

Walking, No Longer Your Patient

Jill M. Allen

—*To Marilyn*

A decade after we burned through the mysteries
and you taught me cartography's other dark

arts, I dreamed of you coming for a garden tea,
then held buoyant in the Gulf, your hair and muslin gown

sweeping across my arms. Today we're walking
for an hour like old friends, dangerously

pink in the white noon and unprotected
from the Atlantic wind that carts away what isn't

necessary or affixed. We've been wrecks,
divers and witnesses at the altar of what gets buried,

what surfaces. You gather shells. They will sleep
in your office, chilled fists of moon on the window sill.

Their names offer small comforts: banded tulip,
whelk, olive, periwinkle, shark-eye.

What extraordinary creatures once lived
in the homes we collect?

White Space

Amanda McCormick

1.

She had to get to work. It was that thought that kept her moving against the tide of people pushing past her on Sixth Avenue. She had overslept and now she had to get to work. Her cell phone rang and she ducked back away from the crowds pushing against her path. Knowing who it was, she just pressed the phone to her ear, listening to him breathing. She tried to block out the shouting, the hundreds of feet on the pavement, running.

2.

Though she had always told herself it was only temporary, though she hadn't made any real *friends* there, she had liked her job all right, the analysis of start-ups, the living hum of money and promise. She had a place in a cool white-walled room and took advantage of the calm it brought her. Starting out with data entry, the tasks they gave her were easy and diverting, lulling her into a state of suspension where random snapshots from her past would bubble to the surface of her consciousness, like the disjointed portents in a Magic 8 ball. *Patent leather shoes on a carpeted expanse of Marshall Fields when she was ten.* Friends of hers in the arts—directors of photography, traditional music enthusiasts—were being lured away and fattened with cash by dot-coms, start-ups of the type her firm analyzed. The symbiosis of patron and patronized was growing ever more confused, at least when she joined her artist friends for drinks. So you work downtown with all the suits now? What's *that* like?

She got used to the regularity, the cool feeling of the air on her skin, each day the same. *Standing on First and A in the dead of winter, watching a class of kids wander by, holding hands.* She didn't find any of the images that came up terribly significant, something she could tell her shrink about if she had one, just odd in their precision and randomness. *Play-fighting with her sister in Mexico, cliffside at a grubby lobster shack.* If she *were* an artist, she would find a way to collect them, put the random recollections in some kind of substantial, meaningful order. But she wasn't an artist. She was just another member of an army of workers,

arriving on the dot, pouring into elevator bays, whooshing to the top of the world. *Joshua trees flying past as she drove through the desert.*

Don't you want your work to *matter*? said a small, tightly wound filmmaker she met at a bar in Williamsburg, winding her up with talk of how nobody cared about narrative anymore, it was all about the instant, how he'd really like to shoot some photographs of her, how her eyes were so exquisite. She didn't want to think about her future so much, or her past, she just liked having the structure of life mapped out for her. And when someone in the office finally noticed her crack analytical skills and took her under his wing, saw to it that she got more challenging assignments, it was enough. It was enough that she mattered to him.

With her mind engaged in the logistics of start-ups, in the peculiarity of the markets, in organizing research, the images stopped. Occasionally, she would lift her eyes from her work and look out the window, a view so dizzying she could barely believe it.

3.

During the days after, people called her, but for the most part, she didn't answer the phone at all, just sat in front of the TV in pajamas, consuming news. She had an endless appetite for information, and even though it was just a million different angles on the same collapsing towers, she filed away the details, she hungered for information. When she was finally tracked down by her company, which was headquartered on Long Island, she wanted to tell them that the buildings weren't designed to withstand that kind of heat. We're so sorry about what happened, they said. She didn't know what to say. We'd love to see you out in the Long Island office, they said. They would even put her up in a hotel for a while if she didn't want to commute.

For how long, she wondered? Outside her door, the streets were being used as staging for the dump trucks that hauled the ash from the scorched hole downtown. She agreed, packed her bags.

How *are* you? said the woman who met her at the train station, which was right across the parking lot from the Long Island office. When people said this lately—how are you?—they really meant it, their eyes strip-searching your soul for evidence of hidden trauma. She had had too many exchanges like this on the street, with strangers, back and forth with their eyes: *yes, I can see you, and it's good to see you, how are you?* It was exhausting, so she told the woman: I'm fine.

An administrative assistant named Carlo gave her the grand tour with all the enthusiasm of a theme park ambassador. Here's where you can come for

the finest culinary experience in town, he vamped, pointing to the vending machines. Here's the payroll department, he said. Don't joke around with them about getting an advance; they won't find it funny.

He made a lot of the fact that they had each only worked for the company for such a short amount of time. These days, it's good to have a job, you know what I mean? he said. She looked at his thin, fluttering hands, and figured he had something more theatrical in mind for himself. Sure enough, Carlo soon revealed his real interest was in screenplays. Would you like to see one sometime? he asked. She took his clumsy regard for friendship, and it was a relief.

Looking down the row where her desk was situated, she flashed on her old office, where there were no separations, no cloth-covered walls demarcating workspaces. Here, she could see how long people had been there by the condition and appearance of the square, fabric-covered cubicles. Sedimentary layers of binders, stacks of paper, collections of stuffed frogs and snapshots spoke of years in the carefully delineated squares. She felt a little bit of pride in her blank, empty space: she could take it or leave it.

Sam, a senior associate in the next cube over, was to be her working partner. He was tall, lanky, and fair-haired, and looked to be only a few years older than she was, maybe thirty-one or thirty-two. After he introduced himself, he immediately set to talking about how they would divide the workload.

I was told that research is your specialty, he said, talking slowly and warmly in a way that didn't seem to fit him right, as though he had read that that's the best way to deal with a traumatized person.

Who told you that? she asked.

I can give you the research-heavy assignments, he said. If you want.

I don't care, she said. And because it sounded curt, she added, I mean, wherever I'm needed is fine.

I was thinking that we could meet, once a week, to discuss the split of assignments.

We used to meet every day, she said. My supervisor...my old—

Well. He paused, looking up at the ceiling and then back to her. We could do that, if you want.

Either way, she said, her voice shaking. She wasn't sure if he was being aloof or he was afraid of her. She wasn't sure why she was arguing with everything he said.

Actually, we're just getting started again with everything, so it's fine, he said. We're not going to get much done today. There's a meeting later on. Grief counseling in the northeast conference room.

She hesitated. Well, I don't think—

I'm pretty sure it's mandatory, he said. He seemed anxious to get away from her. I could check?

No, she said. His deference seemed a little old-fashioned, and she resisted the urge to hit back at someone wearing kid gloves. That's okay.

She was sick to her stomach. She closed the door of the handicapped stall in the women's restroom, tugged down her ridiculous pantyhose, and looked at the white enamel walls in front of her. You should be sick to your stomach. You should be screaming and crying but instead you've put on a scratchy uniform and you think no one's going to notice you.

Finally, she rubbed lip gloss over her picked-at lips and tottered down the hall to the conference room. The further removed you were from the calamity, the scarier it was. She knew that from talking to her gun nut brother. They were probably just scared, and so the shock in the moment that she walked in—what she was seeing in their eyes—was compassion, surprise, horror, but not a demand: How can you still be alive? That was all in her imagination.

Still, she felt trapped underneath all those eyes: before the kid who looked like he was captured on the football field, pressed into slacks and a blue broadcloth shirt; a tall, bird-like woman with self-consciously quirky glasses; an overweight, bearded guy in Orthodox garb; and Sam, looking at her with a curious compassion. She stood there, frozen for a moment, and then said, I overslept.

The woman at the head of the table, presumably the trauma counselor, nodded, as if she understood, or at least was good enough at faking it. She sat down.

They watched a video of a polar bear that had just been felled by a tranquilizer dart. The bear lay on his side, his enormous paws moving in the air, as if running from a bigger predator than someone with a dart gun.

Even when stunned, the bear's body still registers stress, said the woman at the head of the table. It's the same for people. We can go into shock, and sometimes our minds don't know the trauma our bodies are going through.

Let go of your memory of the tragedy for a moment, and just think about how your body feels in this space, the counselor continued.

She looked out the window, across the gray parking lot, to the spindly trees reaching over the train tracks that led back to the city. There must be enough trauma back there, she thought, to occupy every trauma counselor in the world.

By closing their eyes, and paying attention to the way their bodies felt in the present moment, they were supposed to have some epiphany about this

connection between mind and body. The shrink started going around the room for each person's responses.

The bird-woman went first. I guess I feel hungry, she said. I forgot breakfast this morning.

Someone else ventured, My butt's starting to get tired.

She was surprised, then, to find the room suddenly shifting around her as she focused on her own presence. She waited for the startling, benevolent memories to rise up again, as they had when she immersed herself in busywork at the old office. She listened to her body, she really wanted to give it a go. When it was her turn, the first word that came into her head—*tilting*—rose to her lips, and suddenly she was fighting off nausea as everyone stared at her, waiting.

That's okay, said the counselor, and turned away.

The counselor passed out pens and paper, and told everyone to write down a list of their resources in hard times. She knew better than to volunteer when the counselor went around the room again, asking for ideas. People talked about baking apple pies with their families—*makes me feel patriotic*—taking walks, being with friends. She looked at her own list of resources and wondered if she'd done the assignment wrong.

a bowl of cold, spicy noodles

seeing three movies in a row

the Rothko color field at MoMA

The session finally dissolved into tears and hugs. She pushed past Sam, standing by himself on the outside of a group hug. She didn't want to share her pain with these people. She didn't want it to be so simple.

He was standing on the platform after work, Sam was, to catch the 6:22. He was wearing a shiny, cherry-red leather jacket of the sort that must have been bought at a thrift store or found in the parents' basement.

You're not from around here? she asked him.

No, he laughed. In Queens. You?

Two stops west, she said. They've put me in a hotel.

Where were you before? he asked, more to be polite, she thought, than because he was interested.

Bleecker Street, she said.

His eyes lit up. Bleecker and—?

MacDougal, she said.

I used to live right there, he said. Sullivan Street. Film Forum and John's Pizza, that's where I used to live.

And now you live in Queens?

Yeah, well, it gets old, right?

The train pulled in, and once inside, she shuffled awkwardly past him, choosing the seat directly behind him. Her old apartment seemed to cease to exist after she'd left it. To think about mustering the energy to climb the endless series of stairs in her tenement, to encounter all those strangers, to exchange survival stories, was exhausting. Even though she had lodged herself in a temporary space, she realized she couldn't see herself going back.

See you tomorrow, she said as she departed the train.

She could see the hotel from the train stop. The sky still held a little light over the spindly trees and pretty houses as she closed the few blustery blocks between the hotel and the train. She had taken up residence in a small satellite of the hotel, more low-rent, she supposed, but less pretentious than the imposing white presence of the hotel itself. In her small wing, a group of rooms surrounded an atrium and a skylight. She paused to admire the trickling water over the rocks in a fountain in the middle.

She pulled a long-awaited cigarette out of her purse, but instead of lighting it, she just stared into the water. Out here, she was a virtually unknown quantity. She could be anyone she wanted to be. Someone who had it together. Someone who didn't smoke.

Back in her room were the few things she had decided to bring with her. Articles of her drab, professional uniform—black skirts and neutral pantyhose—a stack of CDs, and some art books. She opened one of the books and took in the color it held. She would turn to this now as the others turned to each other. Even the glossy pages felt good underneath her fingertips. She put her face against its spine, breathing it in for a minute.

To put a big block of solid color on a canvas—she knew people thought it was dumb, something anyone could do, and frankly, she could see where they were coming from, while standing at a distance. But then her mother had shown her, when she was ten or eleven, how to look at a Rothko color field. Station yourself in the dead center of the canvas, face just a few inches from it. Suddenly, your field of view is pure color, the agitation of red, the melancholy of purple. A whole world of color, and it's so beautiful that you can't explain, can't reason with it, the way three or four blocks of color could do that.

She had last been in the Museum of Modern Art three weeks ago. She had been standing close to the Rothko, when she heard the voice behind her.

She put her face up to the page, closed her eyes, as though she could breathe him in again.

She mouthed the words: I just want to disappear. Behind her eyes, she was lost in the color field, red everywhere, his arms around her.

I see you, he had said. I see you.

4.

So, like, the entire world is leveled in a world war, Carlo said. It's a war between humans and their humanoid clones. Only there has to be a personal story, so I'm going to make it that the leader of the human army, you know, falls in love with a half-human hybrid being named Mollanique, who is also a guerilla fighter on the side. So, it's Romeo and Juliet, but more futuristic.

A few of her new coworkers had invited her out for an after-work drink. She sat between Carlo and Sarah, a beautiful, chain-smoking mother of two toddlers, and across from a tall, silent guy from accounting dressed down in a pink polo shirt. She merely eyed the platter of chicken wings in front of her. You can do that, she said, for like a degree?

It's just a night class, Carlo said. So that I can get down the basics.

Sounds like you're beyond the basics.

You'd be surprised by how much there is to learn in screenwriting, he said. Like my teacher always says, make sure there's plenty of white space on the page.

What does that mean?

Well, at first I thought he meant line breaks, you know. But then I realized that it means you need to tell the most with the least amount of words. You know, like, just let it be *less*, I guess.

Sarah flipped the top off a pack of smokes and pointed it at her.

Oh, I don't—

What *do* you do? Sarah laughed.

Good question. Seems options are limited.

You don't have to tell me. Have a boyfriend?

She spun her wineglass by its base. No, she said.

Slim pickings at the office, Sarah said. But I'll keep my eyes open for you. If I can live vicariously through your exploits.

Okay, she said, staring at the pack of smokes on the table. She brought the wine to her lips. It dripped, sweet and thick, down her throat.

A week in and Sam was still tiptoeing around the freakish interloper, overly solicitous, always careful.

It's fine if you want me to pick up a couple of files, he said, laughing nervously. I've got nothing to do this weekend.

She looked at him, his perpetually startled face. It didn't happen to *me*, she said.

He lifted a file in front of him, as though it was a shield. But you were close by, weren't you?

She could tell him all the details, in the motor-mouthed delivery she remembered everyone using, afterwards. Instead, she said, Did you know that the way people remember traumatic events changes over time?

The way polar bears remember trauma, maybe.

At this, she smiled. Really—some researcher interviewed people about what they were doing after the Challenger exploded. Five years later, the guy who was dropping off his kid at daycare would swear—*swear*—he was by himself, listening to the radio, on a country road.

I was a sophomore in high school, he said. I remember it because Ann-Elise McKuen had just agreed to go to a dance with me. It was the happiest day of my life so far, up until...

How confident are you that Ann-Elise would say the same thing?

Not confident at all. Where were you?

She blinked. She saw the ceiling above her head in that narrow room, the terrible knowing before knowing, that thing she would carry with her forever. I overslept, she said.

At 6:15, Sam gathered up his things. You on the 6:22? he asked.

The next one, she said. Thought I'd catch up on a few things.

She dug into work again, and when she looked at her watch, it was three hours later. She panicked a little, though there was no reason to. She was alone. There was a stack of reproductions next to her keyboard. Rather than recreate the postcards and clippings she had above her desk in the other office, she had torn out a couple pages from her art books, planning to put them up here.

She stood up to see if Sam had any tape at his desk, and found, underneath a stack of reports, a piece of lined paper with RESOURCES penciled in block letters: *standing alone on the beach in winter*. She started to feel dizzy. She sat back down at her desk, spreading her hands out and then curling them into fists. It wasn't worth it to try and get back to the hotel, where she wouldn't be able to sleep. There was no one around, anyway.

She lowered herself down to the floor, kicking off her pumps and wedging herself underneath her desk. She curled her legs up towards her chin, and, eventually, let her eyes fall shut. She tried to place herself back in her old life, but those spaces seemed fuzzy and indistinct. She would wake up, she reminded herself. She would wake up early each morning, knock her way down the narrow, dark hall of her apartment to the coffee maker. She would jump on the subway, or walk down to the office if she had time, moving seamlessly into the sea of bodies in the plaza, slipping onto her elevator. The bright stab of excitement she'd feel seeing him for the first time each

morning, pretending everything was normal, *here's the report you were looking for*, all the while holding a secret knowledge inside, a reason to get up every morning.

The ugly light of dawn, of day, woke her up. Startled, she rose from her hiding place and walked into the ladies' room to clean up before the others arrived.

5.

Sam toed the edge of the platform, leaning out, looking for a train around the curve. She took a spot about five feet away, and waited for him to turn around. He did, and shuffled closer to her, jamming his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

There was a whole year once where I didn't sleep at all, he said.

Uh-huh, she said, suspicious again without knowing why, wondering what he knew or could tell about her just by looking.

He backed up against the rail, standing next to her, face forward toward the tracks. I have hundreds of illegal sleeping pills from my ex-girlfriend's aunt in Saudi Arabia.

She shook her head at him. Hundreds? That's like a lifetime supply.

You can have some, if you want.

She smiled, touched somehow, that he was trying to reach out. The thing about Sam was that his aloofness could easily be masking a lack of social skills. They left their conversation, as always, when the train doors opened. She had taken to occupying the seat directly behind him, watching the top of his curly head as she normally did from the next cubicle, easing the transition from work to the space outside of work.

6.

About a month after she had moved to Long Island, David's widow appeared at her cubicle.

He called you?

What? She looked up. She had never seen the woman before, but who else could the heaving stranger be, standing just outside the fabric-covered wall?

The woman was dressed in black, for grief, not for work. And besides, she knew why she was there. Sam rose from his chair, protectively. With her eyes, she told him *no*.

I have the records right here, she said, waving a piece of paper. What did you talk about?

What if those numbers in tiny print could tell the woman that her husband found some sort of solace in her, that he had liked talking to her about art, that they met sometimes after work, only briefly, always moving away from each other and then bouncing back. Could they have shown her the irresistible pull between them?

Work, probably, she said, tugging on the sleeve-ends of her blazer, a little girl playing dress up. I'm not sure. I don't remember.

She waited for the woman to strike her, because she deserved to be struck.

Try to, the woman said evenly. Don't you think I'm entitled to know?

She would fall, she would faint, she would disappear. She already had disappeared. I'm sorry, she said softly.

Everyone was looking.

What? the widow said. Her face was tight with fury. She had all the facts in front of her.

I'm sorry for your loss, she said, her mouth full of stones.

7.

In her room that night, she looked in the mirror. She could have been better about concealing the dark circles under her eyes. The surface of her hotel desk already resembled her cheap bureau back home. She wondered about hotel room desks. Are they there so that the comforting idea of work could lure the weary traveling businessman to sleep? If so, it had no effect on her.

Carlo had been providing her with an ever-growing stack of CDs he burned at home. Also, his screenplay-in-progress, which she opened to page one, letting the words swim in front of her eyes. Something about the army of humanoids advancing down a verdant valley of smooth glass factory buildings. She used to love to read; it was just that lately, she couldn't focus long enough. With numbers and facts, she was better, but this required too much imagination.

8.

The second week of January, they were let go as a group, called into the large conference room that overlooked the parking lot and the train track to the north. There was someone unfamiliar, another hired hand, at the head of

the table saying something about how the company hadn't made its target revenue, and how much they hated to do this in such uncertain times.

She struggled to be present, but she could see now that things should have happened in a different order. It shouldn't have begun on a crisp autumn day like that. The dead of winter, like this day, would have been more fitting. The man in the front of the room was talking about severance.

As everyone stood up, coworkers crying and hugging and seeing each other in a new way—friends, survivors together in the bread line—she just sat there silently. Her eyes moved from the window to a sign on the wall. *What to do in case of emergency.*

Afterwards, she sat down in the lounge and tried to imagine life beyond the cup of coffee in front of her. Carlo came in and dropped two quarters into the slot in the candy machine.

Believe this shit? he said. He smacked the machine, his potato chips still suspended. Fuck. He banged. Cowardly to send someone else to do their dirty work, he said.

She said, Must be the worst job in the world. Freelance hatchet man.

Worse than a contract killer, Carlo said. This guy who goes home at night and says 'Honey, today at work I annihilated the livelihoods of twenty people.'

We should have seen it coming, she said. On the train, she read in the newspaper of recession. She had read that the eye contact shared between people on the street was last seen in London during the Blitz, and psychologists said it wasn't a learned behavior. She had read that a metro area baby boomlet was expected in a few months. She had read of rescue workers down below in the shops, gathering loot from smashed display cases. She had all the facts at her fingertips, and after all she'd seen and everything she had lost, she knew there had to be a way of feeling about this, but she couldn't find it anywhere.

9.

She and Sam stood on the platform for the last time together.

What are you going to do? he asked.

She shrugged. I thought it was only going to be temporary. She wondered if there was something between them.

Me, too, he said. I needed the benefits.

It'd be a pity if we never see each other again, she said. He said nothing.

The train pulled up, and Sam waited for her to board. Instead of taking the seat in front of her, he sat in the same row, one place between them. As usual, the conversation ended at the doors. They both stared in front of them, at a DeBeers ad that read: *Love is outperforming everything this year.* Her stop came and went. She looked over at him. She saw not interest, or amorosness, but instead a kind of fear.

She followed him off when they reached Jamaica Station. She hadn't been this close to the city for months, and she thought she could still smell the smoke carried on the wind, though she knew that was ridiculous.

We could go see a movie or something, he said, fists in pockets.

Sure, she said.

I've kind of got to stop off at home first, he said, his face stricken.

His block was barren, wind-swept. A chain-link fence surrounded a small house with off-white accents. Inside, she stood in the dining alcove next to a cabinet filled with figurines, while Sam prepared dinner for an old man, his father, who was seated in the kitchen. In the glass, she could see her reflection, ghost eyes in a gaunt face. She wondered if they had forgotten about her, when Sam finally looked up and said, I'm going to change, okay? I'll just be a second.

He left her standing there, toeing the boundary between the kitchen and the hallway. The old man had big eyes like a turtle's, folds of skin down his neck. She moved closer to him, and finally sat down.

How are you? she asked slowly, looking into his eyes and not seeing anything, certainly not the horror of the preceding few months.

Me? he said. I'm in fine fettle.

I got fired today, she said.

Are you thirsty? he asked her, squinting at her forlorn shape.

I'm all right, she said. But thanks.

You go out like that, you'll catch cold, he said, his eyes kind.

I've got a coat with me, she said. She looked up to the calendar against a bright cheery wall, and back to him.

Would you like anything to drink? he asked again.

I'm all right, she said.

Why don't you take off your coat and stay a while?

Sam appeared at the door looking at them. Well, okay, he said.

They saw a movie in which a Hollywood star ruined his beautiful face and was forced to avenge his maiming through a series of riddles doled out by the bad guys.

Afterward, they walked back to his place, without saying much to each other. She had to suppress a smile, filled as she was with the mischievous

thrill of being completely untethered to anything. She didn't want to startle Sam, scare him away. The house was dark, and smelled mustier than she remembered.

Sam's room didn't reveal any peculiarities. The double bed was covered with a navy blue bedspread. A dusty sewing machine sat in the corner. She sat down on the bed and looked at his bookshelf for clues, for things to make small talk about. He came back in, a glass of water for her in his hand.

He looked at her the way she had been waiting so long for. She unzipped her boots, pulled them off, and fell back on the bed, her stocking toes pointed upward. Sam was still standing there, looking at her, the water glass tilted slightly in his hand. Finally he set it down, and climbed in next to her, at first leaving a small space between them.

His kiss was tentative to start out but quickly became hot and rushed. She expected his touch to run like electricity through her, bringing her back to life. But, under the weight of his body, she was thinking in dream terms again. Her mind like an empty room, filled out with screens of color and shape: first, a blank blue wash, indefinable color, everything she had been before this moment. And then everything turned to white—the blank white walls of the office, scraps of paper blown to the heavens, white shirts fluttering down. The feeling of tilting was so immense, so overpowering, that she pushed back against him.

Nobody knows anything about me, she said.

Sam's eyes were still closed. What do you mean?

Everything gets erased.

Your first time being laid off?

She nodded. She wasn't afraid of his eyes anymore.

It's better that you learn now it's just a job. You put too much into it and when it's gone you lose all of those important things about yourself.

Maybe, she said. She closed her eyes and remembered the morning last fall, trying to get to work. Her cell phone rang and she ducked back away from the crowds pushing against her path. Knowing who it was, she just pressed the phone to her ear, listening to him breathing. She tried to block out the sound of things picking up around her, the shouting, hundreds of feet on the pavement, running.

She tried to stay present, concentrate on Sam's hands, but maybe her body was still registering stress. She flipped over on her stomach and Sam softly kissed the back of her neck.

I love you, he had said on the phone. I can't wait to get my hands on you again. And even then she had known it was not love but something so overwhelming, the feeling of falling, the only reason she had to wake up in the

morning. Still over time, it could change, she could remember that what they did in secret was part of something bigger, just the way she could imagine it was David inside her now, pressing her body down against the bed.

Stay where you are, he said. And she had tried.

Reeling, Like the Sky

Stacy Kidd

Like smoke: the first traces of fire,

our daughter lighting anything with pitch,
our son found face down in the river.

I remember the water,

how his hands where they first knew Winter,
knew the river could lose elasticity,
drew on some other sensation to name skin.

I remember when you left, it was December,

the black sky that carried you back in abandon,
April and burning the place. The smoke.