Last week I went to the neighbors
to feed their dogs and fish.

As I watched their betta
floating on the windowsill
like a ribbon in a sea of light,
I found myself thinking
that it's no small wonder
they will fight to the death
in a shared tank. The water
is gloomy, the temperature immoderate,
the treatment is never quite right.
The filter whines and screeches
like a colic infant. Incessant light
shines through the four walls
of their glass house, and every meal
is scattered above them like bread crumbs
on a ceramic countertop.
I remember being told, as a boy,
that certain fish would rather
tear each other apart
than share their space.
I remember my parents
calling us upstairs for dinner
blindsiding us with the news
that dad was leaving.
I used to think it was worse,
my parents never fighting—
because I never saw it coming.

The way death sneaks up
on a fish. One minute
its swimming, occupying space
in the small world of its tank,
the next its belly up, bloated,
swirling in porcelain.

Brandon McQuade was born and raised in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada. He earned his B.A. from the University of New Brunswick Saint John and his M. Phil in Irish Writing from Trinity College Dublin. For a selection of poems from his second collection, Bodies, he was the recipient of the 2022 Neltje Blanchan Memorial Writing Award. He lives in Northern Wyoming with his wife and their children.