Where It Belongs
Paula Duncan

I am roaming through the park thinking of you. Dirt lifts and mingles with the dampness in the air. Everything smells of pine, as the forest opens to the rain, like the living Christmas trees you’d bring home, root ball and all, straightened and contained in a plastic tub. They looked like any other Christmas tree, but with a mass of fabric at the bottom. You would slide them out onto the porch around New Year’s. Dragging them into the yard, you planted them between the house and the woods. They always died, but you always gave them a chance.

I point out plants I recognize to my friend, like you did to me on our walks: Sword Fern, Trillium, Oregon-Grape, Madrona, and Western Hemlocks. Clouds cover the lake and the dense forest that frames it. With a break in the clouds, I see a fishing line that suspends a crumpled bat over the water.

You made time for nature. Thunderstorms were greeted with the opening of a window in a second story room. Sitting in the dark, you would watch the trees dance, and listen to the wind howl. A wonder left in you from your childhood.

After being set loose the bat drifts to the ground like a leaf. It hangs inches from the ground grasping a few strands of grass; its chest pulsating towards the graying sky. Holding the hook in its mouth between its thumb and second finger, it knows what hurts.

You would fearlessly sweep spiders up in your dishwasher-manicured hands, after spotting them running around the perimeter of a room, or noting them in bath tubs, their legs slipping down the edges. Dropping them back outside, you’d remind them that was where they belonged.

I coax the animal into a hat. I slide up the lake’s embankment, and cut through a patch of Salal. A man is loading a truck outside the park manager’s cabin. He helps remove the hook. He says he has been working on removing the bats from the eaves of the cabins.

When and why our walks in the woods ended, I am still not sure. Maybe it was when depression hit you the hardest. Our falling out, over noth-
ing, still aches in mystery. When dad died I learned the pain of losing a parent I knew too little. Your black hair has changed color. Even when I see you rub your joints as arthritis sets in, I pretend time is not a factor.

I hold the recovering bat outstretched in front of me. I walk slowly to the stream, my gaze resting heavily on its frail body. Nearing the water it crawls to the edge swiveling its head in recognition. It hangs upside down, beats its wings once, and flies off. Drifting on air it chases after bugs and rests in a tree. I am surprised by my sense of accomplishment. Accomplishment is harder to find the older I get.