

John Bartell

Crane Creek

My brother's house isn't much.
It sits in a draw where the snow collects
and the elk come down,
out of the mountains,
to raise their young.

There's not much insulation
in my brother's house,
and single paned windows
do little to stop the cold from swarming inside.
He should have fixed it all,
when he had the means,
before that ponderosa pine fell crossways
and that helicopter ferried him out of Hangman's Gulch,
the roar of the blades echoing through the canyons.

A porch wraps around my brother's house.
Weathered wood and fleeting paint,
cluttered with tubs of rabbit feed,
stacks of Amish blankets
that once would have fetched
a vacation in San Diego,
but now only keep moths warm.

An old logging road leads up
the ridge by my brother's house,
a gentle climb through dusty stands of pine and fir,
past rusted pickups and
western tanagers on the hunt for mates.

Years ago I stood on that ridge,
watched my brother limp across his pasture,
and I wondered what the world would be like
without him.

If I would ever return to his draw,
if I would see all the things again.

Pileated woodpeckers on wing.
Fading hoof prints in the dust along the trail.
The freedom in my brother's pain.

Atop that ridge again,
now under a bragging of constellations
so far from city lights,
stars that minimize my world.
There is no coffin to throw dirt on,
only ashes to spread
from the mountaintop that overlooks
the thing I envy the most -
a house
in a draw
without insulation
but with the love of the pines
circling it all year long.

John Bartell is an east coast transplant trying to make it Texas, drinking Shiner beer and enjoying the Austin music scene, though he hasn't taken to wearing cowboy boots. His poetry has been published in *Canyon Voices*, *The Loch Raven Review* and *The Orchards Poetry Review*. He also has prose in the *Manhattanville Review*, *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Press*, *Trembling with Fear 2019 Halloween Edition* and in A. Lee Martinez's *Strange Afterlives Anthology*.