hard-breathing

Jeri Theriault

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by Jeri Theriault

I walk the ends & starts
of June  breathe lilacs & salt-marsh
car-spewed toxins  last
year’s rumor of  heat.
somewhere factories unmake (still)
lungs/backs/hands
like those boom-time
pulp & loom  hard-breathing
jobs my ancestors proudly
happy for sweat & strain
the good work of their bodies
inhaled dirt & weed-killer
breathed smoke-stack
& cigarettes
work-paid mortgage
happy for over-time  split-shift
side-by-side father/son
steady pay-check  girl [my aunt]
in the back room breathed cotton
lint two decades
all of them artists
of their own lives like renaissance
painters breathing/tasting lead
white  whitest of whites  everlasting
clapboard-white  chipped
sweet-smelling lead
breathed
pot roses & lavender  cut
grass & clover    exhaled after-shift
laughs & stories  brothers
father  aunt with the excised
lung in the too-small    paid-for
house  everything earned
with the work of dangerous
breathing
    even now [somewhere]
a grandfather & uncles
water tomatoes  re-shingle a roof
play cribbage in the cool    moth-soft
near-dark    breathe easy
breathe what we’ve always
breathed    grief
& goodness    alveoli enfolding
detritus & duff in delicate plackets
pit-scarring    like the wind-burned faces
of    far-gazing pioneers