

hard-breathing

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/back/hands
like those boom-time
pulp & loom hard-breathing
jobs my ancestors proudly
glad 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