Little Daughter

Susan Wylie*
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I.
When I died, there was only a glass nursery
between us. I kept still
all those years, but before anyone, I knew
when Mother’s cancer sprouted. The doctor
removed her left breast,
but I took it for consolation, cherishing
it for months: nuzzling, biting,
woaring it like a silly cap.

My sweet, pregnant sister
began to visit more often, took Father
to dinner alone because Mother refused
to cook. She stood
on the porch afternoons and evenings. Unkempt,
she wouldn’t wear
her foam breast, safety pinned her sheer house dress
shut at the neck. In time, the doctor took
her other breast, but the dark
flowers still spread
beneath Mother’s skin.

II.
Now, she naps fitfully, groans
all night. In sleep, I watch her turn toward me.

As Mother grows away, Father keeps
house. Mornings, Sister brings her son,
and all Father can do is keep him from knick-knacks,
glass tables, try to teach him
to crawl on plastic runners which branch
down hallways. Mother stares
past the others, rocks for hours
with me nestled in her lap. Now she knows
I’m a miracle, not just her still daughter.
She’s glowing where she imagines her heart.
As Mother's lungs fill, I tickle
her toes and slide fingers along her ribs
until she breaks, cries, begs
me not to leave. I curl
into her to hear
her blood rushing, and she becomes beautiful:
her skin, a Chinese lamp; her face, a mask
of pain or ecstasy; her disheveled hair,
fine and sparse, past combing.

-Susan Wylie