

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 leeching 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.