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## Strange Penance

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Hannah Dow

*Strange Penance*

Every house we lived in my mother gutted to the endoskeleton: tore down walls to make new rooms, swapped in windows to trap the sun. Wrecked her knees laying tile. In the meantime, my brother and I distanced ourselves outside, skipping pebbles, playing house beneath pine trees, and sweeping dirt flat and smooth beneath our feet.

Once, I found the rotting carcass of a trout and wanted to know how it had died on land, convinced myself I had killed it with a wayward stone. I wanted to give it a proper burial. My mother said *soil is mercy enough, the earth doesn't need our help to carry—bones and all—its creatures home.*

Still, I wanted to scrape my fingernails into the backyard's granitic soil, dig my knuckles raw with the repetition. Pain, the only ritual I knew.