

JOHN FREEMAN

Repair

They've torn down walls, ripped up floorboards, pulled aside the electrics and
beneath all that Carolina pine discovered
blackened supporting beams so brittle I can pick off chips with my
fingernail, as if someone had roasted marshmallows
at an open fire on the bathroom floor, and it's scorched above the tin
ceiling tiles too, so badly the carpenter looks
at me like I've been running a dog-fighting ring out of my apartment, and in his wince
I know this is going to cost, like, there-goes-the-rest-of-it
cost, just as, later that summer, it will cost in the dentist's chair tipped toward the TV
where Darlene Rodriguez is talking about
the latest MTA accident, a bus this time, which ran out of control and
smashed into a building, killing three, including the driver.
Something similar happened on 14th Street, my dentist says, peering into the hole
he's made on my back molar, the one supposed to be
a cavity but is now a root canal and a crown, and I keep apologizing to him
and his friendly assistant with the star tattooed
behind her ear, for the embarrassment—six years it's been,
my job, the commuting, but I know
why I didn't go in during that time, I'm thinking
of my father cleaning her teeth, more and more yellow
even though after she'd eat he'd raise her out of her chair, and carry
her like the fullback he once was, lifting her off the ground into the bathroom,
slowly brushing her teeth, wiping the spit, drool,
the toothpaste with a washcloth, and when I visited
I'd stand there helpless before so much love, unable to do anything useful except
to watch how serious it gets, how there's nothing serious
without an end, and that's the only bill you're ever going to be scared to pay,
unthinkable, because once you start paying, there's no end
to what you'll give, and I witnessed him do it, no bargaining, no installment, just
give up everything, his vanity first, then his friendships,
and finally his faith. He looked at the blackened circle around her and said
if this is how God takes then we don't have an agreement
anymore, while I'm recording the changes
in him, so great they just obliterate any
self-consciousness, it becomes something you do, like carpentry or dentistry,
if you don't drill this tooth now you're going to lose it,

if you don't give these drivers a break they're going to fall asleep at the wheel
and smash into things. So I take the rest of the money
I earned from her death, this wealth drilled from the ground in Texas and
Indiana and Oklahoma, Rockefeller money that
bought my grandmother a sterling retirement and would have passed to my mother
if she hadn't died before her own, I take the money and put
it back into the new hole, and the carpenter doesn't blink,
or even say thank you, just says he'll make it look
like new, and that's when I know he's lying.