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Bleach / Fire Fallow

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Bleach

I've been reaching around for lessons
on how to grow old. For stories that guide me
toward roots and vines, lines and lives here
and here no longer. My grandmother
always reaches back from places

where I'm surprised to find her.
She caught in her hand ninety-three
years. Wash your dishes with bleach,
no vegetables, drink scotch, eat oatmeal—
this is how you hold onto ninety-three
years begun on a dairy farm where
the buckets were cleaned by little
girls. Children who, in a moment of boredom
or exhaustion, left proof on the pails
of milk's lacy traces. Those stains
were deadly. Discovered by a surprise
visit from the health inspector, the farm
was punished with closure. It was

the Depression. Everyone was reaching.
I think a lot about bleach. A little does

the trick. Dishes, clothes: just a splash stains
things clean. As I nurse my own hair's
whitening, I coax age through
and out of me—my body, in time, entangling

these hard traces of the past. Missing you
has let me find you in new places. Did you know
that the stalks of young trees, growing close
enough together, can be braided? There
they live, separate but entwined, aging
into the future. I laughed when I learned
this gardener's trick is called
pleaching. In words, their letters turned,
our lives interweave. We find ways
to keep grasping.

Fire Fallow

When I was seventeen, I visited the ancient city of Pompeii. Two thousand years ago this abundant place was suddenly buried under ash when a nearby volcano erupted. Those who couldn't escape were trapped in the blistering dust: running, crawling, curling into the final poses the cinders both destroyed and preserved.

Centuries later, that land bore an alien yield. The Garden of the Fugitives unburied the enduring dead, as poured plaster casts engorged each body's earthy void. Walking around the ruins, it seemed so reckless to build a city at the foot of an active volcano. How abundant could this land really be to risk living here? Years later, I understand that what enables survival—what nourishes and protects—is cut through with danger. What lights our way will burn our skin and scorch the earth.

If you're used to the ground shifting beneath your feet, why would one day's quaking be any different?

Burnout is a word that means something to me now. The World Health Organization calls it a "life management difficulty" and they're not wrong, I guess. Exhaustion, memory loss, cynicism, hopelessness: burnout is the signal of a self scorched. It develops slowly, in minor quakes and accumulations, until air transforms into ash. When I finally realized what had happened, I wished I could say I felt like a sparking socket, a blazing failure. All I sensed was the hollow outline of a plaster mould out in the elements: cold, damp, degrading.

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Pompeii's erasure had sheltered life's traces: frescoes, artifacts, vital signs all brought back to light, pristine. But one day, a few years ago, the House of the Gladiators simply collapsed. No one knows why, exactly. Perhaps a little water, or decades of visiting hordes, eroded those sturdy foundations. The official charge is prolonged neglect.