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Dendrochronology

Carson Colenbaugh

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Carson Colenbaugh

Dendrochronology

At the foot of this tree there is a lip,
And there is a lip beyond that. Each turn
Marks a fold of fire from seasons gone by—
The lightning of the last century,
Sparks flung by the friction of industry,
Campfires loosed by Mississippian hunters
Onto landscapes prepared to light. Each time
A cavity tightens it holds pitch,
And that pitch keeps those gaping scars alive
Even after the slough of bark and moss
Have reduced the rest of these woods to loam.
We came as observers of what once had burned,
To log witness responses and depart
Unseen. We wrap up our tapes and make findings
As we snack on morsels by the phone tower;
Red-shouldered hawks emerge searching for lunch
Through blank sheets of fog. In this bleakest March,
Last summer's shoots protrude anticipating
Bud-break. They will grow tall in their lifetimes,
They will amass incredible tons
Of carbon in their roots and their thick bodies,
And they will pin each fire to pass
With physiological certainty—
Even as we fail them, even as hills
Turn to soot while our engines keep running.
They will report what we did, what we
Held with importance. We cannot escape ourselves:
There is no slate we can wipe, no passage
To omit, not as long as the world
Thickens around us, hardens, and remembers.