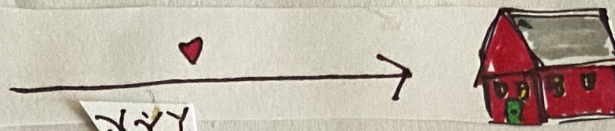


Mapping My Heart



By Sherrie Flick

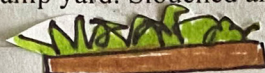


It's not buried so much as planted in my garden, not the oldest thing planted there—I've found marbles, lopsided and speckled blue in the soil beside earthworms, and clay, and little bits of dishes, and once a pop gun with DICK stamped on its side.

This map starts at the old house and ends a few blocks away, at the new house. Even though they're close by most mapping standards, they're like two different countries in the South Side Slopes of Pittsburgh.



1999. There's my heart, battered and beating in my chest as we look at the first house I'll own. *Pitter. Patter.* I shop for this house like a practical raincoat. This will do, I say. I walk out the back screened-in porch and into the postage stamp yard. Slouched and scrunched up, I see this little yard and I think, hesitantly: *garden.*



When we buy the house my annual income rings up at \$5,000. When asked by the sympathetic banker how many years of school I've completed, I say, twenty and a half. I've quit a PhD program that broke my heart in another state and time. I can't find me but I will.

I feel something like hope. I kick a clump of grass. Sense the world, feel it sloping up from the flats. I see the view from this tiny worker's house. Think: *maybe.*

At the closing the previous owner's son says, "You can grow anything back there except cucumbers." So that's what I do. I grow everything.



I stick a shovel in the ground, punch it with my foot, turn the grass over so the dirt side is up. I toss in some of my dried heart flakes. I grow things here and here and here and over there, too.



We live there two years. It seems like five if you forget how time works. First, our old neighbor John loves to talk tomatoes at me from his tiny second floor porch. Strong Polish accent, sweet old dog named Midnight at his side. Then, he's taken away without a goodbye and his grownup, wayward son tears out his tulips, in bloom, by the roots, and leaves them there to die (which is another story for a different map...the tulips were red, another sign I did not heed). The new neighbors move in, force us to move out (unkind, loud, unmapped terrain that is wild and dangerous). I rip up my heart, its roots hang limp and raw—fine and moist.

When we find the new little house with a view, very close by, but in another country of this neighborhood, I walk toward the back while we wait for the realtor to open it up.

There's the yard—it's narrow and long. It's all grass, just like the old yard, but more room. Homes bought from old women done with cultivating their passions, rooting their secrets in the ground. I'm holding my heart in my hand. And we both agree—me and my heart—this is the place.

I plant it there (truth be told) even before we see the inside of the house.

