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Gretel Returns

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2022 Vassar Miller Poetry Award
Honorable Mention

Gretel Returns
by C.A. Munn

The way you know it's an obsession is if it returns, recites Gretel
as she plucks the lint from her toes
on the train seat. No passengers nearby to watch; it's not a heavily
traveled line.
She's always looking for patterns,
like the one on the seat upholstery—Dixie cup squiggles, stuck in the
nineties—
or like the ones her body makes.
One, two, three, four, five toes. One, two, three, four, five
valleys between them. Repeat.
It's interesting that toes have exact replicas of themselves. Fingers
too.
She paints her nails next,
black and metallic. Absorbing and reflecting. Her fingers are—*what's
the word*
Mother used—shapely.
Maybe it's a euphemism because they are not slender. She thinks of
chicken bones passed through cage bars
and other life-saving items. She thinks of calling her brother to tell
him about this trip
and to remind her she's not alone
after all. For imagined excuses she puts it off. She counts pillars on a
bridge
as they pass by the window,
out of habit. *Ch-ching, ch-ching, ch-ching* goes the train. The space
between
each judder a pregnant suspension
of breath. It only makes the perpetual pulse more emphatic when it
returns.
The passing pillars make looking
out the window like watching an old film as it winds up to speed.
Sometimes Gretel thinks life
is like that, like watching a movie reel. The space between the frames

so small you don't notice it,
but without it there'd be no motion at all. If you look at the film stock,
it's all just snapshots, little unstuck pieces of time.
Gretel likes to take photos with an old Leica M3 that belonged to her
mother.
Develops the negatives herself
in a darkroom. You can make infinity copies of a negative,
theoretically speaking.
She checks her daypack.
Camera. Phone. Extra battery. Water bottle. Trail mix,
which she has always assumed
is so named because it is perfect for leaving a trail when you are lost
in the woods.
That's why she buys the kind
with the brightly colored knock-off M&Ms. The trip is short
but it feels like a lifetime
before she disembarks in a one-road town. She laces her sneakers and
sets off
down a familiar path. Still,
she is shocked when she finds the cottage exactly where she
remembers it.
No one lives here but it is not empty.
She walks the dusty rooms and stops in the kitchen. There squats the
oven,
bulging, obscene, expectant.
Click. She snaps a photo—to show Hansel, she thinks—
but she will never develop
this roll of film. It will sit in the bottom of her bedside drawer next to
hair ties
with the elastic worn out
and the pack of cigarettes her mother doesn't know she smokes,
and when she is feeling
around for her lighter her fingers will stumble on the canister
and she will pull it out,
forgotten negatives coming to light when she least expects it.