Cabin John

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5958
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Vultures flay the flesh off a crushed doe some careless driver’s rush has kicked onto a stretch of lawn outside another gated community taken root by the river. Teeming with a life of their own, black wings ripple like dark water as blood trickles onto the remaining snow. An occasional scarlet spray blooms a stern warning across golden letters that read Private Drive. Once the unnamed poor thrived along these banks, canal people descended from the workers who cleaned the locks and controlled the flooding, dredging their livings from the nation’s capital, families as quiet and reserved as the mules that pulled barges up the towpath and ensured the country’s trade. Otters slide their fat bellies across the frozen canal like well-fed children enjoying a snow day from school. I rub my hands vigorously against the cold. By now the vultures have receded into their own dark country, and the deer’s ribs cradle an empty sky while a few chimneys near the Potomac scatter soot across the snow slowly disappearing like the footprints of the dead.