

Afterward

Dixie Partridge

Once on the porch I asked
great-grandfather Porter a question
loudly and he said *wait*
though he was just sitting still
his face raised to low sun
eyes half-open

his answers were usually
to questions we hadn't asked
but made us laugh and feel better
almost deaf he still spoke to great-grandma
buried before I was born
and I had to ask if those gone
are really anywhere if they know
we're still here

so I sat with him on the west porch
and smelled beets my mother was pickling
my hands red from topping them
and his white with no spots except one
the shape of a moth across a knuckle
gripped over his cane that could reach us
if we crept too near

the sun sank into sky the color
of blueing waters from my mother's laundry
and I heard some kind of bird tremble
branches in the poplar over the attic
I felt my heartbeat
pass into another season and I thought
for the first time of summer ending

something left it slipped
through my hands and went
out of the yard and into the hills
dark with trees and I looked at grandfather
who looked as if he was listening
to music and he never turned back to me
but as night came
he hummed the faint lullaby he used to sing
when I was small