MARGARET'S FACE

My three months son, gone softly quiet, as if on the verge of sleep or new learning, rocked forward in his infant seat for the first time and was launched from the kitchen counter. His head slipped beneath my lunge. First the feet, useless against the tile, then the cartilaginous thud of his face bouncing once, and again. Five years later, he does nothing to warrant my third visit, but his easy breathing recalls that inhaled moment before his cry stretched into minutes, into the hour. For weeks he’d call over and over in pleasure, then stop and slip off the edge. I’d try to still the quick future, the coming impact. Tonight in this dark room Margaret’s face swims up to me. Years ago, single, feral with poems and dope, I watched Margaret revel on the carpet with her small daughter, and I thought it all happy and impossibly foreign. Later that hot afternoon, perched above the rock garden in Laguna, we sipped drinks with her husband, when their toddler peered over the low wall and—like that—stepped out onto the tropical oceanic glint of air and fell toward the rocks ten feet down. The girl’s plummet seemed almost casual amid the talk, her thoughtfree look, even her ignorance a kind of grace stalling our stunned flex. Then Margaret’s calm clutch at the sinking wash of hand actually caught. Her daughter’s high, panicked cry soon sang playful in her mother’s hug and dismissive laugh. In those days life was a comic sequence of miracles. Weeks spun like kaleidoscopes, four-armed hookahs bubbling on the floor. I laughed for an hour at Margaret’s nonchalance. Now I understand her composure as something else,
an elegance above the fierce adrenal pulse, a face to show herself. In the years since my son's fall, I've never matched Margaret's calm. And as I bring the blanket to his neck, he takes my hand in his sleep and clinches tight, pulls me closer. His eyes open up at me, confused a long moment, searching past a dream. How must my face appear? I whisper to him, and before falling back into the dark descent, he raises up on one elbow and stares hard to find just what he needs, what he's made me.