

Greetings Unanswered

by Joshua Martin



That December of salt, there were letters from loan and electric companies, letters from clothing stores praising their cottons as if pea coats could turn lives around, letters from my landlord typed in that font that looks half-human with its orchestrated imperfections, that read *Happy Holidays* with the insincerity of Caesar before the Senate, letters I didn't open because they were addressed to someone else who had woken once in the same bedroom at 2 AM with the same unshakable thirst, the same knotted throat, letters that urged action on behalf of some politician who, pending a donation, could save us all. There were letters that slept uneasy on my table like hungry children on pullout couches, letters that screamed like prisoners tortured by open windows, letters containing cards of families I couldn't remember—someone's son looking past me, smiling, *Seasons Greetings* inked above the photograph like a sign outside that hospice in Nitro where my grandfather died after a lifetime of chemical plants and Wednesdays numb in West Virginia. Though his letters burned my palm like sulfuric acid, I never opened them out of fear they'd be the last I'd read of his chicken scratch laid down like a seed with his one good hand, so I'd bundle his letters and forget them in boxes like leaves hanging on the one holly left in the meadow I never returned to, the wind like a blunt letter knife, powerless to do anything but save them.

Image: "Bound" by Natalie Seabolt. "Greetings Unanswered" was written by Joshua Martin for *Rattle's* Ekphrastic Challenge, December 2019, and selected as the Artist's Choice.

