

## 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.*