

Nusya (Mama)

Varia Karipoff

You drew the curtains against dusk
and melancholy
something darkening, hesitant
lilac in the sky, a refrain
from a bird,
almost a coo-coo

Your past, further sliding into the horizon
a faint strip of colour, memory
a cardboard photo album with strangers in it
that I, unreasonable, terrible infant,
took to with scissors

Sumrak is the Russian word for dusk
it ends with the same crisp finality
and the last syllable, *rak*, cancer or a crab –
my star sign (children always think it's
about them, that the world stops within
the boundaries of their knowledge)

A family, a country left far behind
stepping off an aeroplane in ugly Soviet shoes
watched by ASIO, your
degrees unrecognised
a mother of two now,
at our door, they no longer deemed you a threat

Curtains drawn, you'd sit down at the piano with bony
concert pianist's hands

You didn't drive, we rushed uphill on foot
for a birthday party, I imagined,
or heard a sneer, the birthday girl in her dad's company car
motioning to get in, we were late to see a movie,
with an eye roll she said she should have known we'd walk

Your accent, a dark, hesitant tone I talked over
when they asked how you were at the check out

In Siberia, I learned that your family called you Nusya
you slept in a tiny room I could not stretch out my arms in
I felt the walls lined with books and brittle, textured wallpaper
and no windows,
no curtains to shut.