

EUGENIA LEIGH

Matrescence

The fire in the news sets loose
the bulwarks in my brain. They protect me
by compiling all the ways to die.

I am not the kind of woman who prays
to be spared from the fire.
The fires will come, I know. But I can't help

asking my midnight questions,
rotten questions sour in the mouth.
How to be mother enough,

how to save my child
when the blaze comes for us.
What I know of mothering is this:

my mother often locked herself in a room
to pray for hours until she couldn't
see out of her swollen, scarlet eyes.

Spare us from the fire, spare us from the fire,
she'd wail as we knocked.
Spare us from the fire, spare us

from the fire, she'd wail
even as she packed us up
to move back in with it again and again

each time the fire showed up
to beg on its knees
even after we painted our red car blue

so we couldn't be found.
When I fear I am
the kind of mother my mother was,

I have to keep in mind
the end: she did eventually take the three of us
and flee. The marks on her body

took ten years to fade.
And still, on my right arm, the faint stain
of a burn. I've been trained by now

to outrun the devil
and outcock the pocket-sized devils he lobs
from a distance. But remind me —

in the legend, who stood
in the king's furnace with the three
who walked out of the flames
unbound, unharmed, not a stick of hair singed?