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Marble Autumn

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Marble Autumn

THERESA SMITH

You taught me how to shoot marbles.

Like a pro
you knew all the names...
Steely, Boulder, Peery, Catseye.
We played every day,
even in late autumn
when thin sheets of ice formed
like glass encasing leaf collages,
and the cold smack of well-aimed marble
on marble split the air.
You said I wasn't too bad . . . for a girl.

Once, in late October,
you won my favorite brown and yellow Catseye,
but promised to let me win it back.
"Tomorrow," you said.
I watched you turn and shuffle home,
rubber boots scraping gravel,
an odd grin on your freckled face,
my best marble in your palm.

In an ashen dawn,
Mom and Dad spoke in hushed tones.
Secrets doused in coffee
and oatmeal scent.
I caught your name.

In the still of the night
a burst appendix
silently flooded your gut
with poison.
They said you died
in your mother's arms.
She, with all that nurse's training
and a mother's devotion
couldn't save you.

We were only seven.
What could we know
about a cold reality that
strikes with perfect aim
and offers no second chance,
stealing away with the prize
like a small boy on a crisp day,
forbidden treasure in hand.