

# Landlines

JEN DeGREGORIO

Today I dialed the number for the house  
where I grew up. I let it ring a long time  
  
though my parents won't answer. They've  
moved. The ringing soothes me. Its rhythmic  
  
purring promises. A return. I have just stuck  
a quarter into the slot of a payphone  
  
at the mall, heard the plink as it sinks to wherever  
it goes. Between my ear and shoulder I cradle  
  
the plastic receiver, still warm from the last  
caller's ear. Girlfriends beside me wear  
  
tiny t-shirts, baggy pants, chokers. Chew  
gum madly as a skater flies illegally by  
  
on his board, a bird glides above us  
toward the nest it's built  
  
near the roof. A man on a ladder  
hunts it down. The ringing  
  
becomes the voice of my mother. Her  
*Hello, ready to go?*  
  
back to the house where we'll all sprawl  
that night on my floor in sleeping bags  
  
emblazoned with cartoons we've outgrown  
and will call the boys (& girls) we like, all night  
  
their cracking tones passed from one  
to another, like the cigarettes we haven't yet  
  
started to smoke. That's how young we are —  
before the booze and sex and drugs

the marriage and kids and divorce and the not  
getting married or giving birth and the feeling  
  
all that attention to work, even our art, was  
misplaced. The world is ending, after all,  
  
it was always ending. But today it's record-breaking  
hot. Canadian wildfire darkens the skies  
  
of New York. Maybe that's why I'm dialing  
the past, though I know nostalgia's  
  
a drug, it's a cop-out, it's precisely  
what's wrong. But the truth is I want  
  
to be strung out on this one moment, blown  
clean like a bubble from a pink plastic jug  
  
of murkier water, float across the freshly  
mown yard, pop music echoing  
  
from my open window. To taste lip gloss  
throat raw, belly sore from laughter  
  
with my oldest friends. Each year we speak  
less and less. I do what I can. Tap  
  
a heart on every new photo  
they post. Silently send them my best.

*Jen DeGregorio's writing has received support from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference; the Kettle Pond Writers' Conference; Binghamton University (SUNY), where she received a PhD in English; and Hunter College (CUNY), where she received an MFA in creative writing. She currently works as the associate director of creative writing at Binghamton, where she also teaches undergraduate creative writing as a lecturer.*

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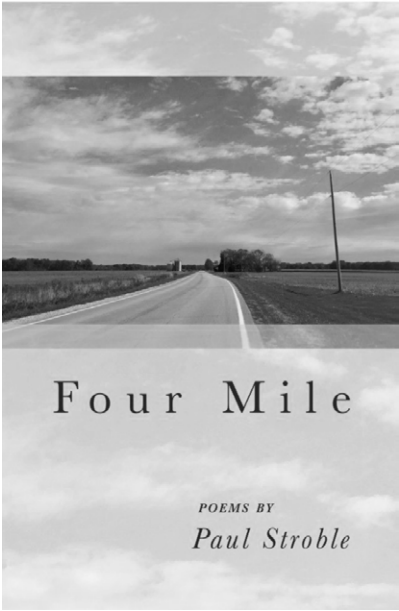
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