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Fantasy of Walking My Niece Home

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Fantasy of Walking My Niece Home by Nikki Ummel

We veer off the path, head for the trees, knee-deep in pine straw.

My niece launches herself

from the Radio Flyer,

her feet crunching pine needles.

She sinks her hands into sharp pine cones.

They become missiles,

bomb the thick straw for enemy ships.

Look! I cry,

pointing to the looming trees:

the pine cones have come so far.

She jumps, flaps her hands open and closed.

We have to put them back,

she says. Their mommy will miss them.

Clutching pine cones in her too-small palms, she hugs them to her body:

A child, far from home. Mother, unreachable.

Sharp distance. My sister, sheathed in stiff sheets & soft lights, pink nails painted by kind hospice nurses.

She is two. The world is still kind.

I tell her, some things can't

come home.

She takes a pine cone, shoves it in my pocket, deep.

She says,

We will make a home for them.