Scheherazade

They were raised
as if feral by nuns, fed at the back door. My mother chain-smoked
Lucky Strikes, ironed clothes in her robe, told me stories,
family yore, outlasted another night.
Penny,
she said, was the next-to-the-youngest, danced \textit{adagio} in nightclub dives,
lived with a man who beat her, wanted to pimp her,
met a good man, wed him on her deathbed at thirty-four.

Rita
found religion, lived it, thrived, children twined around her
like clematis vines. She chose to ignore her church’s insistence
on brimstone and blaming.

Gen,
an artist, jumped from a tenement fire—her child stopped breathing
in her arms. She coddled a bottle of gin all years after. Each
canvas throbbed, re-learning color.

Dot,
whip-tongued, funny, smart, married often, died rich,
but still gleaned from thrift-shop bins. She fought off whiskey,
loved her daughters with fierce pain.

When clouds
buckled, rained ice, my mother, the eldest, held them all,
rocked them, crooned tales, rhymes,
untangled their hair.
I dream them
on my porch, fat as neutered cats, content, sun
on their backs, out-staring time,
food on a flowered dish.