Tiny Blue Flowers

for Dolana

by Danielle Stricklin

I was nine, almost ten, with my dad and big sis
in the Little Belt Mountains
off the steep logging roads,
the only sounds birdsong, the snap-crunch of twigs, pine needles under foot.

In the air, a feeling of diminishing summer, of the Earth slowly shifting into shadow, still warm, yet cooling, as a body cools after its heart-flame’s smothered out.

All around us leaves fell like loose hairs, their colors leeched for fresh decay: orange-yellows, reds, browns dried like scabs sloughed from an elbow, a knee.

We found small heaps of gray ash, the charred remains of a cold fire.

We found tiny blue flowers surviving on threadbare, crumpled bed sheets; broken movie reels gutted, black ribbons spooling.

We found a hole in the ground gaping like a wound, bleeding out rusted cans, nomad trash.

We found our own unnerved reflections in the shimmering mirror-blade of a knife; we saw—could it be?—her lost and forgotten red ten-speed.

She was nine, almost ten, last seen riding her sister’s red ten-speed in flip flops, with sandy hair streaming as she cruised the one way, roller-coaster streets, a cherry popsicle melting in her hand.
Last fall, her picture in black and white
appeared at breakfast on our milk carton;
her arm bone, her jawbone, her skull
appeared behind a pile of dead logs….

In the Little Belt Mountains—
those I miscalled Little Bells, like the ringing
surfacing inside my head—
a part of me, but not—
like the blue bells—those tiny blue flowers
that emerge every spring,
from the awakened, thawing ground.