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Sweat

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SWEAT

Michael Hettich

My first girl's mother exercised
by walking up and down the stairs
of their elegant house, from attic to basement
and back. For hours. She wore a jogging suit
and she listened to soap operas on the TVs
she blared from each floor. Sometimes she called out
to the characters, panting. Then she'd rest
in the kitchen with a small glass of juice and talk
on the phone, sighing, still breathing
with gusto, patting her forehead with a damp cloth
and proudly stretching her legs.

Her daughter took bubble baths while I sat
in the hallway outside her bathroom door
and played folk songs on guitar, leaning
toward the keyhole, so she could hear me
over those soap opera voices.
Eventually she'd emerge, wrapped in a huge towel,
and slip past, into her bedroom to dress.
Of course I was eager to see her new outfits,
to smell her perfumes and lotions and oils—

so I claimed I was writing love songs, out there
in the hallway, and I played what snippets of tunes
I could imagine, from records I hoped she'd never heard,
with such simple chords my clumsy fingers
eventually sounded graceful, even
musical enough to charm her into
the love I imagined so vividly
my singing grew strangled, into a kind of howl—