

ALEXANDRA TEAGUE

Levels

We're looking for that sure thing: the glowing yellow
of a carpenter's level with its bead of oil,
or is it air, that promises perfection, and we know

tonight we'll never hold it steady, like the ladder
in an old song I loved when I was far too young
to understand *James, James, hold the ladder*

steady, and my mother had to explain *eloping*
because I didn't yet know the edges of my life
so well I'd want to climb outside it—hanging

on only a promise; I still get lost on familiar
blocks, the sun not gone, but leaving, floating
crookedly down between the buildings, or

maybe we've built the ground slantingly
from landfills as all conversations tend to become
lopsided, even the most romantic or especially

the most romantic; she was ready, which rhymed
of course, but I can't remember how it ended,
if he really held her steady on the long climb

to the bottom rung, and why she had to call
his name twice as if he might not really be
there—the ladder just sprouted like a tall

tree against her window, and her stepping off
backwards and singing into the rest of her life.