Military Wife

"If you have any more children, you will die."
My brother's tiny hand wrapped
around my mother's index finger.
Staring into the doctor's eyes—
only seventeen, in a foreign country—
she agreed to have her tubes tied.

Ten years later they told her,
"Impossible!"
She dug her heels into the stirrups.
In America, she would not acquiesce.

Death almost took her.
With no recollection of my birth,
she was sent home alone
forced to leave me in an incubator
with those same nay-saying doctors.

I never suckled,
did not see my mother's breasts
until I was fairly grown,
hung they sagged weighted
under years of being told no.

My mother never went to college,
did not have a public career.
She married at fifteen,
exhausting her individuality
somewhere between
the smoldering ruins of Atlanta
and a base near the Berlin Wall.
She was a good wife, a good mother.
But lately when I stare hard at her face,
I notice she is old.
When I encourage her to try new things
she smiles—her eyes glaze.
A couple of years ago she said,
"I don't think you will ever have children;
I want you to know I'm okay with that."

When I first began college, I didn't talk much,
thought she wouldn't understand.
Now, every morning, over coffee,
she telephones and I tell her
everything I learned the day before.