

JOEL B. PECKHAM, JR.

## The Raconteur

—For Jane Peckham

How do you read a life—the bric-a-brac  
of bone and blood, white damask of desire?

My father's mother, brittle as barley  
and smouldering with loss, her fifteenth  
cigarette:

Oh just one. Don't be such  
a Puritan. See, your father's problem is  
he's never suffered. I was a beauty once and now,  
just look. Look. Sure it was hard, hard—  
five children, and your grandfather never could  
hold down a job, bless him. But I made sure  
they never wanted. Work like that can break you.

Later, in the rattling hulk of the car, my father  
would revise. Lies, all lies. And give his strict  
account

of dinners missed, birthdays forgotten,  
the image of his mother, no saint, passed out drunk  
in the afternoon, cigarette burning always burning

the dead facts, collected in a tough time, stored

In the back room, where her youngest is crying.  
It wasn't meant to be like this, a yellowing dress,  
faded flowers at the wrist—already old, dying.

She thinks of her mother's filtered cigarettes,  
ballroom gowns, and fluid French, takes another  
glass of wine—*Merci beaucoup monsieur*—raises  
her skirt in the mirror and bows. And the boy  
hardens at the sight, listens to his sister cry.

Lady Jane, it's been years since I've  
learned to lace my own lies on the air. And now  
I weigh my father's words against a memory  
of a face, sheltered in a veil of smoke, cheeks  
afire with something you had secreted away

in the dark corners of the basement. Far from the cold  
eyes of your son—you lean into the only truth  
that you could count on, and I am hanging on every syllable.