

Cross-Ventilation by Kathleen Jones

after the painting "Gray Matter" by Elizabeth Darrow

Her mother painted pictures of flowers in large vases
and in the evenings the air around her father tasted of Scotch
and her sister, sticky with apple juice, always whined

until she got part of what she wanted and her brother left
for the Air Force as early as he could and she missed him, and she
was named Alice and she almost lost her life to whooping cough

and complications during her eleventh summer. As penance
for escaping death, she had to rest and rest and rest. The pain
of inside-out: bedroom as existence. That year was dull as old snow.

She spent her time listening to street noise, and hopscotch and stickball
turned to colder passions. Her bed rested along a windowed wall
but far from the window, so she could see only a corner of the full

picture, and that through fingerprinted glass. She craned
her neck for hints of what she was missing, her latest *Nancy Drew*
and half-hearted curriculums abandoned tents on her lap.

Many times she thrilled at the flourish of her best friend
Maria's turquoise winter coat. Maria ran the neighborhood.
Alice didn't even wish she would come inside to visit, not entirely—

but wished instead that she could transport herself
into weather again. To feel an atmosphere not dictated by her body.
That year she was a cave and after coughing fits

her breath rushed humble and grand into every crevice.

Alice never thought to ask anyone to move her bed
closer to the world. She healed, and as she grew up

her room became more planet than universe. For years
she retreated to the little world of it after feeling on the outside
of charades and Pictionary and basement makeouts and snowball fights.

Eventually she couldn't remember why games sent her to the perimeter.
Her lifetime included twelve first kisses. She favored light jackets
and went hatless, spring-cleaned in paroxysms, cross-ventilated her home.