

Fire-eaters

by Cori Rupe

I am something to be gawked at,
though my face is covered by the softest curve of glass.

I was once a pretty thing.
I was once a ballerina trip-gliding
over marbles, fallen into the potential of grace.

Once a boy looked at the shell of me,
took me into his arms and whispered words
I will never remember, with searing breath
that I will never forget.

His ROTC jacket hangs in my closet,
still saltwater stained from the day I bellowed
I am too gay to be with you
in a bar we were too young to frequent.

At the end of every paragraph,
the center of pitted pomegranates
marking the beginning of fall,
his sippy-lid eyes follow me, forever asking
who are you today?

Today I am that same disjointed ballerina
pushing elbows and toes into every crevice
of the cracked universe that swallows me
like the pills I must force down my throat
to be deemed normal.

Sir, today I am a fire-eater.

I am a rip-roaring son of a bitch
who will never stop making declarations:

a sick dog lying in heat
in the dead of July—
wounded, but I will bite.