

David Thoreen

Brass Key

Your mother closes her mouth and opens her eyes,
untaking her morning nap. A moment earlier, she
stops fussing at the sink to sit at the breakfast table,

where she assembles an orange with the paring knife
you'll get sharpened tomorrow. Your father looks up
from the paper, folds it into neat creases, shuffles

in reverse down the driveway and across the road, where
he scans the headlines before pushing it into the mailbox.
The dog follows him in, bounds backward up the stairs.

Brass key firm in her hand, your mother unwinds the clock,
stops its pendulum with an index finger. The delicate minute
hand pushes her finger around its face, erasing the hours.

The phone rings like an emergency and your father answers
on the first of several attempts to rise from his chair. Her older
brother, who will die next month, the third of three in a year.

The word *pandemic* drifts to the periphery, unimaginable
as *apocalypse*. Your parents return to church, Father Todd, at 10:30.
Donald Trump, in real estate, daydreams fitfully of a Sun King.

Two EMTs in sneakers settle your mother at center ice, retreat
across the rink, drawing their stretcher after them. On your knees,
you ease your gloves from beneath her head, untell someone

to dial 911. The blood puddle shrinks, dries up. Her eyes crash
open. She's upright again and spinning. Her *dare me* child's smile
evaporates, then she glides backward around the perimeter, and

sits on a bench to untie her skates, before renting them to the girl,
who tugs a few bills from the register, fans them across the Formica.
Your father's hearing improves. He turns down the television, stops

bobbleheading, opts instead for *Pardon?* Your mother drives her new VW downtown, trades it in for a used Honda. In the voting booth in '84, her black felt pen empties the oval next to *Ronald Reagan*. Ditto in '80.

Her hair grows darker, long, then short again. A contractor tears an addition off the house. Your mother's smoke coalesces into twenty unsmoked cigarettes a day, slipped one by one into packs, the filters

shoulder to shoulder like soldiers hidden behind shining foil. She fills whole cartons, drives them to the store. She bleaches Ford's oval, then

Nixon's,

twice. Your father loses weight, takes up jogging. Even Saturday, he hauls

his briefcase to the office but still finds time to take apart your go-cart.

You're five when your mother bleaches Goldwater. All that summer, men dismantle the house above the river: plumbing, wiring, framing, cellar

block,

foundation, fill the hole with sandy soil, returning it to meadow, tall grass and scrub trees, saplings, ungerminated seeds, dormant under blue sky.