

GIBBONS RUARK

Quarantine

Some things happened every year, no matter what:
The air cooled down a little after a storm,
The fireflies rose and fell in total silence,
Unlike those mournful gnats along the river
In that poem the lovelorn teacher read us
We were every one too young to understand.
The berries fell from the chinaberry tree
And left the backyard slithery underfoot.
But this was the year of Mama's polio,
The summer when the epidemic kept us
On the block, then under the trees, and then,
When she came down with it and went away,
Behind the head-high railings of the balustrade.
Next door was the church, high sunlight angling

Through the steeple's stained glass, unfolding then
Like a flickering board game on the floor.
I stood on the steps and hollered "Polio!"
Then came the parade of openhearted aunts,
Spelling each other, stern and sweet by turns,
One not caring if we saw her naked,
Since we were only children, after all.
Beautiful and young, an Army nurse in the war,
Milk-pale except for the dark touch here and there,
Did I dream she made us buttered toast and eggs
Before remembering to put her clothes on?
She died in childbirth, fifty years ago,
And I have wondered at her all my days.
When Mama came home, there was the wheelchair,
Strange, like a marvelous oversized toy,
And then the crutches and the metal braces.

Crutches I knew, big boys with football injuries,
But the braces were hinged and ominous,
Not Mama's legs, not anything like them.
Only late at night could you not hear her coming.
Then she lay down and they were taken off
And stood till first light in a bedroom corner
Like parts of a skeleton, and she slept
As we all did, swimmers floating in a salt pond.
In those hours nobody needed to walk,
Unless you had to pee or the house caught fire.