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My First Mother

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Witte: My First Mother

MY FIRST MOTHER Francine Witte

Not the one she turned
into, but the young, dizzy
girl who got through college
with art history and no boys.

Oh, they were all in Europe,
your father, too, she would say
when she became my second mother,
standing at the sink, swirling suds
on the dinner dishes.

And then, my third, fourth
and fifth mother. Each one lost
in a circle of smashed plates
and money fights. Packed suitcases

that never left the house.
Till one day, she was gone.
No forwarding address.
My father blamed the hippies,

all that free love and
not knowing a good war
when they saw it. I watched him
wither after that. Slow kill
of loneliness. No bullet

could even touch. Soon,
I grew past my own
first self. College,

marriage, divorce.

Till one day, the phone.
My final mother calling
from L.A. A lifetime

crunched in her gravel
voice. *Sorry*, she said
and *I'll call again*, which,

of course, she never did.
She backed off just enough
to let my first mother

return, dizzy with art history
and waiting for the man
she would marry to come back
from a beautiful war.