

Leslie Ullman

Private Acts

My father promised,
as he shut my room
dark, night
was the sun's eye

blinking. I promised
I wouldn't chew paper
again, or leave the damp wads
like amulets under the bed.

I shut my eyes. The guests
raised their drinks and told stories
downstairs, laughing in their
bracelets. Their rings of smoke.
Their strange breath bloomed

with attention. I opened my eyes
but the paisley sofa print
rose still, a copper wave that filled
and kept filling my eye's
black room.

I crept to the stairs where light
floated up, and sometimes
a string of words I would
wear for the night . . .

He tucked me in again.
He promised me dark
as a pair of arms, rocking
water, a blanket my size . . .

The paper tasted salty,
the taste of my first lie.
Then I crept among scented
furs on the bed no one

made my parents sleep in—
no, I slept all night
in the bed where I
belonged, while turquoise threads

branched like bits of sky
through my mother's water-colored
gown, and morning came
slow, grey, through every window at once.