**Hollowed Bone**

Janet E. Irvin

The butcher block in my grandfather’s shop

stood at the back of the showroom, unbloodied

in the face of morning. My uncles carried racks

of lamb, quartered calves, the carcasses of pigs

from the underground coolers to the maple square

where Grandpa waited, blade in hand, apron clean,

heart eager to begin the carving: slabs of beef, ham

hocks, ribs and feet, steaks, sometimes tongue, to fill

the orders spooling from immigrant mouths. I waited

by the candy counter, listened to the knife soprano,

the cleaver bass, the hum beneath his breath. Ten

languages he spoke, not the literary version

but the earthy cadence of mines and mountains,

steppes, tundras, seas Red and Black, each phrase

a slim sinew of connection, a tendon tied to village

and hamlet, mouth to mouth. Time has carved its own

stake, shaved the fat from the roast, all the juicy bits

gone, swallowed by age, nothing left but hollowed bone.