**Bramble**

Arden Stockdell-Giesler

Austin drives you home from rehearsal one night,

parking on an unlit street just outside your neighborhood.

He is a friend, your best friend’s ex-boyfriend.

She always called him pretty and you think she must be right.

He is cool in all his nonchalance.

He makes you shake and you

like the adrenaline. He lowers

his voice, slow and intentional.

He makes treachery feel warm.

There is only one streetlight down the road.

You watch through the passenger window

as the tree sways under it,

gentle and forgiving.

It is almost midnight

and warmer in the car

than outside on this backroad.

I spent most of late elementary

on a backtrail behind my cul-de-sac,

dead ended and barely 200 feet long.

It was suburban North Carolina in 2009.

The right side of the trail had scattered

blackberry and honeysuckle bushes,

all intertwined and tangled through the summer.

Loosely graveled and completely covered by oak and pine,

The canopy kept the backtrail quiet.

The blackberries were bitter to me then,

always warm from the sun. I ate them anyway.

I was sure if I tried hard enough or found the right one,

I would enjoy it. I could make myself love them.

Was it cruel to the fruit to give it more meaning than it asked,

more responsibility than it could carry?

I squeezed it gently.

The juice collected in my palm, slow and patient.

Once enough had gathered, I used it as ink.

I painted my knees and thighs,

fingers tracing suns and sisters

and shadows into the blank space.

I walked home that way,

all fruit-bloodied and warm.

Austin tells you he tastes berries,

tastes your Chapstick.

Says he likes it.

Says he waited for this.

To get you here.

Alone and his.

The September I was eight years old,

the blackberries were gone and overripe.

I sat on the gravel, the rocks loose

and half-forgiving.

I’d given up on finding anything

and settled for the quiet instead.

While looking through the last of the honeysuckle,

I saw one berry tucked and hidden,

the brambles all intertwined

with the surrounding greenery.

I reached through.

I miscalculated the distance between my foot and

firm ground, tripping over myself and into the thicket.

Ivy cushioned my fall, but my legs bled,

thorns all up my calves and in my knees.

I reached to the back of my head to check for blood.

I felt a damp, warm clump.

Tenderly pulling at my hair until it gave way,

part of the clump came free and fell into my palm.

Squashed and deflated, I held the blackberry.

You kiss Austin when he asks and

you go with Austin to the backseat when he asks.

The car is off, and

you are cold, late autumn ice

slowly covering the metal.

His lips are warm, and you let him hold you.

You kiss until you don’t, until there is more.

You can’t see his hands in the dark.

Your dress around your waist,

the seams in your underwear torn and

the fabric pulled to the side.

His breath, hot on your neck.

*You...are so...beautiful*,

he mumbles between movement and exhales.

What follows happens without you.

You move your face to the window

to find the tree you saw before.

The windows are now fogged.

You see nothing

but diluted light

from the streetlamp,

barely dispersed and mute.

You mumble softly.

I left bloody-kneed, shades of purple

smeared across my hands and down my thighs.