Piling Cords in Uglitch: Russia’s Fox Visits

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One

At noon I sat between
the oak trees listening for
the fabled fox to come. Inevitably,
the fox would come with the cock
clenched between its teeth.
Father told these tales
over and over again.
At age six I scratched my name over
father’s on the oak bark,
cracking open acorns,
hearing Russian fairy tales
until we fell asleep, our words
joined by voices in the leaves.

Two

Into my fourth grade blue-spruce fort
I took Uglitch boys and girls
to cook them scrambled eggs,
striking a match to yellow leaves.
We cracked eggs on a skillet
from mother’s cupboard and the fox physician
joined us, licking his lips
from the old woman’s bones.
“Place the match here,” the fox said,
“to heal the earth.”
Without thinking, we lit the leaves,
and when flames reached
into hanging acorns,
we ran for pails of water.
Three

In fifth grade Helmut and I
built a fort in a wild oak tree.
Helmut took Anna there
to have their first kiss.
Hiding from father
electric and sly as the fox
with sheep’s wool on his paws,
they leaned close,
putting plums to their faces,
their noses in a scent of plums,
not yet ripe.

Four

Years later, I return to split wood,
listening to grain rip,
remembering my father’s words,
those fairy tales, after piling cords,
rubbing my fingers
over rough bark
on a fallen oak tree. I watch
the fox come again to trick me.
He cries, “Come closer! Come closer!”
“For what?” I say.
“Your father is dying. I’ve come
to give you this message,” he says.
“But I can’t do anything,” I say.
“Come closer,” he repeats. “You can save him.”
I do not listen to his human
imitations. I run my fingertips
into the grooves of my initials,
wanting to pull them back
into my knife.

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