Carter Richard
Root-Beer Girl

Look here, she says when she wraps her fingers around the leaves and – in one swift move – exhumes the plant, roots and all, dirt sliding away. I’m ten; she lives down the street, goes to high school, studies biology, smiles with all her teeth. See this root? she asks, curled down to a crouch, her boots arched, her jeans somehow squeezing my attention, a gray tank-top taut between the buttons of her red flannel shirt. She holds sarsaparilla veins up to her nose, then breathes in and offers them to me.

This is the smell of my favorite soda. It’s the smell of what’s missing from any cold glass filled with scoops of ice cream. It’s the smell of an aluminum can pulled wet from a cooler then popped fresh open while firework
smoke and cigarette smoke and
barbecue smoke thicken the air.
But more than this, it’s the smell of
root-beer girl, sixteen or something,
whom I now hardly remember, offering me
this earthy root, a walk in the woods,
Springfield, Missouri.