

KATE STOLTZFUS

prelude to marriage

We buried my first pets in the garden. The goldfish I called Mary, Kate, and Ashley had a funeral, a song about seas, a trowel we used to sift them to sleep. I cried when my dad tilled the ground for spring. I didn't know how to want it. I still don't. But when the tomatoes ignited into fat fiery globes, I was there, visiting them, running my fingers down furred stems so I could carry their earthscent everywhere. And when my dad taught me about taking the saltshaker right to their feet, to eat what we'd grown, there, where it first rose up, I let the acid vibrance flow down my arms, ravenous to know more about all I did not know.

What comes from shedding
familiar bones? Just a door—
beyond it, the rest.

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Pennsylvania Homecoming

When my parents need to bury my brother,
they leave the city for a hillside tucked down

like a bed. The Mennonite farmers near the church
didn't know the baby born among pigeons

and concrete. But they know what it means
to put a heart not yet grown into the soil, come back

in spring to find the smallest flower. My grandparents
left their own farms for New York at nineteen.

They didn't teach their children to squeeze cream
from an underbelly or tuck hair into a covering

or snap a chicken neck by flashlight. But they ask
for space in the cemetery for their grandson.

The congregation nods—knows grief
can be so thick it can't be aired out.

Sundays are for rest. But when my parents
open the earth, the neighbors in bonnets

circle them tight. What else is belief for?
Soon all they will see is corn, growing

tall and bright as a boy.