

RAYE HENDRIX

The Nightmare

in my dreams there is an atomic horse

on the horizon galloping its mane

a mushroom cloud toward my porch

(I meant to say horseman but I have never

remembered scriptures the way

they were written)

when I was a child we kept horses

and my mother told me they were holy

said their high backs brought us closer

to god but never said which one

I bet anything tall could do that I bet

I could find a god on top of the barn

changing the name of atmosphere turning

the cocksure weathervane

with its breath

but I've built myself a god already

I call her *night mouth*

like me she's always hungry

her body is made entirely of want

when I wake she's still the blooming

cloud and its hot wheezing

that ballooning dream-horse bursting

from its cage of sleep to take back my mother's

kept horses and all our borrowed

bales of hay

Poison Ivy

As a child I filled my hands
with what I thought were weeds
from my father's garden.

Ungloved I pulled twists
of strangling leaves from throats
of okra, unwound them
from tomato-stalks to let the red
fruits gasp and heave.

Then I filled my hands
with my father, pulled him
by his wrists to my conquest
of stinging green.

We didn't make it far before the itch
began—his dark arms pink-puffed
and angry from my touch.

These are his traits I didn't inherit:
 black hair
 bronze skin
 arms capable of cradling a child

and—we learned that day—

 the corruption of those weeds,
 their poison the only fault
 I managed to escape.

(My father held me anyway.)

That night he bathed himself
in calamine, and with its pink
sheen of softness his body
almost looked like mine.

The Bats

we find them in the icicle-toothed
maw of a cracked open boulder

in the woods behind our home
soft bodies hanging close

as cloistered nuns tucked habit
of dark wing stone-shadow veil

my father says their mother
must have loved in the wrong

season her babies born
in the wrong turn of the year

he says it's a wonder
they haven't yet starved

but soon they will no food
to be found in winter no insect

-hum choir for them to quiet
in the cold my father says

they're so still they might
be dead already upside down

memorials in a stonefrost church
that night I freeze myself as well

with opened window watch

for black wing against black sky

listen for shadow-soft sounds
of flight petition the stars

their heat that one might
become a saving sun but morning

comes in silence the winter
sunlight harsh and cold as moonless

night when my father wakes
we go to check them find

their bodies icebound to the rock
wings fallen hanging stiff

above their heads like lifted
hands in praise or the prostrate

arms of sinners before god
I go to move them but my father

says to leave them for the wildcats
and the dogs that run the mountain

he asks me to be more like
winter beautiful but hard

he says despite my softness
everything must eat