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Markham Finalist

Olives

Gnarled and root-like, they sat in airtight bags, dried,
unchanging, as I tasted and tasted apple, banana, rice –
he knew that jagged tang beneath the sugar surface,
the assault on the throat. But that day I watched him
take one knob and hold it against his front teeth,
his puckered lips became a pocket; he tucked it safe.
And when he bit down, I did too, loosening
skin from pit. The flesh gave, finally, the way leather breaks –
it released a brine, current of earth and salt
raged from throat to the top of the head. With my eyes sealed
shut, I lost my hearing. I rushed to rip the tough
chew off, like peeling a jacket from a body in shock,
convinced my senses would return when it disappeared.
On one side of my mouth, I held the jacket, and opposite,
the seed, eye-shaped. A ring of ghostly sweet. Smiling,
he said he remembered carvers etching olive cores for buttons:
immortalizing that which we cannot consume.