

## Ars Vita

—for Dylan

My son, Dylan, and his new friend  
sit on the front porch swing talking  
between play, toes caught on the floor,  
pushing gently back and forth while I paint  
the up and down of our home a quiet off-white,  
comparing notes on what they remember  
of their younger years—  
earlier towns and what they did there, the sizes of their first houses.  
Dylan recalls the room upstairs in Santa Barbara when he was six  
the one with a skylight and lanai with a view of the ocean  
its own sink and the toilet in the corner behind the unvarnished gate,  
a master bedroom large enough for his buoyant energy.  
The road outside led to a Thousand Steps  
down to the beach where he could play all day in the sand  
nothing more pressing than constructing battlements  
with their elaborate moats to take away the incoming sea  
until overwhelmed by the rising tide, content to build again.  
And so begins a life of reflection, memory  
enhanced and denied, time settling into the stories we tell ourselves.  
He doesn't like to recall the time when he almost set his face on fire.  
In the backyard he found the white plastic milk bottle  
with the gasoline the landlord's son hadn't put away  
after mowing. Something to experiment with,  
he opened it to pour the liquid down  
the ancient gas heater for the old redwood hot tub  
outside our bedroom window on the first floor.  
Even his four-year-old sister knew it was a bad idea,  
but he went ahead despite her plea—*Don't do it, Dylan.*  
The flame from the gasoline and pilot light shot six-feet in the air  
singeing his eyebrows while I walked the beach a mile away.  
When I returned the police were already there,  
Dylan in shock, his sister crying, his mother hysterical,  
and the officers questioning where I had been.