

G A S L I G H T  
by aj earle

We can stay here a while.

I remember you were lemon wedges in cold water,  
the ancient evergreen air freshener in my car.  
You were a good-kid, a not-so-good-kid,  
a balloon accidentally let go.

It feels like blown out birthday candles,  
this emptiness in my chest,  
like a bonfire in late September,  
like a tall can on a good night,  
like a California sunrise.

I could never master a bike well enough to ride with you,  
and you smell like chalk on a well-loved blackboard,  
like sand and sunscreen and home.

...

You know I hate this band but you play it anyway,  
it's your car.

I'm too loud at this party for the downstairs neighbors, you say,  
too brash for your parents, you say,  
too big for this box, you say,  
but I'll try to fit,  
because we're friends,  
because what else is there?

There was mist when we drove into the dawn,  
and I think of how you laughed at my jokes last summer  
when it was hot and you were dating someone who looked like me,  
and think about how I can make you laugh again.

...

I am the steady cycle of ocean against cliff,  
the warm and dry August,  
the quiet that has settled in gulfs between us.

I can hear your five-page-not-apology,  
can smell the oil you'll use to color our collective memory  
to buff yourself into something that casts a better light.

Your friends still like you, still don't-like me,  
and I am too old to pay attention anyway,  
of the shifting sands in our circles.

The garden needs de-weeding, the kettle is done,  
The boys are whining to be let out.  
there are so many books to read  
and my friend just had a baby.

Someone else is on their way to pick me up  
and they keep texting to let me know  
how excited they are to see me soon.

I don't think of you at all.