

First Kill

By Gary V. Powell

They're everywhere, you can't miss them,
the plastic pellets my son shot with his airsoft rifle
and now and then steel bullets from the pellet gun
we gave him when he turned sixteen. Even today,
years after he enlisted in the Army and became
their lethal weapon, deployed to slaughter
in defense of our interests in dangerous places,
I find the suckers embedded in sofas and chairs,
rising from the carpet pile, and fertilizing the soil
around my peonies. Green, red, white, blue, and gray,
they're as ubiquitous as my memories of him
climbing trees, leaping off roofs, and leading nerf gun patrols
along our suburban street. He first took life not in a desert or swamp
but here among these flowers and ferns; we buried his kill
and wept over the grave, giving death its due. Yesterday,
I found the carcass of another squirrel, dehydrated and flattened.
The current generation of backyard critters is wary, its DNA encoded
with memories of the mighty slayer of its ancestors. This fellow
didn't die of a bullet to the brain or shrapnel singing through the ether,
more likely the victim of a well-armed hawk or neighbor's orange cat.
He's missing a hind quarter, and his little teeth are barred
with the agony of his last breath. I could bag and carry him,
garbage to the curb, like my son's second kill and his next
and next after that; how casual we were in our ignorance.
But instead, I fetch my garden spade, good at slicing hickory roots
and cutting Carolina clay, for now I know death plays no favorites,
and today's hunter will likely be tomorrow's prey.