

CLAIRE MILLIKIN

Asbestos

One winter they cleared the asbestos from our rooms.
Through great chutes the white gray flowers withdrew.

We breathed asbestos in our dreams of snow,
its delicate tendrils. They said it wasn't dangerous,
the way it sifted through interior skies like a kiss.
A boy will press himself to you.
You will inhabit his bed
for somewhere to sleep because you have to sleep
somewhere, when snow is falling
or asbestos, unquenchable.

Unquenchable, no flame can touch it.
One winter with the building sealed deep into snow,
they pulled out the asbestos, leaving vitreous white shimmers
everywhere in the light around our hands.

Asbestos would keep us warm if it enveloped winter rooms.
You leave the house and walk out into snow,
where you can no longer tolerate what he has done.

One winter they sucked the asbestos from the halls and closets and
back rooms,
with steel hands peeled asbestos from the ceiling.
We wore our frayed nightgowns and watched the men.
He will press into you and you will think you cannot breathe,
but it's only asbestos flickering, a small pale bird in your mouth and soul.
One by one the birds get taken.

Allow him to reach for you. Against the wall at night
birds' wings shudder, winter flight, fugitive
unquenchable substance of asbestos
through which girls pass with slender feet.