

## Emergence

The summer our parents split, we spent our days  
at St. Mary's. June's heat had drawn the water  
from the ground. As the sun incubated the air,  
cicadas crawled from their burrows and screeched

into being. Males called out with ribbed bellies;  
the females rubbed their wings in answer,  
flitting on stone statues of saints, squirming  
in the crevices of robes or folded hands.

The windows vibrated with mating calls,  
sparse rugs hardly absorbing the sound.  
Icons looked down from plaster walls,  
their eyes distant like someone lost or in love.

Emily Dickinson Floats the Buffalo River

She regrets wearing white,  
the edge of her dress muddied.

Down she drifts—  
catching a whiff of charred food  
and a faint Skynyrd riff,

past purple flowers she deems gentians.

The canoe paddle  
stirs the tawny fish. She calls them cod,  
the water clear

down to the riverbed's  
algaed stones.

Just beyond the shadow of a cliff,  
the rapids come.

She cannot stop

thinking of the river's nonchalance—  
its only thought, resistance;

its only love,  
change. Evening light  
shifts the tableau—

viridian and burnt ocher  
blend to muted indigo.

Just when she seems at home,  
Dickinson pens a postcard—

“How can I stand  
this tighter Breathing,  
this Zero  
at the bone?”

## First Communion

The night before, Grandma made my pallet  
on the couch with faded blue flowers.

Across the room, the iron-barrel stove loomed.  
We learned not to touch it.

At midnight I woke. I'd never heard rain on a tin roof  
and was sure what Revelation promised was true—

dark horses had come. In church we'd learned  
about the wise and foolish virgins with their oil.

I had not confessed my sins. Everyone else slept—  
or were they gone? Then the rain let up.

The dark turned dim. I chipped the polish  
from my nails, ashamed they were not bare.

## Milking

The women slipped her head  
between the fork of a tree.  
I braced a board against the bark,

a makeshift stock. Mrs. Henry kept the rope  
taut around the legs while Grandma  
milked the bleating nanny.

The swollen bag shrank.  
The runty kid approached slowly,  
still afraid of hooves.

Smoothing out her wrinkled dress,  
Mrs. Henry said her grandbaby  
would be visiting soon.

Then softly, "But she's got  
no fingers on one hand.  
Umbilical cord, you know."

Grandma frowned, then said, "Still you're lucky,"  
placing her hand above her heart  
just below the neck.

Morrilton, Arkansas

Train cars jump in and out  
of old storefront windows.

A boy in Levi's crosses the tracks  
toward the monument company's headstones.

A few already have a chiseled name.  
I wait for him behind a heap of brick

and corrugated tin. On windy days,  
the paper-mill stink drifts into town.

He claims the money beats baling hay,  
then closes his mouth over mine.