

CLAIMING KIN

Insistent as a whistle, her voice up
the stairs pried open the blanket's
tight lid and piped me
down to the pressure cooker's steam and rattle.
In my mother's kitchen, the hot iron
spit on signal, the vacuum
cleaner whined and snuffled.
Bright face and a snazzy apron,
clicking her long spoons,
how she commandeered the razzle-dazzle!

In the front room I dabbed
the company chairs with a sullen rag
(Father's drawers—nothing
wasted). Pale lump blinking
at the light, I could hear her sing
in her shiny kingdom: the sound
drifted out like a bottled message.
It was the voice of a young girl
who stopped to gather cool moss, forgetting
the errand, spilling the cornmeal,
and cried and cried in her bearish papa's ear.

At night, while I flopped
like a fish on grandma's spool bed,
up from her bed and my wheezing
father she rose to the holly,
flat-leaf and Virginia Creeper.
Soft ghost, plush as a pillow,
she wove and fruited against the black hours:
red berries and running cedar, green signatures
on the table, on the mantle.

Mother, this poem is from your middle
child who, like your private second self,
rising at night to wander the dark house,
grew in the shady places:
a green plant in a brass pot,
rootbound, without blossoms.