Under the Deck

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Brendan Raleigh

In my backyard there is a hill
and on top of that hill my father
used to grow gooseberries—
little grape-sized, watermelon-looking,
sour berries which grow
in clumps on small, thin bushes.

He planned to use them
for pies my mother said she hated
(without having tried one),
but he never managed to harvest them
because, before they could ripen,
the damned rabbits had already eaten them.

And every time the gooseberries returned,
so did the rabbits. No amount of brick edging
or wire fence or run-out-and-yell
could halt their heists.

The neighborhood cats,
my father’s only allies in his holy war,
would occasionally swoop in
to chase off the smaller intruders.

And once, an orange tabby shot out
and drove one of the smaller rabbits
beneath the deck.

It must have grown a bit
as it sat down there, chomping grass,
because it did not leave,
and we knew it did not leave
because a window in our basement
looked straight up, pointlessly,
beneath the deck.
It was too dark to see it,
but, whenever we sat in the basement
to watch TV or eat dinner,
we could hear the soft, subtle sound
of feet padding around
and, after a few days,
what always sounded like a baby crying.

The window did not open
and there may have been something we could have done
but, if there was, we did not think of it
or could not afford it
or simply did not value life
as much as we liked to think we did.

The sounds were soon replaced
with a sharp, piercing, biting odor—
as if someone had doused a hunk of rotten meat
in cheap, too-sweet department store perfume.

A few years later, we pried open that old deck—
ripped off rotting strips of Red Balau
and found, beneath it,
a hole into which the animal (and many others) had fallen:
a sunken, grassless boneyard of little mammals.