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40 lines

Driftwood

What's this? the boy asks
in his infinitesimal voice. It's fall,
they're at the foot of the dunes,
the reeds nodding over them.
Mom is still in bed.
This is driftwood, the father says,
touching and then picking up
the chunk of tree limb—
all elbows and knots,
no better word for it than *gnarl*.
But what is it? the boy asks.
And the father explains
this was once a branch,
somehow it got into the sea,
he doesn't know how—oh,
the things fathers should
know—but the water skinned
the wood, opened seams in it,
left it here for the sun
to whiten through its daily examinations.
The father holds the awkward
fragment. He doesn't get into

how *we* started out like this,
some remote ancestor no longer fish,
some gnarled
origin, some knobby limb
crawling up from one version of life
into another. Doesn't say
that the boy, too, was like this
in the beginning,
pale and crouched
at the foot of the unknown
world. The father can't speak
past the object
in his throat. Anyway
the boy is done with the driftwood.
He's moved off to a clamshell—
half a body, an open
bowl.

When I had the pleasure of sitting with Kikki Ghezzi's paintings, going back and forth between them, I found myself thinking over and over about driftwood—the knobbed, bent shapes, the bone-whiteness in so many of the paintings. I found myself thinking about childhood memories at the beach (a kind of in-between place) and about my own experiences of fatherhood. The objects in these paintings are in their own in-between space, between not-alive and very-much-alive. The poem came out of all that.