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Night School, Mother & Daughter, Trompe l'oeil

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Night School

In a classroom like this one where
her children once sat fidgeting for the bell
to ring so they could grab their jackets
and shout out loud to the cold air and sun
shining on Broadway two blocks from home
where two flights up she had set out bread
and milk on the kitchen table because

she was down the street at the tailor's shop
turning a shirt collar or mending a man's coat
and nights she got down on her hands and knees
to wash floors in an office building on Second Avenue
things she had learned as a girl in Poland

and brought with her a boat ride away to Ellis Island
to the man she married and soon enough
their four children (one dead one)
and after he died of influenza

to the new husband and his five children (one dead one)
and in time to the new daughters-in-law
and sons-in-law in their uptown apartments
and the babies one at a time:

she sat practicing her Palmer letters
connecting the fine threads of ink
each graceful curve looping to the next
like crocheting a pair of ladies gloves
making words where silence used to be.

Mother & Daughter

for my sister

Maybe it is not the words
you have waited all your life
for her to speak or
your own words knotted
under your tongue.

What matters after all
is comforting the body
bathing her
oiling the dried skin
anointing
face
arms and hands
scars on the belly
feet
an act of devotion
for both of you
which she may have forgotten already
which you will never forget:

how it was
after anger had burned itself out
and there was only
the wash cloth in your hand
warm water
the pale sick skeleton
of an old woman lying on the sheets.

Trompe l'oeil

From the beginning the eyes trick:
 a burst of blinding light
 the moonstone of your mother's face
 objects afloat in the air above your crib.
 It seems you could float up
 to reach them, roll off your bed
 into the sky.

Separate, you never see yourself
 seeing – only someone else's eyes
 looking back at you, someone's
 eyes looking away.

Your range is limited as the pinhole
 of a camera obscura, shadows waving
 like black drapery at the edges. If you
 do not turn your head, there is
 nothing there. You see only parts
 of yourself: hands playing the piano,
 buttoning a jacket; the belly curving
 away from you; a bent knee; feet
 walking on a country road by
 themselves. You are disembodied
 as your shadow.

Eyes sit at their windows alone.

In the mirror
 your face swallows itself
 like the new moon.