

MARILYN L. TAYLOR

Sestina for My Mother

We never mentioned dying, she and I;
never spoke of passing on, growing old
with grace, wearing lipstick to the last
emergency, all that. But she died. Because
of cigarettes, they said, but I knew better—
her inner fire, untended, guttered out.

When she lay sick, the news had not come out
about the changes (neither she nor I
had seen them coming.) Not knowing any better,
we worried that she'd broken all the old
rules, flouted ancient customs, because
she hadn't done her penance first, her dying last.

*But he's Attila, she hissed to me at last;
he's Norman Bates, before they dragged him out
of the cellar. Benedict Arnold, because
he turned on me. He was Pinkerton, I
the idiot Butterfly. I'll stab the old
bastard through the heart when I get better.*

But she never did get better,
she got weaker, and her fury didn't last;
her face took on the thick sheen of old
ivory as she let herself run out

of time. She could not know that I
was dying too—the nice I, the I she knew—because

I seemed, next to her, so alive. Because
I was getting stronger, better,
even as she blurred and faded. Even as I
saw her breaking up, receding with the last
yellow shreds of the sun. Snuffed out.
But me, me—I'm rekindled by the old

fires. I burn. I have become the wicked old
witch. I am Grendel's mother, because
of her pain. I am the bat out
of Hell. I am Goneril, or better
still, Hecate. And with my wild torch, I
will light her way at last.

(And you'd better not howl, old
man, or beg with your last shout—because
I'm coming, here I come, to cut your black heart out.)