

JOSHUA LEE MARTIN

## Letter in a Drought

Written in coal and music and butter,  
written in trout blood, the letter's  
last words pierced him like barn nails  
splintering a wood post, and so he took  
the letter out to Crow Creek, listened  
for the half slop-pit, half-Buncombe County accent  
that meant a childhood shaped by ham-hocks  
and mountain laurel, the currency of cheese grits,  
heard her voice soft as porch-creak: *just leaving,*  
*not forgetting*, it said. But he knew what *leaving*  
meant now, had seen the families leave in the middle  
of the night before even the cock had cried  
for stillness and sometimes just the fathers, who'd shave  
a final time in the kitchen before loading  
their trucks with whatever they could sneak away,  
before their children rose hungry, their ribs  
jutting out like snakes swallowing mice.  
Even God, it seemed, had abandoned  
this place where crops dreamed of rain in their seeds,  
where the faint trace of mud-splatter  
could make anyone believe that this land  
wasn't turning to dust like a high country Sodom.  
Long gone, he knew she'd forget what they did here  
beside this once-lapping creek, how the water  
had licked their hands in the cool swell of evening.  
He knew that once down the mountain, they never  
came back, just passed time forgetting the way smoke  
curled around scrub-pine in summer's first dry spark,  
their last wisps of memory drying-up  
as they sped their trucks towards water.