

Sarah Elkins

Ancestry

I am thirty-seven percent invasion, thirty percent famine,
eighteen barbarian,

twelve percent retreat with only a drop of peace.

My body is threaded with long strands of steel cable,
the sort that gives the suspension bridge its tension and elegance,
the sort that, if you hold to it, will leave your hand
blood-blistered from the braid and punctured where the wires have frayed.

Wired for the fantastic—I am a fantasia of spillage
and spilling.

All of this is to say, I hit my son when he was three.
I could say *spanked* because, yes, I hit his bottom and the baby-fat backs
of his legs when he twisted and tried to get free of my grip. I beat him
in an acceptable fashion.

I swung my hand high toward the ceiling. You might have thought, for a
moment,

in praise or worship—it was an ecclesiastic
gesture.

There, above me, a chorus of ancestors collected, and one by one
kissed my open palm, blessing me—the distillation of their many rages.
Then, the small fire of my beatified hand delivered its inheritance.

What follows is the unbraiding of this helix.