Year of the Monkey

A man on a ladder attacks a building with a machine that emits a wedge of sparks and a smell like driving around with the parking brake on. And you want to know if I can be more casual? Ask me when the sky’s not as low as a waiting-room ceiling, when the clouds aren’t a flotilla of empty milk jugs bobbing across a shallow sky. The truth is the man I said was attacking a building was sanding a length of awning tube—a certain amount of roughness is needed to make it adhere. If I told you that, you’d roll your eyes and put your hand in my pocket. You want to let what happens happen. I want to be more transparent in my desires, to hand you a ring pop and ask you to love me as long as it lasts. Keep an open mind is what I’m saying, pencil in a line of a poem in which we drive from Marfa, Texas, to Baton Rouge. In the meantime, I’ll settle for Chinatown buck-a-shuck. It’s wonderful and awful, don’t you think, to slurp down an entire existence without chewing? The truth, after all, is only what happens when no one objects, when I say, for example, The clouds look like they’re trying to empty their emptiness down on our existence, and you answer, I wish they would.
If I Wrote a Poem About My Father

I’d tell you how he taught me to know whitetail from mule deer by prodding at roadkill with his rifle, to know north by the moss on trees and spruce by the pain it caused, to draw the thin, green capsules of nectar from Indian paintbrush and to draw a knife from a trout’s gills to its anus, to scoop out and toss back the sloppy coil of intestines, the soggy raisin of its heart, and you would know him by simple facts. I wouldn’t have to explain the complex resonance with which the intimate, animal smell of his work clothes occupied the laundry room, or how his greasy orange-shelled chainsaw ruled the basement perched on its tarped pile of board ends and firewood. I wouldn’t say that once he went behind our house and began to attack the hillside with a mattock and shovel, that a week later the hillside had become a series of steps made of soil where my mother planted carrots and sunflowers, that another time he tied my brother’s dog, Joey, to a post and shot him with the .22 because he wouldn’t stop chewing on Pepper’s skull.
I’d tell you that he taught me to layer kindling over balled paper, light it in several places and let the flame build before adding firewood, but not that he had scars all over his arms from lighting himself on fire, or that the rain and the years washed out the terraces he made behind the house. And even if I said I still build fires the way he taught me, I wouldn’t say that he still has his scars. I wouldn’t say that I’m still on fire.
Pilgrims

As we drove it down the stairwell
Curtis’s couch bucked and fought
like a rodeo bull in its chute, shedding dust
and dribbling a trail of coins and cushions.
Downstairs, we tried to wedge it into
a U-haul packed with everything
we’d carried that day: his grandfather’s chairs,
his mother’s linens, his Craigslist bookshelves.
The five of us who’d come to help
Curtis ferry his life across the city
were silent. Bryce lit a cigarette,
sat down on a kitchen chair among
the boxes and suitcases scattered around
the parking lot. “It’s not going to happen,”
he said, and I knew he was right—the single
trip we’d planned would turn into two, and none
of the things I’d meant to do with the rest
of the day would get done. What those things
were, I wasn’t sure, but I knew
that whatever was wrong in my life I would
have fixed that afternoon. Instead, I traveled
with Curtis from Kitsilano to East Van,
balancing a wooden boat on my lap, trying
not to snap its delicate rigging as I turned
the dial looking for hockey-draft updates.
Half of what Curtis had gathered in twenty-four
years rode behind us, slightly unsettled,
shifting on corners. I spent the day
shouldering duffels of laundry and angling
tables into elevators, wiping sweat, downing
water, cradling the bottoms of overloaded
boxes of books and kitchen utensils. The more I carried the less I saw the use of any of it. And because I forgot the ship in the cab of the truck I had to carry it back across the city twice more. I resolved one day to trim my life back until it fit in the matchbox hold of that vessel. It was only hours later, finally carrying the ship up to the new apartment, setting it on the bookshelf, among the boxes already being unfolded into towels and houseplants and coffee pots that I saw it was the Mayflower. We were pilgrims, I thought, and it didn’t matter what we’d carried—we’d crossed the ocean of another day and found a new shore.