Ember

By Alyson Hagy

She found it when she opened the stove. It resembled the desiccated carcass of a bird, some tragic dove that had made its way down her lonely, unused chimney. But when she touched it, it moved.

Or perhaps it pulsed. Anyhow, a thin throb of color appeared near its center. So she leaned and touched it again, certain it was a scroll of forgotten ash. She was an indifferent housekeeper. It would be just like her to leave behind a modicum of filth.

The thing glowed once more, almost willfully. It didn’t seem to produce heat. Just light. Or a prickling somewhat reminiscent of light. The asymmetries it displayed were not familiar. So, despite the faint odor of roasting beets, she closed the stove and went on to other things.

What other things? Money. Fresh garden asparagus. Unpunctuated text messages from her nephews. She had only been trying to straighten up the house. A house she didn’t even like.

The stove was the kind that burned wood chopped by stealthy locals. She used it only in winter. Because she was between the yawing moments in a life that require true courage, it was late at night before she selected a dramatic bathrobe and returned to the stove.

The glow, what there was of it, had become shivery and sobbing. Not dependent upon her at all. The thing appeared to be recovering from some kind of exertion she had not been allowed to witness. A faint, uncomfortable clawing instigated itself at the roots of her eyelashes. Had she seen a single tongue of flame or only imagined the licking? It suddenly became impossible to leave the stove. She kept vigil for hours. She offered a saucer of water. She planned the shopping for agreed-upon meals. When the cream of morning clotted itself against the window shades, she closed the stove. But not before she touched the thing again. Palm to heart, she recited in nervous preparation. It was important: Palm to heart.

She tried to go on, with limited success. There was an entire day spent with her head inside the dark stove, singing. There was the trembling offer of a folded, handwritten note.

In the end, she filled the stove with splintered logs and unread newspaper and struck the guardian match. She left the room without a glance. No burn, she said to herself, sullied and falsely proud. It never hurt me. I haven’t changed. Where, finally, was the viper’s sting?