

For My Brother on His Sixteenth Birthday

I am burning my brother on a rooftop
in September. He doesn't protest much,
never screams. I tell him something had to give
and it couldn't be me this time.

I tell him he's dust to me and sweep his ashes
off the ledge. He keeps coming back
a boy and says it'll be okay. He points to the sky
like something's there. I tell him it's gone.

I tell him anyone can be born—I was
born yellowed by an unready liver.
He says it's his birthday, so I give him
a beer and he pretends to like it.

He looks like he wants chocolate cake,
so I give him another beer. He says
he's had enough, so I give him
a cigarette. And he takes it.

He tells me he's cold. I tell him I held him
as much as anyone could as a baby,
supported his needy neck in terror. He asks
for chocolate cake. He points to the sky.

He tells me he's cold. I press my lighter
to his sleeves and tell him it'll be
okay, hug him until we're both charred
and warm. He tells me it's gone.

What I Mean By Ruin Is...

When there's only condiments left in the fridge
and you join a free online dating service
so men will buy you dinner.

When you've shucked the night with the dull blade
of indecision and gulped down everything,
even the pearls.

When some old, left-handed love has left
your guitar strung backwards
and you can't find any songs for rain
in its frets.

When you wake up next to the body
of your past and it looks ready
to wrinkle and bald.

When the last burn of summer is peeling
from your breasts and there's nothing to husk
the pale raw of new flesh.

When the woman who wears her hair in the old way
quits mumbling about Jesus on street corners
and takes her salvation pamphlets
to a pauper's grave.

When you're too ugly to pray,
but pray

and the only voice
on the drunk subway wails
good grief.