

Abby Lewis

Snakes and Stones

She was a wild child, my sister. At four,
she hopped on her red and yellow tricycle
and peddled halfway around the block, naked
as the day she arrived. Grandmother phoned,
demanded how Mother could let Chelsea ride bare,
on full display for the entire neighborhood. Mother
let the gust of grandmother's words pass over her ear,
calm as ever. She didn't even go after my sister,
let her return the same way she left.

Mother knew the house was a crib Chelsea
would not be confined to; its intolerable
prison bar view kept her from making friends—
until the day she found a gardener snake
hidden in the rock garden out front.
It was no longer than the space
between her wrist and the tip of her pinky.
My sister understood a house of rocks
was not the same as a house of flowers,
so she kept it by her bed—in a shoe box
filled with grass—until Mother had a dream
the snake offered Chelsea a killing bite.

We let it go the next morning. It took a week
before my sister's eyes dried completely.
In the months after, she was often found curled
asleep against the belly of the Golden Retriever,
her fine honey-blond hair splayed over the dog's coat
like an added shawl.