Reversal of Fortune

In the kitchen
In the evening in
the dark corner
My mother becomes
shadow in the dishpan
humming nervous
the dim light
hides the dog shit
on the newspapers
and the children are
scratching at the door
to come in
to dinner.

—Andrea Illes

I imagine her going mad in various ways:
when she eats three ice cream bars
I imagine she'll want to eat six, then eight, then
ten,
the freezer door open all this time,
and her gradual agonized fatness, her shivering.
When she takes a children's video up to her room
I imagine her watching it over and over,
learning the songs by memory, nose to the screen,
and eventually howling and shitting her pants
when I come and tell her to turn off the set.
When I hear her uncertain laughter in the kitchen
I imagine she's hugging her arms around her chest
and trying to give herself counsel in a tender
voice,
her words growing gradually sweeter and clearer:
you want to be dead, you want to be dead.

And I always imagine myself
bursting in through the door to save her, or
sobbing.
Walking upstairs to discover her spinning slowly
from the overhead light,
first cutting her down while cradling her neck in
my hand,
then draping her body over my back.
Some days she's leaning against the kitchen counter,
wrists slit open with the meat knife,
or she's on the floor with the blade twisted into her belly,
which I have imagined repeatedly how to reshape
without wrenching her organs, grazing her heartbeat.
Or else when I get to the kitchen she's hugging the oven,
down on her knees as if praying again,
and I have to drag her away from the gas,
turn the knob to off, crack open the downstairs windows,
tilt back her chin and start giving her mouth to mouth.
And I'm pressing my mouth to her mouth so hard
and trying to breathe so that she'll start breathing,
but this time she's dead and I know there's no way
I can tear her rubbery lips from my lips.
But in the next version she's awake and looking at me,
and she opens her mouth a little wider,
to breathe, I imagine, and then she's screaming:
first on and off like a strobe, like a more accurate clock,
until the sound grows steady and doesn't stop,
and my mouth on hers begins to scream as I catch it.

This is the only conclusion: our mouths glued to each other,
our throats one tunnel, and she's screaming into my mouth
as I scream into her mouth, a sound like acid.
Each throat hoarse, outrageous with bleeding,
each mouth in horror forcing the other
to take by force what it needs to survive.

—Wendy Lyn Burk