

2023

Combustibles

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Recommended Citation

Rathburn, Chelsea (2023) "Combustibles," *Birmingham Poetry Review*. Vol. 50, Article 65.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/bpr/vol50/iss2023/65>

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Chelsea Rathburn

Combustibles

Pinto leaves you with that warm feeling.

—tagline dropped from Ford
radio ads

Even before I knew about the explosions,
the recalls, and the late-night television jokes,
or read the memo that measured the value of human life
and found it wanting, I had my own reasons to hate
my father's orange and white '73 Ford Pinto.

Already ugly when he'd bought it, seven years used,
for a hundred dollars, it suffered his benign neglect,
torn red cellophane fluttering across a taillight,
papers and cups collecting in every crevice, rust
spreading like mold, mold growing where it rained inside.

Riding in the backseat meant straddling a hole
in the floorboard, watching the asphalt tumbling by
through a latticework of rust. But worse than all of that
was that I sometimes rode to school—to middle school,
where students ranged in pimply throngs, scanning the crowd

for weakness. I made him drop me at the end of the block,
as though no one could see me there, and walked away
head down, afraid of what the car said about me,
who I was, where I came from. For a year or so,
my father worked at a dealership on the side,

talking my classmates' parents into new convertibles
or cars for their older children's sweet sixteens. Each time
he came home, I hoped he hadn't mentioned me, the way
I hoped no one had seen me walk away from him
and the car as if I could leave my ugliness behind.