

Snake Oil, Snake Bite

By Dilruba Ahmed

They staunched the wound with a stone.
They drew blue venom from his blood
until there was none.

When his veins ran true his face remained
lifeless and all the mothers of the village
wept and pounded their chests until the sky
had little choice
but to grant their supplications. God made
the boy breathe again.

God breathes life into us, it is said,
only once. But this case was an exception.
God drew back in a giant gust and blew life into the boy
and like a stranded fish, he shuddered, oceanless.

It was true: the boy lived.
He lived for a very long time. The toxins
were an oil slick: contaminated, cleaned.
But just as soon as the women
kissed redness back into his cheeks
the boy began to die again.
He continued to die for the rest of his life.
The dying took place slowly, sweetly.
The dying took a very long time.

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