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The Flames

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Gandolfo: The Flames

THE FLAMES

Marcene Gandolfo

for my father

*How many nights must it take
one such as me to learn
that we aren't, after all, made
from that bird that flies out of its ashes,
that for a man
as he goes up in flames, his one work
is
to open himself, to be
the flames?*

-Galway Kinnell

I

You lift your oxygen mask to ask if I see a dead pigeon
on the burnt sienna

and when I shake my head, you stare cold into hospital
light and say

that once your eleven-year-old hands caught a pigeon, held
its body down and sliced

wings from thorax then left the bird to wrench on red ground.
When you held the trophy wings

to the boys who dared you, the crowd cheered, another boy
lit a match to the pigeon's

body and you stood still holding those wings in the smolder.
How everyone wanted

to be your friend. You tell the story in small breaths,
how no one knew

you cried yourself to sleep for three weeks and you were glad
when the rains came,

took to your room and glued model airplanes.

II

As you sunk back into the gurney's buckle, I listened to your staggered breath,
pictured each lung

a vessel of black snowflakes, an envelope containing a sentence from the hell
you could not excavate

but I asked to you to breathe the black ash out and as we breathed into that
antiseptic night

you said you could see your breath smolder, began to cough the rattle
from your chest

until morning when your fever broke, when the nurse brought me coffee and said
happy new year,

took you for your morning walk, and I was a child again running down the
empty street,

a filament of blue confetti at my feet.

III

In April we don't speak about the last article of December, and you say
you have no memory of that night.

I don't mention your story, don't ask if it's true, don't beg for proof today

in the garden where a pigeon sweeps

down to eat a crumb and as April makes me forget the scars of December, I
throw a piece of bread and see you

stare as I stoop to peer into the nervous fidget of the pigeon's eye.