

DOGWOOD BRANCH

by Ashley Crout

My grandfather punished us best
with dread, sending the cousins
into the deep yard

to select the branches
that would drag ragged cuts
across our skin, held bare,

the thin flesh at the backs
of our legs flush with this
friction, written with red lines –

our slightest sins a language
only he understood. I always pulled
my branches from the dogwood tree,

its bark smooth as paper,
stripping it clean of leaves
as I walked back towards judgment,

implicated in my own suffering,
selecting and surrendering
the instrument as if there

were agency in shame. I admit
that I return to those moments
when the force of passion

is not heavy enough against me,
not vicious enough, when my lover
is too gentle, too careful,

brushing fingers like dogwood
petals across my body, when
I can think only of the branch.