

Surrogate father sestina

Nathan Marquam

Losing a tooth is like losing a father—
another soon grows in its place, though not
immediately. First comes the blood-black absence,
the small cavern hidden inside. Then one day,
it fills with jagged rock, something small and alive
within you, that's of you, but haunted. I grew

so fast I could hear my bones crack, outgrew
skirts and sweaters, friends, my name, the father
I was born with. He was an exoskeleton, not alive
the moment I left him, just the cells to die. Not
my fault, people said, but with each passing day
I was a different shape— bigger in his absence

and brave, no walls of him to contain me, and absence
became me, something exponential in the way I grew,
formless and large, more myself each passing day—
but like a poem, I wanted to be restrained. No father,
no curfew, no shotgun warning for the boys. Not
alone, but reaching always for something alive

until I reached and found something alive.
He tasted of salt, morning breath, the absence
of death, of fathers, the word no. Before, I had not
known something worse than death. I grew
fond of my own decay, eyes like my father's
blue and terribly still, counting days

spent watching the sun pass me by, days
spent afraid to let the world see me alive,
and the fathers lined up to save me. Fathers
with blackened lungs, charred in the absence
of children and wives, fathers who grew
fond of me, of what I could fill in them. Not

out of obligation, they said, but love— not
worth it when my chatter filled their days
with incessant noise. I watched as they grew
bored of my damage, but they were alive,
a line between me and the absence
of me, chain wallet fathers, bar stool fathers,

fathers I killed while they were still alive.
I spent my days collecting each absence,
grew into the shape of a man, a not-father.