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Double Portrait: Migraine

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Chelsea Simon Woodard

Double Portrait: Migraine

I.

My mother lies in the upstairs bedroom,
a pillow shielding her eyes from the sunlight
that pours through south-facing windows.
For hours, sometimes days, she swims
in darkness, in the merciless throb
of her own blood vessels that can't
narrow down. There is no talking, no loud
noises; vomiting or trips to the emergency room
sometimes when the pain dilates itself
into everything. In the back of her car,
in a small yellow cooler, she keeps a shot
in case of a headache that can never be
just a headache. Hormones, they say, or chocolate,
or anything. A needle in the thigh on the side
of a dirt road. As a child, I could never
understand how a body could turn on itself,
make her lie corpse-straight and as still
as the winter pond. I never knew when she might rise,
Lazarus-like, stagger down the steep
stairs into morning, dust the sleep from her eyes.

II.

The winter is witchy and my left wrist
and fingers feel like they're falling

asleep, weak when I try to type emails
and weaker still when I try to write

poems. The next morning my left thigh
is numb, and I struggle to walk

up the street, to balance in a standing pose
I know like the small mole on my jawline, like the smell

of the thaw. Some mornings, I can't feel a part
of my cheek. There's something wrong

with my head, but it won't hurt the way
it's supposed to, the way I remember driving

at night at nineteen, a stoplight searing
into my eyeball. There's something wrong

with my heart, it turns out. Something
so soundless, so inconsequential, it's been missed

all my life—in the stethoscope's ear, in a hollow
that won't ever close. All along there was a slip,

an upward strain of blood that never carried
far enough to make me hear it. But in this chimerical year,

I clench my teeth through reflex tests, an MRI—
until a doctor holds the ultrasound against my chest, finding

the fetal flaw that never healed, that kept
its secret to itself all of this time until my body

begged for me to listen to the part
that had always been wrong, to my heart

writing and rewriting its name.