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## Learning the Language

Susan Dworski Nusbaum

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## Nusbaum: Learning the Language

### LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

Susan Dworski Nusbaum

Ruta, the Russian hairdresser  
at the Jewish Home and Infirmary,  
watches Adele loosen her white hair,  
pin by pin, strands rippling  
from her temples  
to her thin shoulders,  
resting along the backs  
of her pale arms like wings.

Ruta shampoos and rinses  
the silvery stream, towels it dry.  
She has never seen  
a person's face so luminous,  
so transparent, although she hasn't  
learned the English words—  
how to describe the cool white light  
glowing through her skin,

the color of—  
what is it?  
something like moonstones,  
something like rain?  
She studies her own  
ruddy complexion, black curls,  
peasant shoulders looming  
in the mirror behind Adele's head,

gently brushes the cascade  
into three skeins, winds the silky ropes  
between her fingers,  
pulling them back and up,  
weaving them deftly  
into a French braid at the crown,

pinning them tight,  
until Adele's cheekbones shine,

then bends to touch her lips  
to the coiled softness.  
Adele smiles at the gesture  
reflected in the mirror,  
reaches for Ruta's chapped hand,  
presses it to her mouth,  
releasing her breath  
into the open palm.