Batch Cooking for My Mother: A Deconstruction Manual
By Jen Karetnick

It doesn't begin with stacking bricks
of chicken soup in her refrigerator, dated
in Sharpie permanent as plaque.

It doesn't begin with unloading them
from the cooler I use for the drive west,
always two hours and two minutes.

It doesn't begin with waiting for the soup
to cool, to trowel off the sallow, malleable
cement of congealed fat from the top

before parceling it out in plastic deli pints.
It doesn't begin with scooping out
the chicken salad sharp with celery,

chopped too small to choke on but also
a fine dice is the way she likes it.
It doesn't begin with pulling the bird

like rubber bands from the bones
I then boil for the stock or first
roasting the chicken without salt

because she believes she can't have it,
even after she lost her balance and fell
from a too-low sodium level, cutting

open her forehead open as easily as I slice
through the brittle, browned skin of the breast.
It doesn't begin with spackling the water

in the stockpot with dill and parsley, snipped
with scissors corroded with herby detritus,
or with sauteing the holy trinity in oil

—against her wishes—because I know her
cholesterol is under enough control although
I choose avocado to feel less guilty about it.

It doesn't even start with shopping
for ingredients, jotting down the list
like a phone number on the back of my hand

or deciding what day to visit so I can slot
the icepacks that I've saved from deliveries
of medications into the freezer the night before.

It kicks off with me at ten years old in my childhood
kitchen, watching her build mother sauces and stews
every Sunday, pointing out what I should defrost

for our family's dinner the next night
as she delivers a week of meals to her own parents,
patching the cracks in the walls that raised her.