

Hard to Breathe

Some fires won't catch,
no matter how carefully
the kindling's laid. Wood's
too wet, or punky,
or thoughtlessly stacked,
like throwing blankets
over a sleeping child's face.

We forget about air,
the importance of pruning,
pauses that cool the lava
of afternoon blowups.

Some matches fizzle, too
little friction on the striking
surface—or too much.
The decision to flare or not
depends upon the atmosphere,
seems so random, like shooting
stars or children.

How to Lie

I lied a little at the funeral,
called you a creature of the air,
so they might think; *oh, like an angel*
or a silver-tipped sea hawk.
But I was really picturing
you as a sky snake, envenomed
bringer of bad weather,
flinging down hood-denting hail,
whipping up a dust storm
that swallows towns whole.

I didn't mention all the other
swallows, beginning
on the front lawn the day
you sat broken-winged, drinking
in news of your brother's
ticked-out heart, that stillness
after the snare drum sticks

break, or the one time we forgot
the don't-touch-there rule,
the tangle, like fish thrashing
through seaweed, and after—
the can't-look-at-each-other look,
as if we were still kids caught jamming
lit firecrackers into frogs' mouths,

or, years later, the bottle flung
at your daughter who walked out mid-
argument and only returned
toward the end, when that tiny spore,
yawning, stretching, greedy,
settled in your lungs like a python
with nothing else to do but coil
camouflaged in the underbrush,
and slowly squeeze all the air out.

Too Close

He's clearing a path through the choked woods behind his house. It's slow going. The juniper has taken over, crowding out blueberries, laurel seedlings, wintergreen shoots. Pale-needed whips wait at eye-level, deadfall lies strewn like finger bones sprinkled from the sky, his mother's flimsy nightgowns still flap from branches.

She tiptoed in, smelling of licorice, tucked in her boy, both pretending. Sometimes she only kissed him on the forehead. Other nights she climbed over, curled up behind him, hugged him hard enough to leave an imprint of her inlaid carnelian necklace between his shoulder blades.

Except for mosquitos, there are no signs of creatures in these woods: no birdsong, no burrows, no feather tails, no ember eyes in the darkness. Either he has driven them off with lopper, snub-nosed shovel and bow saw, or they fled before footfall, when they felt the first twitch of fear, saw the future slash, couldn't bear the closeness coming.