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Apparition

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ADRIENNE AGGEN

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Apparition

Nothing is malleable in an age of deadlines.
But at three, bones are still figuring themselves out,
deciding how they want to grow and if they'd
rather be firemen or attorneys or investment bankers.

Three is a flexible age,
the doctors said as they examined
the damage to the bones in my foot from the benevolent wheels
of the garbage truck that would pay my way through college.

Flexible,
my mother repeats,
breasts sinking toward the floor, the womb pained thin.
She needs to hear this and she needs to sit down, having

rushed me to the hospital in her manner
usually reserved for cereal sales,
one arm holding her infant son, one elevating my leg
wrapped in a rust-colored hand towel.

Twenty years pass before I return.
This time is different.
No industrial-sized scar to scare,
no drug-spiked pudding, nothing intravenous.

The doctor actually looks about the same age as I do
as he prepares the tetanus shot and cautions me
about the dangers of barbed wire.
I can't help but picture him three years ago

in braces, the orthodontic barbed wire
trapping the fleshy bits of carrots and not-quite-ripe tomatoes.
He hands me paperwork, asks about career goals,
and guides me to a perfect rectangular sheet of tissue.

I am thinking, you and I, we could have easily been classmates
using this tissue to make paper flowers and triceratops,
but instead I sit on it in trousers
(and I say words like “trousers”).

It’s daytime and the white of the ward is
nonthreatening as the chemicals enter my skin and torpedo through the veins.
I don’t know if the slight shudder is from the needle
or the nonsensical figures of nurses who still, years later, frighten me,

wandering in and out of the room like hungry ghosts.