Self-Portrait as Burn Out

By Ginger Ayla

I didn't get a manicure until I was 26, the same year I learned to drive.
Before my eyes I became a manicure-having, car-driving person.

They say millions of bacteria languish in pedicure water, infection
is too easy, but my office-working, car-driving, Starbucks-drinking

coworkers are immune to that kind of negative thinking, have long
accepted it, can ignore it, *Nice nails!*

I like the way my hands looked on the steering wheel
or pushing elevator buttons more than palms cracked

from scrubbing or making, though I miss the snap
of tamper against portafilter, the unapologetic scream

of milk steam. I had so much anger then,
always getting even. Giving the worst

customers the saddest pick. Defiant enough
to show up form-fitting and deadpan, but not enough

to say *no* to working the lunch line

when I had pink eye, each BLT worth more
than my hourly, and I must have made a million

and twenty. When I started making enough to live
a disguise showed up without me

behind it. For years I stopped looking
at myself, I willed another kind of poverty

in the face of wealth, identifiable only
by the constant flit of wings and anxiety

attacks at having to say my own name
at an all-staff meeting. When I first moved to Denver

I worked downtown for shit tips. Now my mother
sees the napkins stashed in my glovebox, says, *I guess we are still*

in the same tax bracket. In her laugh I sense a scrap
of relief, and leave it at that. For years

I didn't talk to my mother, I was

a baker, I came home covered in sugar, my nails
pure as water—trimmed and bare—but my pores

gin-soaked from long nights out with our service
discount, drinking our way down Larimer

and doing it again tomorrow, and tomorrow, and I burned

something out of my system with all that
poison. They say it takes seven years to grow

new skin. I was left with enough meantime
to scoop onto a nameplate, enroll in automatic

bill pay, allow a cupcake on Administrative
Professionals Day. I sit it in traffic. Me and a million

commuters watch the sun come up over our exhaust, UV

sutured into my nail beds. Oh solar flare,
oh steering gear. The red glimmer hints

of forever. Of *where are you going*
with all that fire?