

JOHN McCARTHY

North End, 1997

That was the year a red & yellow Fisher Price car appeared
on our porch, its body dented & scratched, its dirty roof
covered in faded stickers worn down to the white adhesive.

That was the year we had plastic over the house windows
because we had no windows. I sat on our stained porch
in my car without windows & listened to the rain clink

the plastic roof like a clicking stove burner. That was the year
I was always on fire because my shoes pinched my toes
& my clothes never fit. That was the year our mailbox settled,

leaned to its side exhausted, its orange flag snapped off
& its rusted front flap hung open like a fish's curved mouth.
That was the year I was sent home from school for head lice,

for peeing my pants, for not changing my clothes, for never
washing my hands. I scratched my scalp with a cheese grater
on the porch & cried all year. That was the year I wondered

what year mom would come back. That was the year her body
came back like a plastic toy someone had shaken with a fist.
That was the year she slept all year. I carved my scalp open

until I could feel the smoke leaving my body. That was the year
I stepped through a nail & my father slapped me around
for the price of a tetanus shot. That was the year

the rest of the houses woke up covered in brown boards
& spray paint shouting *Gas Off*. That was the year our neighbor
was arrested for shooting squirrels with a shotgun in his yard

while I watched from a red and yellow car without moving.
That was the year that was longer than a year in Springfield—
gunshots—my father never speaking except to say *enough*.