

Still Life

All I recall from 1991: a dream. A stairwell
sprouts from a cafeteria to a playground. Jesus sits
at the bend. As blobs of children rumble ahead, I turn
to ask him if he'd like company. *I'm alright*, Jesus says. *Go have fun.*

What does it mean that I remember dreams and not real life?

I was born with a black hole in my brain. The first time
I noticed the hole, I was twelve. In the back office
of a glorified daycare, I said nothing
until the skittish social worker admitted, *Yes*,

*that's a two-way mirror and behind it, a thousand
suits are whittling your words to knife
your father's spine in court.* Later that day, my mother
shook me— screaming—*Why did you lie?*

Why didn't you tell her he beat you across the head?

I stared at her. *Who did what?* Black hole.

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Last night, the oncologist reduced Grandpa's morphine drip
to let my sister tilt the phone to a lucid ear.
Five hundred miles away, I told him
I'm sorry. And *I love you.* Again

and again. Again. I pictured his sunken

chest, plastic tubes linking his lungs to my grandmother's
prayers. When did I last see him? I remember
Grandpa everywhere. Feeding us. But sometimes
I remember him not at all. Not even his face.

Within the hour, my sister called back to say
he died. *But first, he opened his eyes.*

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My still life childhood crumbles like a photograph
brittle in the fists of an arsonist.

We get one thousand words per burning photograph,
yet this is all I've got: my mother's kneeling
shrieks. My father's voice full of boils. My sisters'
flinching, my wincing, and now, cracking

at the edge of my frigid Brooklyn rooftop, I hear

all of us blaring from that black hole: *I'm sorry. I love you.*

I'm sorry I love you.