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Housefire

Savannah Sipple

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HOUSEFIRE

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A woman came in the middle of band rehearsal
to tell me and left me, stuck,
locked in place like a trombone slide,
in my high school hallway lined with lockers empty
in late July, air laced with the scent of sweat
and floor wax, standing on the thin sheet
between what was and what is about to be.

I cannot tell you how it feels to be the first
person my mother sees, the one who weighs her down
with the news that all her years of part-time
working in a greasy cafeteria, the hot source of cracked hands
and sore backs, did not pay off.

My mother would not leave the car, couldn't look at the house,
the way walls bent into each other, a fevered origami.
She didn't even check on father, wired with a blood pressure
cuff and oxygen monitor, sitting on the ambulance bumper.
I had to keep an eye on him, on her, on the house sagging under heat,
and I let it all go, a blue balloon, the same second I saw grey ashes
carried away by soot-filled air. I wanted air to take me away.

I would not sleep for months, could not scrub away the smell
of burn, my *Little House on the Prairie* books, baby photos,
green couch cushions I used for forts, and homemade quilts.
My skin will always be cold and ashy, nervous and afraid
of the next time I have to check on her, on him.
This is the sound of safety fleeing:
the soft plock of stone melting.