Light Years

It is always an accident that saves us. It is someone we have never seen.
—James Salter

It's late November, sister, and the stars are hard and high
outside my wide kitchen window,
blazing above the snow-sheathed maple
from distances so deep they are described in terms of time—

the time it takes the ghost of light, the fastest thing,
to reach us.
A faint song
reaches through my wall—my neighbors, two music majors
work frozen fingers on the Steinway
they had shipped from Sacramento.

Aliesha, it's sixteen years now since we met—
since our father leaned his forehead
on the corner of the kitchen cabinet
and told the truth of you
and drove Allie and me to your trailer by the ragged field in Albany
where your hands, like reflections
coalescing in settling water,
shone out and mirrored mine—
wild veins, long fingers, knucklebones too big for wrists.

I still try to imagine the waiting room
where you ran into our aunt, the receptionist
who looks just like you—how you both stared
while the phone lines rang and rang.
I try to stitch together the full story, the family secret—
dad seduced after the war, chased away by your mother
and her family—how he disappeared for years to drink
in the dark loft above the service station, pumping gas.

He was in love the summer you saved me
from acne and a broken heart, setting up your guest room
for me to write.
You woke the house one night to watch the Perseids—
your daughter grumbling, your son just two. Even the neighbors
brought their telescope, Juan cursing and cracking a beer
while we laughed on the damp deck, looking for the lost,
the wayward stars.

That summer I learned to laugh like you—
to laugh so hard the tears came burning out
and stung the sores on my face, to scream

as I played with your children,
tripping
over the baby gate, breaking plates
and spilling garbage, banging the corners of walls
as we ran through the house dad had left and rented you.

When Grandma passed, Allie took the Steinway
though only you could play. She didn't understand
what that piano would have meant to you,
how you gave lessons to the neighbor kids for years.

But listen—
I can hear the starving students playing,
hands almost in harmony,
laughing when they get it wrong.

Family is what you taught me—
dented doors, your daughter's fractured toe,
even dad's belated, clumsy kindness.
The rampant damages of love.

We stood under the stars
that last Thanksgiving, listening
while everyone said it's best the piano went to Allie.
You and yours would have scarred it
in some superficial way.

Sister, they were right.
They were wrong anyway.

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