

Ritual Rising

for grandmother

Some sound in the house
wakes you. The clock's face
taunts: too late again, too late.

five minutes to sit up

You work knees to the edge,
legs slant off—excruciating
angle. Elbow as lever,
you inch upward,
pain flaming along nerves.

three minutes to rest

Everything fastens in front—adapted
for frozen joints: nightgown, underclothes,
dress. A carved mahogany arm
reaches where you can't.

*twenty minutes to get them on,
three to fold the gown under your pillow*

Grasping the forearm of the wheelchair,
you rock forward, back
three times. Lunge. Balance. Turn.
Let yourself fall backward into fire.

Your daughter's voice comes, offering
help. The clock chimes its impassive eight.
The heave of your breath
knifes at your spine.

—Dixie Partridge