

Homecoming

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He could still hear the river
when the hospice nurse yanked the sheet up
and pointed to his legs.

You see this mottling here? she said to me.
It means he's almost gone.

We had moved my grandfather's hospital bed into the den,
in front of the French doors that looked out onto the water
so he could wake with the sun and the Missouri,

so we could pretend that this morning was like any other
morning of the last thirty-eight years he'd lived in this house.

I wanted to use my words against her, but grief held my tongue.
Instead, I gently traced the blue tributaries that had
carried the tides of his blood for ninety-three years
and remembered

how he used to take me fishing at the water's edge
with a stick pole and corn kernels,

and all the afternoons we spent in the arcade
trying to outsmart the claw machine,
our hands sticky with lime sherbet,

and the pure joy I felt when I could hear his Diesel engine
just before he crested the hill on Neltom Drive,

and how when it was finally time to teach me to drive,
we swapped seats in that farm truck on Grey Goose Road,
and once I was buckled in he simply said,
Okay. Go ahead, Sunshine.

I wanted to pull him into the stream of memories,
to make him understand that if I was his sun,
he was my moon, but the only words I could find were
It's okay. It's okay. Go ahead if you need to.

I gently tucked the sheets back around his legs,
laid my head on his chest like I was five again
and listened to his heartbeat
until all I could hear was the sound
of the waves coming home to shore.