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Johanna Shapiro

Driving with Grandpa

After my grandpa stopped
being a big city surgeon
he moved to the Ozarks
and became a country doc

When we visited,
my brother and sister
stayed back to eat pancakes
play dirtball or catch fireflies

I went with grandpa
in his rickety, rattletrap car
driving along bumpy, unpaved
roads that seemed relentless

Grandpa didn't say much
He had a small smile
that showed up
when he asked me if I knew

how to tip a cow
Mostly the radio blared
twangy tunes or hell-fire preaching
which also brought back the smile

One time he drove farther out
than I'd ever been
The house was just two rooms
a dirt floor, no electricity

In the bed
was a woman with no face
Skin cancer, my grandpa said

This didn't need to happen, he said

She never sought out care
until it was far too late
She was too proud and too poor
She worked too hard

feeding her men
and her pigs, sweeping that floor
till the cancer ate her face
and there was nothing left

I remember she had no face
But I remember more
the way my grandpa
caressed where her cheek had been

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