

Cremation

John McCarthy

My father burned our dog
and I never got my hands dirty
with ash resin or felt the air
of a sad wind after goodbye.
He told me he left her
in a white room with a hot oven
and walked away. It was too hard
to do anything else. I had
just got home from school
when I began to think of her
burning alone like the squirrel
my friends trapped. They pinned
its neck in the teepee frame
of the fuel logs and sparked a fire.
In my backyard, when the fire
dwindled to smolder, the squirrel's
head was alive, screaming
a goddamned sound beyond
screaming. No fur left on its face.
No eyelids. We felt a terror
of doing wrong, of watching
a thing so dead still twitch
with a hanging on. I ran
to the shed, grabbed a hammer.
I came out hollering, hitting
the skull so hard it stopped.
I had to I had to I told my friends.
They had no eyelids watching me

smash the body of a suffering thing.
My dog was still alive then,
chewing on a stick and leashed
to a stake in the yard. I did
not think about her at all
as I kneeled back down
and got the fire going again.