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Repatriation

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Repatriation

Jessie Fales

They turned the house my grandfather built into a shrine to Beanie Babies. I know, because four of us drove back to the place—the ruins of a small Western Pennsylvanian coal mining town—and found the house where our parents had been children. We stood in what used to be my grandmother’s garden, near the side street where we had parked our car—we had only come to take some photographs and to imagine what it must have been like back in the day. The current resident stood in the basement doorway, watching us through the screen door, eyes narrowed, two fingers holding a cigarette. Our grandfather had died of lung cancer. She stepped out into the summer grass and waved to us across the yard, motioning for us to come closer, her stained tank top falling off her fat wrinkled shoulders, her breasts wilted, almost touching her cutoff jean shorts. She smelled strange to us, probably because we never knew the smell of our grandfather’s cigarettes. “This is the house our grandfather built,” the oldest one of us said. She invited us in, as if the house belonged to us and not to her, as if our family had never left—she apologized for the changes she had made to a house that our grandfather had built with his own two hands. She showed us how she had knocked down an upstairs interior wall, which had formed the room where two of our uncles had slept as children, and where they must have dreamt of childish things. She said she wanted to open the space up—to let some light in and brighten the walls. We nodded our heads, understanding—we had heard the stories of this place.