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Our Little Tradition

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STEPHEN HUNDLEY

OUR LITTLE TRADITION

- Runner-Up: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

EVERY TIME I leave, I take a stone from your driveway. Any rock will do. I slip it in the pouch of my cheek to keep a while. To press and bully with my tongue. To force against the roof of my mouth until the crushed granites rattled out over the path to your home wear smooth. Until the dusty quartz shines new. Then I swallow.

When you see this behavior, you are not surprised. You say your mother walked through a desert. After Poland and the occupation. You say she carried your brother on her hip and sucked a stone when she was thirsty. It's a trick of the mind, an old farmer's tale, but the stone, you say, will absorb the saliva, will hold, in the recesses of its geology, whatever seeps from the glands tucked against your gums. But there are no deserts in France, my love. In Belgium, the dikes are blown. The farmer's fields are sown with salt. And your mother, she doesn't have the stomach for the oil spot beneath your car.

This time, I'll be gone for good, and where does that leave our little tradition? You, with your arms wrapped across your chest, and me, with my fingers welded shut, turned into shovels, hard at work scraping the gravel lot

into jagged gem piles and making them disappear. It takes a day to get it all.

All the things a stone can do to a body, these have done to mine. In the mornings I am someplace new, grouchy in the midsection and hunched over the toilet, waiting on the hairband that broke from your wrist while you carried groceries from the trunk to reappear in my ceramic bowl. I'm waiting for the errant cigarette butts, dead lizards, bird shit. For all the stones that came home, stuck in the soles of our shoes or else rattling in the toe-boxes of our boots: Georgia gneiss, Carolina shale, Maine blue. For the busted up concrete that pricked my bare feet when I went to check the mail. What I get is a few gurgling burbs; a persistent bloat.

You say you don't mind that I chew tire shreds and cream my coffee with the pulverized remnants of seashells, ferried nearly home in your sun hat before it upended and left them shattered in the parking lot. I Hoover what's left of them with the rest. You say it's fine that I'm leaving, but won't I please stay gone.

I'm sleeping on my side and fearing aspiration, that your driveway will resurface in the night and fill my lungs, or else I'll wake with it piled all around me, and I'll have to remember where each pebble fits against the next. Where every busted thing went.