

NANCY K. PEARSON
FIRST PLACE

Abrams Creek

My father spreads his seeds across the table—
Start Indoors. Plant April.

Look at me with my pills. A handful of gravel. An hour mows
its shadow over the field

rippling near Abrams Creek. I've come home
to come down. The woman on the other side

of the Good Samaritan Hotline said
there's no shame in that.

Coming here is like walking through the corn
when the corn is high. Something departs

like hair in a sink. Still, I count my pills.
There's a system to coming off.

I keep crushing trying to cut in half.
The bathroom counter turns granular,

geographic like a tongue.
Near my childhood home is a place called Cades Cove.

There's Hannah Mountain, Abrams Falls, Gregory Bald,
white names for the Cherokees who first blazed the paths

for pioneers carting camphor and sugar. There's a meadow
and in the meadow a gravestone.

Nestled between bluets and stargrass,
the small headstone reads:

Alea & Alea
Feb 12, 1839

I trace the name that death had named again.
Who needs one name for suffering?

Here's the thing. I hid my hypodermic needles.
I let my best friend smuggle my meth in her vagina

while the airplane, that slow pinball flipper,
pushed us closer to the mushroom-shaped bell

dinging in Las Vegas. Who thinks
cocaine is something that lives

and *stays* someplace around midnight?
Whole nations expire like this.

Around dusk, Abrams Creek glints with bottle caps.
And all summer my sisters and I sang beside that creek

One little, two little, three little Indians
Four little, five little, six little Indians

How many dispersed like dust, here,
where the water leads to a corn crib

where the corn silk once wrestled
with the fire of Winfield Scott?

The geese coil up behind the thunderheads.
It's raining on the New Highway

cutting up through the Smokies.
Wheels slap through my childhood bedroom

like questions turned over and over
in the dozed and graded earth.

In a photo, my sister and I hold hands
with a Cherokee Indian posing in the gift shop

where you can still hurl stale bread
at a bear in a concrete pit.

When Andrew Jackson said, build a fire under them—
When it gets hot enough—

The moon fries up the stars.
Nighttime, I'm fitful. I jerk like traffic

pouring into Gatlinburg. My bickering dreams—
black flies biting my hairy ankles.

Then, I down my pills,
those drops of turbid water leaving cusps.