**My Mother’s Hands**

My mother’s hands were soft once.
Her eyes shone and her smile was radiant.
I know because I’ve seen the pictures,
Photos worn at the edges holding the image
Of a girl with her head thrown back in laughter,
The sun illuminating her with open arms.
I wonder if she knew then
That she would marry a man
Who would snuff out the light and make her shrink.

My mother’s hands are not soft anymore.
They are thin and trembling,
Covered in burns and cuts
From countless hours toiling away in the kitchen,
Veined from constant folding of laundry
And turning doorknobs slowly at night,
As if the sound of her movement
Would wake the beast she shared her bed with.

She says she loves her children,
Says it to us like a ritual, a mantra that she must recite
To remind her of her maternal objective,
Of her programmed directive.
Shallow kisses on my brother’s head,
Weak pulls to bring my sister into her chest,
A begrudging embrace of her own flesh and blood
But I see how her fingers curl into themselves,
Especially when it is my turn.

She does not like me. I know this.
I know it in the way that she studies me when I walk into the room,
In how she speaks to me out of necessity,
The way her once-soft hands
Now pull back in sharp recoils,
As if I am a barbed object or perhaps something set aflame.

She says she loves us.
But I wonder if this is what love is meant to be—
Something forced, something hollow, something cracked,
Like a dress that doesn’t fit or a jar whose lid does not fit all the way.
I do not ask her though,
Because I do not think she would answer.

I hear them at night,
Really the only time he seems to speak to her.
I hear his voice, sharp as glass,
Hear the things he calls her,
Hear the way she does not answer back.
And I feel so sorry for her,
But I also feel so sorry for me.
I am not the reason she is unloved,
Though she looks at me like I am.
Like my existence is just another burden,
Another weight to be carried by her already tired hands.

And yet I cannot help it—
When he raises his voice,
When he slams his fist,
When he is set alight with anger,
And I see how she folds into herself
And makes herself small yet again,
I want to reach for her.
Even when I know she will not reach back.

My mother’s hands were soft once.
They held me gently and cradled me lovingly.
Now, they are something else entirely.
Something brittle, something cold,
Something that never belonged to me.