factor ad, circa 1943.
She waved that hanky good-bye,

and even then I saw Brooklyn,
apartment houses smudging the sky
with exhalations of burning coal.
The day they left, Uncle Mike

parked the Packard on 73rd,
back doors open and trailer attached,
all signs pointing west.

Handkerchief in hand, she must

have ascended that tufted leather
as if she were a queen. That
was my aunt. Scepter of rolling pins.
Bestower of cannolis. Six days later,

they stopped at the edge of the Mojave.
Uncle Mike checked his maps,
bought a case of cantaloupes
and an air conditioner that he hung

over the front passenger window.
I see my grandfather in the back seat
slicing melons, and my aunt's sovereign
fingers, pushing orange half moons

over my father's shoulder. Grandpa
says, "Vinnie, pump, pump, *pumpa*,"
—more to let my Uncle Mike know
the air conditioner was a bad purchase—

and my father, eager to please, starts
pumping the device two-handed, a melon
rind clenched between his teeth
in one green, innocent, grin.

In this scene my aunt
holds down right angles
between my little father in the
front seat—winging his way

toward approval—and my widowed
grandfather in the back seat,
who's trying to divine from a melon
whatever sweetness life has left.

Her eyebrows are arched over
all this, her superiority claimed
upon leaving PS 176. She never
told me if she felt trapped

running a household at thirteen,
and I never thought to question
her rule. All I have are my father's
stories: Grandpa yelling,

"Vinnie, *pumpa, pumpa, pumpa*,"
and the one about the air conditioner
that went super nova in the middle
of the Mojave. I can see the wet sparkles

flying across my father's lips,
over his Brylcreemed hair, and Grandpa
spitting a mouthful of seeds,
coming to tears with laughter.

That is how I see my aunt,
anchored in the back seat
of a blue sedan, dripping with seeds,
holding that handkerchief amidst

the uncertain as if she had the power
to wave it aside. I have to see her that way
before my father grabs her ankles,
and her unmoored eye wanders past

fate's occluding blow. Freedom
never felt such unforgiving laxity.
As I embrace her from the bath water,
we lift her back into her chair.