

JOHN T. HOWARD

## The Trees of North America (Black Locust)

In dreams I've been lately having we  
are in the backyard with a pit fire  
  
burning, flames leaping up into the air  
and sparked embers popping at our  
  
feet and sometimes, sometimes there's  
a bothersome breeze that ushers smoke  
  
into our faces, blinding us here and  
there as we continue to toss artifacts  
  
from our time together into the fire.  
Things like that copy of the Joy of  
  
Cooking my sister gifted us one Christmas,  
or all those pointless letters we wrote  
  
and sent across the country that first  
year of our relationship, or the bouquet  
  
of roses we bought at the little florist beside  
the Grand Lake Theater, flowers you  
  
held at our wedding, fresh-cut but gone  
brittle too soon, and transported with care

from California to Indiana and back,  
crumbling to flakes and ash to commemorate  
the end of our marriage. But sometimes these  
dreams turn to nightmares and when they do,  
there's a man with a chainsaw who comes  
into the yard unannounced, the saw's engine  
revving, the cutting teeth reeling along a stout  
guide bar, the handle and the housing of the  
mechanized tool an orange so bright it hollers.  
The man comes at us as if the year were  
1974 and we were being forced to relive  
history, one besides our own, but just before  
bringing the toothed blade down into  
the flesh of our bodies, he turns away  
from us and runs up to one small tree  
we have in the corner of the yard, cutting  
away branches with deft and nimble movements,  
and those fallen limbs land miraculously  
in a neat pile, topped off by cords he's cut  
of the tree's trunk. When the man rejoins us  
by the fire, the chainsaw is turned off, hanging  
from his shoulder by a strap, and he places  
the bundle of firewood at our feet, places it right  
beside the pile of things you and I have gathered  
to burn. He grabs a single piece of wood  
and holds it out for me, an offering I refuse

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because I know that tree all too well. But you,  
you are all smiles and glee as you grab hold of it,

ignoring the long thorns, not at all concerned  
about the blood that might flow from your hands

should those spines puncture your skin. And I  
watch as you kneel into the fire, looking for

the best place to lodge that freshly cut wood,  
whether to place it beside our smoldering

cookbook or atop what little is left of our  
letters and our flowers. It is as if you know

what I was thinking—that I want to push you  
right in—when you lie down in the fire with

the flames and embers begging: come home.