

RACHEL HADAS

Light Bulbs and Soap

September: sunny afternoon.
Stroll with my sister once again.

Drained by two hours of angry sleep,
limp, drowsy, I less stroll than droop.

Watch out, though. Something fin-like slides
up from the river as if to slice

our futures. Yours is granite; mine
is thorns and mist. It cuts through both.

Are we bleeding? Neither one
would deign to blot the other's wound.
Fishing for any common theme
of talk—they're few and far between—

we come up with the legacy
our mother left to you and me.

Light bulbs and soap was her advice
to you: bring these to anyplace

you move to. Mine is little more:
she taught me what white lies are.

Precepts still valid, sturdy, sound,
but pretty meager on the ground.

In a nest of teachers, writers,
what has happened to the talkers?

Light bulbs and soap. a terse still life
rendered in tight-lipped black and white.

Light bulbs in a fruitbowl; lies
like white lilac in a vase

with maybe a single stoic bar
of soap; a tablecloth; no more.

Our livelihood, our medium—where
has language gone? Into thin air

floated away, and left a frail
dusting of tiny crumbs—a trail

for our twin tracking through the wood
our mother with her heavy tread

and upright carriage paced into
and vanished ahead of me and you.

Gone with her words into the dark?
We're squinting in the sunny park.

Meanwhile a mile or two uptown:
a primal scene, our very own.

Two sisters shared a dark ground-floor
bedroom they left by the same door,

emerging into separate lives
and separate sets of memories,

even to what our mother said
before she joined the silent dead.