

STEPHANIE MCCARLEY DUGGER

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Lessons

I rest my hand on your ribcage,  
feel the fist-size tumor. I should

have loved you better. To shift  
a moment here or there

would recreate us, change  
perhaps even this. But I can't

rip out the mass or let the warmth  
of my hands dissolve it. The knot

of cells reminds me of failure, reminds  
me of the piano lessons I took

twice: the first when I was six  
and a woman offered classes

at church. I quit after a few months;  
we didn't have a piano at home,

and I never got any better.  
The second in my thirties. I bought

one then, an old dark upright  
that wouldn't stay tuned. It was the same

year you came along. Three times  
we moved with that piano, until I knew

I'd never really learn. I always wanted  
my fingers to glide over the keys,

coaxing mercy and quiver. If I had gone  
down the road to the church

when I was young, practiced every  
day, it would now be effortless,

muscle memory, the sound surfacing  
with the slightest touch. Here, your chest

rising and falling with what I know  
to be the end, I imagine your ribs

as keys, and my hands swift enough  
to change everything.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Stephanie McCarley Dugger is the author of *Sterling* (Pauper Nautilus 2014) and *Either Way You're Done* (forthcoming from Sundress Publications 2017). Her poems have also appeared in *Arts & Letters*, *Meridian*, *The Southeast Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Taos Journal of International Poetry and Art*. She is an assistant professor at Austin Peay State University and assistant poetry editor at Zone 3 Press. She lives in Tennessee.

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