

Fall 2020

Barley Days

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IAN U LOCKABY

BARLEY DAYS

I remember days in the year when I knew everything—
that wild carrot root looks exact to hemlock

It was May when first I went down for labor,
left, sometimes slighted, sometimes stronger

I sloughed myself in a cropped river valley,
climbed a tree and watched all night as diesel-dipped
stones were lifted for lanterns

they'd yawn, come engorged, asterisms falling
in the soil—we butter the lights here, and churn

We stretched on thin through summer, breeding
ourselves in soil stitched with bone and fry
I learned how we fed ourselves on the passing of birds

When the cold came untethered, it was clear—
some had wanted to live when the blight came, others
were ready to die

We clipped their roots finally the day it rained inside
the hot golden house where the sweetest things grew

These were barley days in the year

As the frost built, I took to pulling fist after fist
of sugared roots out the threatening floodplain—

My little pistol once, come uprooted from my waistband,
going jump in the mud as a frog might

Have I been made violent by this work? All the killing
of small things—new strength in my body, wanting
to show