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Jennifer Hanks

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# **The Unsteady Planet**

Jennifer Hanks

*Vassar Miller Poetry Award Runner-Up*

I.

When there was no better way to explain  
the green ash in her,  
the tails that appeared on the sardines she ate  
with oily fingers, the loam on her mother's bed,

she looked for evidence of the unsteady planet  
in the lens of the telescope  
propped against her bed.

She picked at the ruby scratches  
that ran down her arms

and thought of the planet flickering  
beyond her father's dry lips,  
remembered his sentences trailing off  
and the mice traps he set along the back of the house.

2.

She hid her sleeping bag in the garage,  
had to hide it so she could sleep there when it rained,

to go out to see the thin strip of stars  
visible through the clouds,

to handle the collection of jawbones  
kept in the box next to their cars.

3.

It seemed as if someone lived in their oven;  
it went unused but was always warm.

Her mind grasped for the worst thing,  
ghosts that still had some of their bones.

She saw them in seasonal clothes, jawbones intact,  
sometimes a rib hooked to a solid darkness.

4.

She wet her lips,  
worried there would not be enough spit  
to wipe the stains off her dress.

She thought about falling through the lake,  
what she would see looking up from underneath it,  
how the sunfish would eat the dead skin  
off her feet.

She went home where there was no one to talk to.  
She put on recital shoes and danced around the kitchen,  
avoiding cracks carefully.

5.

After three weeks her dad came home.

She couldn't remember where he had gone.  
He came back with a tropical-smelling detergent,  
three bags of flour and sugar.

He brought in the grisly traps.  
He hugged her and she held  
all the accusations in her mind,  
like she was putting dessert in the middle of a cold plate.

Where will you hide, she wanted to ask,  
but she didn't.

He couldn't hide when the planet came.

He couldn't make her the girl in the story  
who pulls the ribbon off her neck  
and lets her head fall to the ground.