Crosscurrent

By M. L. Smoker
(1975 – )

For James Welch

The first harvest of wheat in flatlands
along the Milk startled me into thoughts of you
and this place we both remember and also forget as home.
Maybe it was the familiarity or maybe it was my own
need to ask if you have ever regretted leaving.
What bends, what gives?
And have you ever missed this wind? – it has not
grown warm with late summer, but soon
it will be as dangerous as the bobcat stalking calves
and pets just south of the river.
Men take out their dogs, a case of beer and wait
In their pickups for dawn, for a chance with their rifles.
They don’t understand that she isn’t going to make
any mistakes. With winter my need for an answer
grows more desperate and there are only four roads out.
One is the same the cat hunters drive with mannish glory
and return along, gun still oil-shined and unshot.
Another goes deeper into Assiniboine territory:
This is the one I should talk myself into taking next.
I haven’t much traveled the third except to visit
a hospital where, after the first time,
my mother had refused chemotherapy.
And the last road you know as well as I do –
past the coral-painted Catholic church, its doors
long ago sealed shut to the mouth of Mission Canyon,
then south just a ways, to where the Rockies cut open
and forgive. There you and I are on the ascent.
After that, the arrival is what matters most.