

Hotshot

“Sometimes there’s nothing you can do,”
my mom consoles her friend, upset about
her son. Both women quit smoking, but we’ve all seen how
a lit cigarette can catch like a lost fishhook hungry for flesh.
Most wildfires ignite from human oversight,
but you can’t blame the mother. In his garage
my cousin playing with matches set his back ablaze,
shoulders and side flared up from fumes and flash
gas over his body like a barreling wave.

My grandmother warned us all our lives, told
and retold our grandfather’s chin, the smooth
curl of his jaw, the day she rolled him in the rug
wielding her sweater like an ax, she beat
her husband bald. Stories would not have stopped
our neighbor John, who killed a boy once while
driving drunk or high or maybe both. You’d never know
the size of a death inside someone. My mom’s friend warns
her son of DUI checkpoints so he can drive
around them. She is still paying his fines from last time.

Her son smokes on his mother’s stoop, drinks on
his mother’s couch, and drives his mother’s car
to the bar because it’s nice, because it’s
air-conditioned, and because he sold his truck
for beer and pills. One car is never enough,
and he’s not back come morning, so his mom Ubers
to work and cries at my mom’s kitchen table
about her little boy who will be thirty soon.

After this, my mother hangs thick curtains so
she doesn’t have to see him ash his mother’s hours
into the grass. How can anyone prevent
a fire like this? His mother cashes out her 401(k),
she postpones her cruise and begs my mother

for a loan to keep her son from jail. Her boy
 lost his father, but so did my mom and
so did our neighbor. “He’s my son,” she pleads
 as if we’ve all forgotten this. My mother sees
what we all see. You must burn a control line
 to keep the fire from spreading, to preserve
the closest homes. Sometimes all you can do
 is evacuate and document the carrot flare
pooling across the horizon, a blurry median
 so far away you can’t tell if it’s fire
or sky, but does it matter when the storm
 stays over there? It’s hard to understand
how air can move so fast and hurt so big.
 Even the experts never know what weather’s coming,
how much or when, as that boy failed to see
 the car, our neighbor still a boy himself
behind the wheel that veered onto the lawn
 to make him man and murderer in one fast crash.
In decades since, our neighbor’s given so much back.
 Not a boy, but Jesus! Only God can do that.
Our neighbor wheels our trash from the curb
 to the bush beside our house each Friday.
He shovels our walk while the snow falls steady
 upon his back. He might have done these things
if he had not killed a boy, but sometimes
 all we see takes the nearest shape of sorrow,
a shadow of what is not there, a boy who would be
 a man now, perhaps with a son of his own.
What would he teach that boy? What should my mother
 tell her friend to help her son? Perhaps she could say,
“You can’t fight fire with fire.” Except, you can.
 Sometimes that is the only way to end the blaze.