



Mother Incarnate

My mother at ninety asleep on the chaise with the moving water adjacent. We two, only residents at the pool, late Spring afternoon, long shadows from the highrise swaddle the lounges. Dark towels, of treetops folding over brick tiles. Supple sun in the rails of the catwalk. Slatted shadow cast on the grounds. Always the dark,

and the light, dark and light. The pooled water keeps moving, because the wind is up and the palms are passing it between them, finger by finger, a rush of messages only a mystagogue might decipher., The swish and wash of the breeze complements the clouds rumpling, toward comfort. The water goes where the wind says and the voices,

of trees follow. The water moves because the wind says something moving, what a mother might say to her daughter calming her worries before she must sing for a crowd. I remember my mother praying always. Now almost cheerfully waiting to die, breath expectant each night. Like anyone, she'd prefer to pass

over in sleep. Proud mother who says outloud nonetheless, she's aware of her mind's decay. Under crimped skin, aware of a silkworm lighting her limbs, something spoken in code by trees and shadows. Small strokes like those that skirt across water. One spark burnt here, one brain cell's invisible damage, memory's

chemicals draining away. What life did. What it does to us all. The visible skull behind her smile. The truth of my mother incarnate at ninety in the sundowning hour, my own head deflowering like hers. In this moment we're two peonies weighted with sun. How they sing in our living faces, afloat, dozing upright.

- Winner of the *Briar Cliff Review Award* 2006