

Elisabeth Murawski

Blessings and Curses

There's something maternal, even wifely,
in her face — a patience
as she leans into a space she does not deserve.
She's tilting her head towards her father
in front of Sacred Heart church.
She's only twenty but she looks older.
It's the day of cousin Vernon's first Mass.

Hats were in fashion then. Hers,
a white broad-brimmed sailor, shades
her face round with baby fat. Her flat
chest hides beneath a jacket
stylishly boxy or sizes too big.
Whom is she protecting?

Her father's suit coat strains
at the belly, the thick wavy hair
he's vain about totally white.
He's wearing a tie she gave him,
splashes of blue and red and silver,
the flash of the male.

An ordination is like a wedding —
people give money and cry happy tears.
She won't marry for another five years.
And there will be three children,
a church annulment, a civil divorce.

Before the marriage ends, her husband will
tell her what her problem is.
He will tell her in the kitchen

while she's not watching the rice.
He will jab his finger in the air
and sputter his charged one-liner
with a long half-life:
"Your father ruined you!"

She hears it again tonight
waiting for the valerian to kick in,
the herb, the label says,
the ancients used to induce sleep.
Did Cassius take valerian?
How different is a natural sleep
from a natural death?

It's been thirty years
and she can still see her father's dark blood
filling the gallon glass jug
beside the hospital bed.

She wonders now
if, when she stood there,
she did it again — leaned toward him
as she did in the picture,
because she'd grown that way,
like a tree.

What happens to a tree
that takes such a turn
the leaves forget?

If lightning strikes it,
does the burnt split trunk
remember?