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The Birthmark

Merrill Oliver

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The Birthmark · *Merrill Oliver*

There used to be a second dark bag
when I was small — not near the eye
like this. It stuck to my nose like gravel.

Mama would spit for luck and say, “Thank God
it disappeared, because no man
marries a girl who’d maybe curse their sons
with such a face. Like that you would have shriveled
alone and empty.” First she scrubbed,
then tried bleaching it clean with vinegar.
Joseph unwrapped the cloudy bottle
a city doctor gave him years before
and made her spoon from it each day
for a month. The smell drove Papa into the street.

— But listen to what next: they used
“the hand of a dead person” to wipe at it
and that’s what worked. The story goes
some neighbor died in childbirth, and when the news
came to my mother, like a hawk
she snatched me and went flying to the house.
The mark fell like a rotten tooth.

This here was larger, but she wouldn’t have
fingers from a dead hand touching
close to the eye. You’re never sure how much
the dead remove, or what they leave.