

JANE VANDENBURGH

After and Before

For my daughter on our shared birthday

After my mother died, I stood in the little
bakeshop on the main street of Piedmont
and—having misplaced my white ticket—

cried out so sharply the counter ladies
reached out to console me, me waving
them away, saying, No, no—it's only that

I've lost something. Lost and I wasn't
found until the first of July when my
brother came and we sat out in my

backyard, drank wine, watched our own
kids planting marguerites for her, each
so little then they'd never hold her face

in memory. But we can dream what we
can't yet know so I can now recall how I
was conceived in a grand mansion in

Piedmont, terraced gardens, the water
course, my mom and dad so young and
poor they were house sitting for rich

friends of his parents. And how—early
in July—they gave the best party they
ever had, all their friends from Cal

were there and the booze soon gone, so
they, for once, were sober. All this said
to me again and again when I was small

to teach me how I'd been made in clarity.
Those two Julys, your brother, mine, each
still an only child, redwoods green-black

shapes cut from a sky swimming above us
like an even paler sea, one etched in high
faint waves of cirrus. And how that

evening opened out to us, and you and
I, who were not yet born, were already so
entwined in the braided love of them, how

could we expect for it not to reach back
for us? Loss? It's only this, that little knot
that holds the chord. Hear it? The silence

becomes the pause into which may be sung
these words to you, that her life would end
just as yours began. Each heart, if all goes

well, allotted its couple billion drumbeats,
the two-part thud conjoined by that little
swish of quiet and it's there you put the

uneven third. You, my mother, me, the
July evening that spilled lazily out into
all these years. And we call it *coincidence*

because we're unsure of our place in
the miraculous. Hear it? The fiddler? An
Irish air? And here, by grace, are we

together in a garden and there are children
playing. Same date, same hospital, even the
same OB, as if each of us were already fated

and decreed, alone only long enough to
be born like this, me to her and you
to me.

Jane Vandenburg's most recent book is *The Wrong Dog Dream: A True Romance* (Counterpoint Press, April 2013). She is also the author of two novels, *Failure to Zigzag* and *The Physics of Sunset*, as well as two nonfiction works, *Architecture of the Novel: A Writer's Handbook* and *A Pocket History of Sex in the Twentieth Century: A Memoir*. She has taught writing and literature at UC Davis, the George Washington University, and Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California. She lives in Point Richmond, California.