

LESLEY WHEELER

Thirty-Ninth Birthday

from hell, or into hell. We hike. We
stop. We stop again. The children
sob, they drain juice boxes, they trudge
up to the Devil's Marbleyard on the walk I begged
to take because my days are small. "Leisurely,"
the web site said. Summer dissolves
into gray wads of cloud, the green leaves singe
as we mount. The sandstone boulders look nothing
like marbles, they are sharp
as the memory of hurting someone on purpose, two hundred
million years ago when this was a beach and Scotland tore itself
across the proto-Atlantic and the continent ricocheted over to Africa,
rifting this piperock with its ancient worm-
holes onto a high ridge. We can't believe
how uninspiring it is. Then the rain starts.
What is a birthday without
mistakes, burnt breakfast in bed,
damaged gifts, a whiff of sulfur? Next
year I will know better
than to aspire to any heights. I will learn how to cheat
disappointment. Disaster makes us all feel lighter and we skid
rapidly down to the parking lot, where the car
is now dead. I say "we," the nuclear family
crawling up and down rocks like a
centipede, but really we are
four kittens in a sack, four kinds of misery
with sharp claws and a bad presentiment, and
the devil himself grasps the burlap. Even if none
of the rest of them do, I
smell winter like a mauled pine, like
burning brake-pads. Oh you bad man,
mister time-rolls-away, please
let the engine run.