When We Collected Fireflies

Alana Merritt Mahaffey
When we collected fireflies

The trick was always
  to open the jar just slightly
  and barely divide the lid
from the vessel and
to coax
the bug
inside.
  A quick dot of light—
a dim and solitary signal to the others
  --mysterious transmissions

Our employment:
  to trap so much life
  into one round and empty space;
hold it delicately, turning,
  turning, lighted beneath a desk lamp.

The universe was a mustard jar
  small and remote
stationed on the nightstand.

To keep
simple lives
squirming—
  tap water and crabgrass
scattered in divine piles
  at the jar’s bottom.
The real trick was keeping them alive.
  invariably, the first died overnight, his
darkened body, hard atop crabgrass, and
a dozen sleeping brothers never knew.

But in days, each one followed—
each one descending toward the former,
each signal unanswered, until
the last body blinked hopefully
that single searchlight for the rest who,
like tiny broken bulbs,
cushioned his fall.

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