

2016

Subdivision

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Subdivision

by

Samantha Futhey

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
Ned Balbo
Jeremy Withers
Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

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2016

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I. FARMALL

“I composed habits on those acres/so that my last look would be/ neither gluttonous nor starved./
I was ready to go anywhere.”- Seamus Heaney, “Land”

Peas

Baby vines buckled, uncertain
 of their weight, coiled their slim fingers
above ground, clung to stalks

of ox-eye daisy, leafy spurge, parent vines.
 I pulled tangles of waxy leaves apart,
unhinged wisps from weeds. She's not

ready, my mother said
 when the nurses showed me to her,
a red, screaming, spindly bud,

fleshy and thin-skinned. Put her
 back in—she's not ready. I grasped
my mother when she tried

to pass me to my father, so tightly
 I blotted her skin purple. She forced
me to let go, relinquished my hold.

A small pea plant uprooted,
 limp in my hand. So easily
torn, those little, unformed peas.

Bones

In the freezer, my mother searches
 for marbled hamburger, finds tubes
of femurs threaded with fat,
 shins stained pink
where blood rushed, knots
 of spinal vertebrae, holes wide,
a viewscope framing her belly,
 vortex of blood and bone
expanding out from her, fists
 and feet kneading her bladder.
Her hand lingers on skulls
 whorled with ice crystals,
ovals where wet noses
 once investigated
her hands, their urgent need
 for the bottle she held,
milk gurgling down
 their throats, white foam
splattering her rubber boots,
 their necks slender, soft,
warm, their tails flickering,
 dark eyes rolled
back with pleasure, eyes
 now staring at her,
fumed in cold.

Farmall

My father, arms and legs smeared
oil black, ripped jeans and shirt
hay-dusted, cranks wrenches
in the tractor's rusted gut to repair

what he thinks he can
fix with force.

I pass him tools, the unfamiliar
weight settling in his hands
to cure vibrations of a faulty
engine, attempts to rewire,

start again. I count seconds
to meltdown because here's how

every repair ends: the tractor's bulk
shudders at his smacks, the barrels
that held him burst, oozing. A man
taught to bust and crumple,

a practitioner of eruption,
his father's pupil. As his witness,

I stand back, grip my elbows. I can't look
at my hands, so clean, so empty.

Penns Valley Almanac

I

First flow of milk. Youth rises from hooves. Red-winged blackbirds at dawn call *work, work*.

Thick fish split currents. Men in waders choke the creek. False flies court trout.

Mayfly storm. Hills shed gray to green. Like missing teeth, dead hemlocks pock ridges ripening
to new green.

II

As the sun breaks dark hills into shards, the Amish bend for kernels of red mouths, gold studded
berries yielding to dirt-caked fingers.

Corn knee high. In clotted, hot air, tractors churn dried grass, splintering sky, peppering eyes.

Red-orbed tomatoes, jellied spears of cucumbers, float in vinegar, pickling metamorphosis.

III

Amish kids sit in one-room school houses. Their fathers yell at draft horses, harvest frosted.

Quilts and shoofly pie for sale, the library's yearly income. Used toys, baby clothes, Steelers
fan-ware lines roads,
orange flamed hills signaling *salvage*.

Ice prickles creeks. Gunshots break the woods. A smoky silence forms in blue-husked dawn.

IV

Pigs shuffle in pens. Trucks back up to gates, guns cocked, knives sharpened. Drops of blood
seep into snow.

Buggies rock at stoplights. Visitors point; Amish stare back. On pavement, horses leave trails of
foam, crackling cold.

Slush on boots. Snow slides off hills. Seed catalogs dog-eared. Last jar of tomatoes in pantry—
burdens of last season swallowed, starvation

a meditation before

the leafy, loud plunge.

At the Millheim Hotel

Millheim, PA

Today the wind coaxes our coats off our backs,
eats our beards with cold teeth, nips us as we work.
But we don't complain much. Here we're safe,

coddled in Yuengling's embrace, TV a faint
throb compared to skid loaders and saws. The Steelers
play a good game, spiking the ball as we

spike drinks, our mouths goal posts ready
for liquid field goals. Like tractors
over muddy ground, our thirst

knuckles us smooth. In bar stools, we sag,
the loaded sacks of our bodies heavy,
necessary. We can't imagine anywhere else;

the valley curls us in its narrow fingers,
pens us like steers, our eyes grazing the hills
beyond, so distant we can't follow their shape.

Outside the bar, tobacco smolders the air.
With nothing left to say, we pummel frozen puddles
with our boots, crushing ice into tiny shards.

Tractor Speaks at the Equipment Sale

I built dirt caskets for mice
 crushed under wheels, throbbed
 up hills, my flanks heat seared,
 throat churning clots of smoke.

Though my steel lacked
 slickness, GPS systems,
 a roof of glass, I lasted.
 Sulking cows moaned for hay

my hydraulic cables lifted,
 those never satisfied beasts.
 I loved to sever grass from dirt,
 slicing the sighs of alfalfa,

brome and orchard grass.
 Dirt, not soil, I tamed,
 rolled over with indifference.
 Now, disrepair unfolds from me

like those grasses I once smashed,
 every season fallen sashes
 of stems behind me. Smoldered holes
 punch my frame like dung beetles

in a manure pile, rust-puckered
 marks of my demise. Ground
 I shaped, sing my end, my reign.
 But I hear grasses teasing,

those pesky plants whispering
 to their former king, *you may*
cut us, but your time
is finite, ours infinite.

Deus ex machina

The rooster's BB pellet eyes
stare me down. His red feathers
puff, ready to pick a fight
with my six year old chicken-
stick legs. He chases me
through the barn, past Holsteins
munching grain, milk pumping
from their udders. Red tears
form on my shins from his pecks,
until my grandfather lumbers
towards us. I flutter around him,
grip his dark blue overalls.
The rooster circles, targeting
the back of my knees, when
my grandfather lowers his arms,
and takes me up high. I cling
to his crown, rub my face against
the safety of his prickled jaw.

In the kitchen hangs a sketch
of my grandfather: mud splattered,
he grips a smoking gun, a rooster
dangling from the other fist.
Blood drips down his hand, blue
eyes staring at me, hard as bullets.

Barn Swallows

Even sitting, they cannot keep still.
On electrified fences, they rock

and bob, desire for the sky
sizzling in their jerky chirps.

Surveying our grandfather's splintered
barn and thistle-choked pastures,

my brother and I watch as swallows
gather on the wire, only to reel

back into the air, teasing
gravity's authority. *Isn't it amazing,*

he says, *how they can sit there
and not get shocked? We're*

grounded and they're not.

One by one swallows snap

their blue wings, flee without stings,
as if their bones surge sparks into flight.

Fence Building

Brambles of multiflora-rose clenched fence rows,
shielding dips in defense, entries for escape.

Always, I followed my father, his silent assistant,
across fields, birdsong scythed from sky.

Utility knives and crimping wrench flicked
and snapped wires taut, my father fusing

a temporary fix. Dark lines embedded
in his palms, strained by repair.

Beer-buzzed, every night he yoked exits
for himself, restless slipknots mimicking

stability. So easy to release the knots,
small strings he twisted in his fingers,

tempted to tug everything
he built and restored, loose.

Woodward Caves

I

My mother and I crept through crevices,
 Woodward Cave a maw of rock
 splintering below my father's farm,

a place my mother once called home.
 Mist and rock wrapped around us,
 his land hovering near our heads.

My mother clicked dim pictures. I wrote notes
 on stalactites, recorded the history of rock
 for my 6th grade project. Our guide led us

into a long, slanted room. In frosted light,
 bats flapped in the fog of our breath.
 With a snap, light extinguished. Bats wheeled,

their wings a mounting pressure above us.

II

A rustle in bushes—Gordo thrusts out, burrs
 covering his black fur like boils. He sniffs
 a wound in rock face. Too narrow

to slip into, its limestone-cooled breath
 the only sign of its cave nature. I touch stone,
 cold knuckling into my skin. Air pulls me in,

like the voice of my father weaving
 fantasies— *the grass will grow*
thicker, greener, we'll produce

the best cheese, you'll inherit the farm. Easy,
 so easy, to fold into his dreams, loosen
 as a drop of water dimples stone,

presses finger-sized calcification.
 I could lay my body against rock,
 let water drip over skin, remain

melded and firm, my mouth
 a fissure, open for the promise
 of bats returning home.

But bats no longer cling to these woods.

At the Auction

Among dusty sinks and electric saws,
between sips of thin coffee,
men question the price

of everything: this back hoe,
this trailer, this son's milking
hands, this son's tractor driving.

Inside sheds, women sell
whoopie pies and hotdogs,
their contribution to men

exchanging money outside, men hungry
for more than they can afford.
On conversation fringes, I hear

arguments of fair prices
for butchering knives, harvesters,
clues to a puzzle losing its pieces

under abandoned barns
and farm houses, a puzzle
I can't put together, the vestiges

of all their bartering. My father
closes on a sale. I wander,
alone. At the auction's edge,

a slaughterhouse squats— doors
missing, chains hanging
in slotted light, windows

fractured as snowflakes
announcing winter
on my cheeks. I stick

out my tongue, but instead
of cold snowflakes, catch the iron
taste of old blood in the air.

Night Vision

Spools of stars cast thin lines
of light, stitch the sky together
as my father and I listen to owls

calling each other across
the fields, their slow *who who's*
puncture the creek's constant slap

of water on stone. The farmhouse
looms in the dark. *Flashlight?* I ask.
We don't need one, he replies.

Between water and owl staccato,
the Milky Way scars ridges,
slicking oaks and pines silver.

His figure wavers as he walks
away, distant as those stars blinking
faintly, *who are you? who*

are you now? Distant as the vast
lighting-struck heartland, where,
cloaked in artificial light, I've forgotten

my father's subtle lessons: how to unpeel
light from my eyes, slip into the dark.
In luminescent silence, the soft call

of an owl floats from the town's creek—
I stop to listen, look up and eastward
at fault lines defining acres of night,

the Milky Way's studded path
sizzling, the only bridge my father
and I have yet to burn.

II. DISSECTED HISTORIES

Iowa, a Photosynthetic Star

Summers unfurl razor leaves,
tiny fingers grasping soil.

Stomata, open like punctures
in a time card, convert light

to sugar, netted in a loop of hunger
and thirst, thousands of mouths

pulsing to the sun. Orbs of water
escape from silica and loam, loss

shivering strings of light, a web
we cannot sift through,

break apart. From space,
Iowa glows like a rash,

the hot pink of a star
rippling before its collapse.

Des Moines Lobe

Below corn husks serrated
to gold leaf, men sink
plastic tubes into trenches

to worm water out
of fields, stop its natural
collecting, men corded

in loam, Carhart overalls
stained dark. A flat ear
of silt, Des Moines Lobe listen

to trickles of ghosts
siphoned underground as you
yield your heart to art-

ificial ventricles. Loess,
Mead's milkweeds, black terns,
bog golden rods, Topeka

shiners funneled down
to southern waters, deafened,
sinking beyond reach.

A Small Note on Survival

In Iowa's flattened heart, a retired farmer
wakes at 6 a.m., a man who scraped by the '80s
when his neighbors in shiny new trucks
drove into bankruptcy, a man who wandered
along dirt roads at night, sliced fingers
against coarse leaves of corn, wondered
where his family would live in six months.
A man who groans out of bed to slash
at sweet corn to feed his son's sows. If
he doesn't, it will go to waste. He can't
have a crop go to waste. He hauls truckloads
to the pigs, watches them with a smile
as they rip, chomp and chew until nubs
and stubble litter the pen, feeding troughs
vacant, sugary kernels smashed by their hunger.

Intervention in Seed

Pull us out of sterilized glass, enzymes
 blasted like bark
flying off a lighting-struck tree. The impact
 thrums codes
in roots—our engineering
 electrifies us.
Coddle us in water and earth, and we'll
 obey
your commands. Sprouted,
 waving wide fins
of green, insects bite contrived
 defenses
and die. To tassel our golden fire,
 we squeeze
soil bare. Our competitors wither, chemical-
 slick.
Across the globe, cows, pigs, chickens
 pulp and grind
us into sinew, muscle, fat. Replicated, we spread,
 entrap
the world in our maze. Beyond fences, the forest
 sways. Pollen
rises into air we breathe in and out. We mingle
 with natives,
release into trees, incubate new biology.
 Wait and see
what our desires will reform.

Hay Making

Every summer, he crawls across fields,
tractor shaking like a wild bull between his legs.
Tall amethyst heads buffet under his blades,
ripple and faint behind him.

Wedged against his shin, the farm dog
peers below for mice and moles fleeing
their wake. She leaps off. Beneath
the motor's gruff dirge, she squeezes

screams out of a groundhog. The farmer
continues his work, a rare day of no breakdowns.
As the sun dips, he rolls homeward, dog
clutching her prize. Dust of cut grass

splinters his arms, reddens his eyes.
Ears ringing, he collapses in bed,
his mind churning in stiff windrows.
Morning, rain lashes his plans, dry hay

tendered limp to spoilage. Allegiance
to the land is tenderness, a fickle
embrace, a sacrifice for the sweetest
hay to gnash in the mouths of beasts.

Dissected History

In Chicago, men boiled cows into candles,
sliced pigs into soap, oleomargarine, bouillon,
knuckles ground for bone meal, blood
dried and pulverized as fertilizer, horns
carved into buttons fixed to ladies
dresses, intestines to twang as tennis
racket strings, hooves melted for glue.
All parts used, waste shunned as lost profit.

A stench of offal rose from the canals,
settled on the plains where buffalo
carcasses bloated under the sun, trains
churning past them toward a future
market in the city's grid, all their parts
intact except for their thick, gray tongues.

eggs

how easy
 clarity slips
 a drop
 on wooden floors
 smash
 on counter edge
 the core swirling inside
 its own uncertainty

broken parts converge
 froth in bowl
 sputter in skillet
 yellow leaking into white

every morning
 two realms suspended in tight circles
 one clear viscosity
 the other clouded
 dark

a clutch of worlds
 in the palm
 poised
 for fracture

Grain Belt Futures
at the Iowa State Fair, 2015

Foreigners to the heartland, we gawk and point
 like children new to carnivals, our eyes asking
what is this fantastic place? Smoky fat gusting
 from food trucks fills our lungs, as pigs snort
 and shriek from their barn. Our gaze veers to pens
 of sheep, sheared like athletes, ram testicles caressing

straw with their fleeced insulation. Fluffed by blow-dryers,
 Angus steers stare, anxious for their upcoming
 performance. We wonder if the first place winners
 live longer. Shows what we know, untrained observers
 to this state institution, this celebration of the past
 and smile to the future Iowa will feed, Roundup Ready.

Buck-sized 1930's John Deere tractors woo
 nostalgia in men and women scattered like caramel
 corn on the fairground's roads, across the belly
 of America. We meander and clop among the crowds
 eating corn dogs, kettle-cooked chips, lick lips at dreams
 born from Oreos crisped in the fryer. Between bleats, moos,

and crunches of walking tacos, we all say *more*,
we want more butter cows gleaming in glass, combines
 glinting promises of efficiency, corn cobs filed in rows
 for judgment. We join masses of the Grain Belt, unloosen
 another notch in our belts for certified Angus burgers, salute
 citizens as sweet as blue ribbon peach pie. In the barns,

boys and girls sleep beside their animals,
 cheeks pressed against their futures—
 warm, soft, steadily breathing in time with them.

Farm-in-the-Zoo

Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago

Under skyscrapers, goats moan
at their zookeeper, wiggle short tails

in anticipation. Barns stand firm,

stable beside the artificial lake,
freshly painted red and white,

as if red is the only color for barns.

Clipped short and even, the grass
holds no towering thistles, beams

of dead teasel, fronds of ragweed.

Metal gates shine bright in the sun,
smooth and polished. Children laugh

at the chickens orderly pecking. A little girl

points to Holsteins loitering in their pen,
cries *Moo!* to them. A cow responds

with an urgent bellow, the one animal

that called to her, out of the meerkats,
giraffes, red wolves, gorillas—

a common animal insisting its existence,

displayed like the other endangered
creatures, protected from habitat loss.

Here, nostalgia is neat, a blown-up

sepia portrait of homesteads,
the old path of progress

tilled and resurrected to gleam

like straight rows of black earth
sprinkled with gold straw, open

for pillage, seeds dormant below, waiting.

Subdivision (I)

I

In desperation, they defined order,
 scalloped foothills, drew and quartered
 plains, overlaid old rules on new land
 in a lattice of right angles:

This is yours, this is mine, this is no one's.

Colonists assigned separate estates
 for corn and potatoes, stone walls
 maintained even and straight,
 cows and horses barricaded

inside invisible claims, unlike
 the Agawam tribe's sprawling gardens—
 beans clambering up corn stalks,
 wide palms of squash hugging the ground,

a tangled, plotless design, frightening
 to those God-blessed newcomers,
 their beacon on the hill indefinable
 until they measured, quantified

the wild, dark forests of chestnut
 and white pine.

 In woods reborn,
 lopsided rock walls meander,
 stray from lines, crumble into leaves.

II

So much space out here, the Midwest an endless sheet
of fabric stretched across work tables. So many shapes
to cut out, stitch a patchwork of potential, green and gold.

Half-whelped conquistadors mapped wetlands, forests, prairie,
urgent for the wealth of black soil, steel the divisor. All day long
sounds never heard reverberated down tines of big bluestem roots.

Land of men turning darker and darker with each push
of the plow, palms pummeled the upended grasses,
bodies cross-hatched like the grids of Iowa counties.

Land of women crazed by slapping wheat and corn destroying horizons,
neighbors tiny blots hills and hills over, women ripped like the sky
thrust in storm—violet shears of clouds, green rents, a discolored bruise fuming.

III

In the birthplace of hybrid corn and Pioneer, anxiety tightened at the farming conference as Iowa farmers raised their hands, uncertain of *farm assets, equal proportions, revocable trusts*. They boasted no *heirs to the estate*, no *exit strategies*. White and gray-haired, farming drained color from their bodies, women and men ready to burst under the weight of legacy like overripe tomatoes.

In her counsel, could the attorney see nights of spent six packs and stale coffee drunk under kitchen lights burning till dawn, nightmares of their land slipping from them by clever tricks of language and dollars, by descendants who wish to cash out, leave no mark? I could see crops, trees, floors transformed into a self-portrait of their worst fears: the American pastime of uprooting history, clawing for more land, more space, always digging for more.

The Modern Farmers

We hope for/against the rise of clouds,
rain to nourish/flood wheat, soy, corn.
Soil, our playmate/our paycheck/our
endless toil; scrub it out of the folds
of our skin until we throb red, newborn.
Dirt never leaves the cracks under our nails.

Our animals cluck/bleat/belch their hunger,
pounding our brains at night. Sometimes we
check gates for loose hinges/broken chains/
push deeper into our covers, turn the fan on,
louder. We love their dusty hulks, feather sprays,
eyes wide and ringed in mud; their stench
becomes our own. We nurture them
till they're worth their weight on the kill floor.

As kids we slept in hay lofts, listened
to the constant roils of guts. We wish
our kids farmed, to continue tradition,
and tear it all down, raze the ground
for student loan debt/ new cars/
suburban houses with backyard pools.

Genetic mysteries entrance us/grow
fear in our bellies like watermelons.
Seeds reshaped, promises against drought,
boll weevils, ragweed resistance sound real/
unreal. To make farming easier/harder.
Company men, we follow instructions/
forget to wear safety gear, Roundup
laced on our fields, no compost. But why
spray chemicals when nature knows best?

We hate following authority—
aren't we Jefferson's dream? Staunch
Republicans/Democrats, we don't care
about party lines, no one represents us,

only companies who make us independently
dependent. Letters tell us *cease and desist*
the criminal activity of planting
saved seeds/speaking our minds
if people will/won't listen. When phones ring,
we hear the company, tipped
by a neighbor, say we broke contract.

Lawyers shrug: *just take the money*. We take/
fight the money, give our neighbors
shifty looks, close the curtains at night,
don't linger on the porch after supper.

Field Notes on Hands

Split with swallows, barns and farmhouses handed down
for generations feel their necessity loosen like a bird from open hands.

In summer, white skin turns dark as a river at night. Hands flicker in vines
and stalks, impatient. Honey combed potential, sun-fevered, cancer-spotted hands.

Under cover, immigrants saw apart pig bones one day, crouch in a trailer the next. Pounding
and yells shudder their resolve, hearing the call; *Put your hands up!*

Manipulators, hands twist ripe peaches from branches. At night, they squeeze
a woman's thigh, sugared-alcohol breath saying, *let lips do what hands do.*

Farm women sweep dead flies, hack thistles, masticate the wills of men. Delicate as steel, bills
and loans dent their frames. Those women pretend they can't bury their faces in their hands.

Palms expose stories of blades, accidental cuts, fingers stubbed. Solidity
of engines easily slips, threads lies of efficiency in farmer's hands.

Leigh, why do you wish to scoop manure, tug heifers with halters, squeeze milk from udders?
Your words fall like seeds—rub them in soil, germinate with untied hands.

III. SALVAGES

Firefly Heart

Your heart—
curdled milk pigs guzzle,
the lost wrench needed
to fix the tractor, the bullet
that stunned the blind cow.

Your heart, the blind cow.

Your heart—a skinny
barn cat with too many
kittens and plump, little teats.
A strawberry bursting
with slugs, the orange

sky ripped open by turkey
vultures, the honk
of a lone goose flying
unseen, the burning
tip of a joint.

But, long ago, your heart
was the engine of a train,
the sigh of night peepers,
your grandmother's hands
clasping your thin shoulders.

Your heart was a firefly
you chased in green
twilight, a smile splitting
your face when you finally
caught it. Behind glass,
it blinked back at you.

Bell's Majestic

Penns Valley, PA

Earlier at the bar, your hand on my knee,
 you ask, *Where do you want to go?* And, for once,
I know—above the hills. So we steal beers
 from my father's stash, creep out of the farmhouse
like mice running laps behind horse-hair plaster.
 Lights off, but he hears us.
On back roads we follow Penns Creek, the forest's
 vein of water. We skimp
on heavy clothes, blankets; cold
 fringes our skin. To keep warm,
we drink. Your cigarette smoke drifts, exchanges
 with night peepers spring choirs. We spiral up
dirt roads to Bell's Majestic overlook,
 an unknown high above the familiar.
Valley lights blink in and out of existence
 below the shift of fog and clouds.
Like red-tailed hawks circling
 warm drafts from ridges, gaze sharp,
we pick order from the chaos of fields and woods,
 a faded, subtle blanket of green.
Cars twist on roads you know like your mother's voice
 calling your name,
as your fingers teach me the valley's kinks and hollows:
 here, the high school gym
where you bounced basketballs,
 there, roads of 1 a.m. smoking journeys,
here, the Frosty Hook Tavern
 where you sip whiskey with your boys.
Clouds drape over the moon,
 blurring the valley into mist.
When I'm alone, I search for the road we took,
 to glimpse again what I thought
was mine to hold. But I've
 forgotten the shape of the road,
the way the pines sway when hawks
 launch off the ridge, into the wind.

Self Portrait as a Wheel of Camembert

Bacteria, you make a feast of me,
pock-marking my round body,
my chemistry coding to slow decay.

Suspended, I am a little
moon, refracting
the fuzz of your hunger.

If I lived as fresh curd, how dull
I would be, sour and bland without
your blooms. But battling for territory,

we wear each other thin, define
lines of white and cream, ripe
with spoilage fears.

Of course, we can't fight
the inevitable cut.
Crushed by teeth, borders we devised

form a microbial ossuary—
my flesh an oozing, yellow wound,
your spores swallowed whole.

Chicken Skin

Love, if we pluck our worries out like pin
feathers barbed to chicken skin, free ruffles
from bones, will we see our frames new?
Our fingers massage wings, empty pores
where our fears fanned, plumed in russet
and cream, crowded with nits and fleas.
Greased, we are whole birds undressed,
from stripped neck to tiny clots of fists,

glistening the answer, *yes, I see.*

So let's shake off the feathers shackling
us, dedicate our hands to rub the jaunt
of elbows and slags of fat-smearred folds
with oil, pepper and salt. A relief to tear
what hid beneath our flighty crowns.

Driving in Iowa, East on Highway 30

Outside of towns, men chop the dead
grass on riding mowers. Blocks
of square houses lean against

splinters of corn stubble. A train
clips across fields, hauling oil
through the country's girth,

not pausing in its urgency.
Charlie's Gun Shop, cemeteries,
roads of dust marked by truck tires,

stream banks cleaved raw
with mud, wind turbines
stirring air for energy—

all passed with little
remorse. Lopsided in a yard,
a trailer sags, *For Sale*

scrawled on its shell.
Outsiders, we can't discern
what's for sale: trailer, caved-in

house yawning to sky,
piles of bent cars, all the land
rolled out like a sheet

of dough tired of constant
kneading. You talk of buying
a house shaded by mountains,

pine-embraced, leaving
this flat country, pressing
forward from the lost

glamour of corn, small
town pride, wide open
faces you fly by without

a second glance. I look
at those silvered hills, split
between what's harvested

and what's left for reaping,
apprehensive of the next turn.

Auman's Salvage
Spring Mills, PA

Wasps churn the air around us, as you search
for the safety I insist on. Through titanium
vines, we weave, lost in a valley of smashed
grilles, contorted frames, school bus skeletons,
scouring the metallic graveyard for seat belts,

decay so ripe, we taste rust on our lips.

Bins of silver hubcaps stare like the eyes
of dead fish exposed to the sun. Ferns sprawl
in ripped seats. Old tires film with mosquitoes.
Spiders roost in glove compartments,
the messy nest of registrations absent.

We stray under twisted gates of stacked cars
lining narrow corridors of trees and hip
bones of the Appalachians, where maples
and pines reclaim sudden wreckage,
where prizes in wires solder trust, new starts.

Inside a weary Toyota pickup,
you meld into rust and shattered glass,
pummeled sides, crunched front ends,
hoods punched with deer hooves, and pry out
seat belts. Coors cans roll on the floor

where feet once pushed
wrong pedals into fateful directions.

Perseverance

In the ancient world,
when crops failed or
children withered, Greeks
and Romans prepared
honeyed, soft cheeses
for emergency sacrifices
to the gods, their hopes
born from boiling whey,
seams of calcium blooming
into glossed gems
twice blessed, spinning
in a fragile rebirth.

So love, as you fume
in the living room,
fermenting in our
disagreements, I offer
this: a gift of sustenance
light as prayer, to shape
wishes in your mouth,
form something edible
from inedible, a second
chance at forgiveness.

Unsheathed

I knew a woman in love
with corn, loved
to peel its papery
sheath, expose gold
knots, newborn
teeth, hard earth
fruit. Shucked leaves
cascaded from her,
silk threads stuck like grit
between her fingers.
She loved the flood
of corn into bins,
a sea of sustenance
she played in,
pebbles of light
she dipped her hands
into, cradled
by kernels, like how
she held her son,
his hair blonde
like his father's,
but sweeter.

*I'm so used
to holding him,*
she told me,
after driving
miles and miles,
past rows and rows
of what she missed,
to her former
matrimonial home,
to see her son,
feel heat pulsing
against her chest,
see him smiling
at her with nubs
of grain beginning
to stud his mouth.

taleggio

a yellow pool
of milk, musk

of animal sweat,
acid stings of urine

silken cream
morphs like day

to night, where in bed,
love is fungal,

breathing spores
of fermented

lust, smooth
to swallow,

ripe with bite

IV. MILK FEVER

Bovine Love I

Junior, the Jersey bull, mingled with the herd,
girls still growing into their hooves. Evening

summer sun slicked their fur as they wandered
slopes of clover. At first, the girls hesitated,

skirted around Junior— a curiosity, no more.
Slowly, they accepted him to graze beside them.

Junior attached himself to a roan speckled heifer.
They grazed side by side, licked each other's

backs. Junior mounted her. She stood, patient,
as he bucked against her thighs. Bullfrogs

crouched along the bank, gurgling. Fireflies
wincing light in the fields. It was over

in five seconds. For a moment they stood together.
Then, she tossed her head, and strolled past him,

ripping at swaths of grass, evening enveloping her.

Bovine Love II

Locked in her stanchion, Chuckie's long frame tenses. Ears flip back, head swings. She shivers at my touch, like when I accidentally brush my knee against my high school crush during Geometry, goose bumps whirling up my legs.

She knows a change in routine; the other cows chew cud, unalarmed, as milk floods from udders. A door swings—out of the milkhous, plastic gloves up to his shoulders, my father holds a thin, long straw, its tip glistening like a threat. The milking parlor, an amphitheatre braced

against sky, shows drama daily, and today, Chuckie's the star. My father lifts her tail, squeezes his arm inside her. Shit splatters concrete. I check the cows, ensure they're calm and milking. Some shift in their stalls, eye my father with caution.

As my father's arm expands her; inside, he needles semen. I watch, unable to look away. Her back arches, eyes widening as her womb will, a glossy, liquid egg. Seconds later, the show's over. He pulls the straw out, tells me to wait before releasing her. My arms tighten, body too

young to know the caresses of men, their glazed appetite in half-light. Her back extends, fluid dripping from her. Was this it, this act everyone praised for its pleasure?

Is this the part we play, even if

we never auditioned for the role? Year after year, this same performance, and every time, we're surprised by the final scene.

Year after year, I'm trained to look away, pretend.

Birth

Into the blushed flesh of a cow's womb,
my brother's bare hands reach, grapple
her dark interior. Morning mist shakes
off pastures as man and cow push, pull—
a strange dance. Head flips, and the calf
flows out, fur slick as thick grass after
water retreats to its banks. The calf struggles
to stand on bright cloves of ivory, a shade
of white they will never be again, where
stones will lodge, mud stain, cracks
pulse. Swallows flush out of pines our
grandfather dwells under. The mother, color
of old blood, nurses her son. For a moment,
disaster slips back to its proper borders.

The Cows

“The sagacity of those animals, which have long been the tenants of my farm, astonish me: some of them seem to surpass even men in memory and sagacity”

- J Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*

We meander in highways of grass
 unfolding under hooves. We desire
 file, rank and order. Safe among
 our hoofed constituents, we bunch
 together, swat flies off our backs.
 Communal calves drink from all teats.
 When separated, we moan, the home
 of each other's company fenced out.
 Under wires, we slip, tromp in forests
 to snip buds, terrorize corn, wheat,
 orchards. Play ferments into tramples,
 charges at a turned back. At night, we hear
 laughs of teenage cows trotting to tip
 us off our feet. In India, we've heard
 we're honored as sacred, a bovine Mecca.
 Environmentalists see us as villains
 in spaghetti Westerns, stream bank cleavers,
 gouging roads into fragile territory.
 We say *the grass grows back, eventually*.
 But we'll return to root and pillage. PETA
 thinks we're sweet as clover, innocent
 as leaves, but we smart talk with horns,
 mark our friends with scars, muscling
 to feed from the trough first, don't care
 for propriety, stand in the way of another's
 shit and piss storm. To some, we're dopey-
 eared, lanky-legged creatures, too dumb
 to comprehend the intricate needling
 of a swallow's nest. We're Laughing Cows,
 Technicolor cows splattered in blue, red,
 and yellow, cartoon cows on two legs,
 spokes-animals for Chik-fil-A, an insult
 to women with babies and swaying bellies.
 True, we get lost, forget: with tails high,
 we gallop down hillsides, flick dirt, udders
 flailing like water balloons between our legs,
 only to stand, perplexed, at the bottom, as if
 we left our reasons to run at the top. Mostly,
 we know what we want, with the clarity
 of cold, clear water. Sometimes, we're not
 the sharpest horns on the skull. Sometimes,
 the pond reflects what we're afraid to see.

Milk Fever

Healthy, she'd shy from my hand.
 But Sweet Pea and I sit together,
 her brain fizzling magnesium

misfires, calcium depleted
 for the calf who cries for her teats
 and tries to nurse my thighs. Sweet Pea

doesn't care that I stroke her,
 pluck at muddied straw plaited
 in her auburn hair. Her legs

straighten against her will, eyes
 glossed. A beard, foamy and white,
 rims her mouth. She heaves her breaths,

the unexpected price of her labor.
 She gives too much of herself; I give
 nothing but human cooing. It's easy

to forget the danger of birth, forget the body
 makes decisions without discussion.
 When my sister giving birth says

I can't do it, my mother says,
yes you can, and when Sweet Pea sways,
 saying *I can't do it*, my father says,

yes you can, plunging a needle in her neck,
 funneling minerals and calcium to replenish
 her udder, the bulging sack once

a small pocket tucked between her legs,
 pink and eager with the adolescence Sweet Pea
 and my sister relinquished. Unable

to understand this foreign place they live in,
 I walk away, as their children surround them,
 milk prickling their babies with need.

Leaving the Farm I

On tentative hooves, two heifers emerge
from the barn's dark cove, coats yellow as yolks.

A truck squats on the barnyard, trailer
open like a metal throat.

Skating on shit smeared concrete, the men
scramble after the girls. One heifer knocks

a gate, her last chance for escape,
and splashes the truck driver with watery muck.

She and her sister funnel into the truck,
electric cattle prods forcing their migration.

A bull calf, too thin for veal, tugs
behind an Amish man, halter cinching his head.

An Amish boy, maybe eight years old,
perches on a fence rail, watches silently

as my father and the Amish help clean up
the truck driver, laughing at the heifers.

In the boy's small hand
hangs a cattle prod, sizzling.

Freshening

Broods of beetles spring from the ground as she
splits apart, the slickness of her blood reforming

into her fur and bone miniature. She hovers
around her calf, nuzzles urgency

for the newly born to suckle milk.
But her body is not her own, nor the calves

that spill from her. All night, they call
to each other, a steady current

flowing across fields and gates. In the barn,
mice scamper to nests fidgeting

with their young. Swallows yolk
fledglings to their wings. Is it too much

to ask for her daughter's musk
of wet earth in her nose? By morning,

mother and daughter croak their cries.
Every season, mothers offer

their liquid gold and their children,
masters in the art of acceptance.

And if mother and daughter
meet again, they won't

sit together, but give each other
side glances. The younger will charge ahead—

her hooves fling rocks,
striking her mother's ankles.

Leaving the Farm II

In my dreams, cows break
out of pastures, timothy

and alfalfa buds
knee deep. Jerseys

spread like mice
in a bag of corn, relentless

in their eagerness.
I herd them, gathering

broken wire. Tan muscles
forage forbidden green.

Unwilling to go back,
they stop, look

behind with one eye
on me, the other fixed

on grass sloping beyond.

V. GEOPHAGY

“There’s no real successor to the unreturning days”- Jane Brox, *Clearing Land*

Milkweed

A healing plant,
my stepmother said
as she cinched a stem,
white juice bubbling
at the break. In gullies
along the farm lane,
the weed sprung pale
sticky stars, centers
jellied like eyes
staring at butterflies,
streaked yellow
and black, slurping
those red irises,
thin legs steeped in sap.
She forgot to mention
milkweed's poisonous
nature, how some butterflies
fester with venom
and flap their warnings
to predators
who fall prey
to the waving signs,
crunch into wings
bred for trickery.

At 89, my grandmother quilts,

sews Irish chains in green and white, starbursts
in pinks, burgundies, and violets. She pins
her design, cuts out shapes in straight lines, precise

angles, reconstructs geometry in a pattern
pleasing to her eye, the structure mimicking
day lilies, irises, daffodils my grandfather

planted around the farmhouse. Now, they grow
unkempt. Now, only quilting. When her children
visit, they lift old sheets to reveal her art,

pull out the pins, say, *remember when Daddy
drove to Canada without telling anyone, made it
an hour north, and turned around?*

She remembers that, and other moments of straying.
The cat jumps on the table, the colored pinwheels
she imagined, clotted with orange, cottony fur.

The Farmhouse, On Succession

I am a splintering idyll of spider web frescos,
 consuming crayons, screws, newspapers,
 in a hundred and fifty years of horse-hair plaster.

Wasps hum nests in my head, gouging timbers.
 But I am not bitter—I will break them, those fool-
 hardy occupiers, like mice chewing wires.

Years of hands smoothed my wooden banisters,
 marked me as theirs. Civil War servants churned
 butter, roasted pigs, crammed shelves

with pickled versions of summer. Hippie
 vagabonds, swirling in smoke, painted
 floorboards in stripes of indigo, scarlet,

honey yellow. Children scribbled anonymous
 faces and nonsense on walls. Women scrubbed
 until their fingers numbed in rubber gloves,

but I resisted cleanliness. Everyone
 dragged in manure, fur, couches, toys, books,
 and left them behind; occupation

never lasts longer than a bad harvest year.
 All who proclaim *I will fix you*,
 bend, delicate as blades of grass

in drought. Inside my cavernous rooms,
 their disguises fall as hay under scythes.
 One after the other, I will swallow

them whole, collected histories framed
 in a corpse of oak and plaster. Brimming so full,
 together, we will implode, gorged by dirt,

thistle-sprouted, sparrow-riddled.

Gardening in Appalachia

Digging down, we reach
bands of wet iron, like blood
I shed monthly, a surprise when

it appears, solid and bold.
My mother and I import soil, layer
poor clay with compost.

But in spring, her garden clogs,
hardens in sunlight. Hibiscus
wilt. Lavender frosts gray

with mold. St. John's wort, Gerbera
daisies, delphinium float
on dead stems. Maybe, we need more

compost, I tell her, or maybe
what we planted couldn't
absorb the blows of rain.

But no—she rips them out, her former
pleasures. No reconciliation,
no maybes for her. Not after

my father's voice cracked,
knuckles tendering cow flesh,
after the owls cooing his dreams

to her, dreams as alive
as the paper blooms
of peonies crumpled under hoof.

Years and miles since,
she doesn't plant again
what failed her before.

Instructions for Leaving

I

Start by moving to the largest spare bedroom,
bringing bags of clothes, a radio to keep you company,
books published by Al Anon, piles
of notebooks, the plants you nurture like children
you once imagined growing in your womb,
your grandmother's silver candle holders and colored candles
lit every Friday night as you sip wine alone, bless the creek
and hills outside your windows leaking warmth.

II

The signs flashed like Virginia creeper,
little flags bleeding brighter
until they screamed red in your face.

III

Thoughts sprout, wander to when, how,
why her? Try not to imagine
his hands around her waist.

IV

Two staircases frame the interior; the grand
spiral staircase and twisted servants stairs. Take
the servants stairs, so as not to pass where
you slept, danced, and hung your clothes,
the person you knotted in matrimony now
a landlord, and you, the tenant.

V

With a bathroom on the second floor, only
go downstairs for work, cook
breakfast, supper. Leave leftovers for him.

VI

So many doors, so many ways
to burrow deep into the old farmhouse. Try
to ignore the late night closing of doors falling off
their hinges, the stumbles up basement steps. Don't think
about what time he's come home from the bar.
Stuff your earplugs in, tight.

VII

And when his youngest daughter comes to visit,
she takes turns eating with you and her father. Show her
your garden, where all summer you pulled
unwanted plants out, retained order
for the asparagus you won't pick next spring.

Talisman

Between my fingers I rub green
metal, my dog's first rabies tag,
the few signs of protection my
father and I gave him, the flat
bell of his sound silent.

 Except for the first,
he lost the other tags, his name
hidden in brush, incised in mud.

On my key ring, memory clinks
a dull jingle, a talisman
to save me from forgetting
the click of his claws
coming up the basement steps,
his long stare of surprise
 as I drove away,
left him under the willow tree,
leaves yellowing and dropping
despite all the rain.

Subdivision (II)

I. sub/division

sub:

what percolates and pulses beneath our feet:
a rotating tomb of microbes, a mesh trap
we twist into, holes ready to let us fall.

division:

how we see the same field of alfalfa,
the same dying trees, the same Jersey cow,
so differently, so irreconcilable:

I see amethyst bulb inspiration,
passing ages of hemlocks and elms,
new mother lowing for her calf.

You see a burden of grass, history
chopped into firewood,
blood greased necessity,

the way things are, always will be.

II

I turn, and drive east on Route 45,
 the road pumping cars like blood
 down the valley's vein, narrowed
 by mountains. Along the road, barns
 leak ghosts through their cracks.
 Traces of old hemlocks caught
 in the murk of their dreams, linger
 with elms so sick their funeral shrouds
 can't contain their bones.

Old narratives
 of the land my father, like his father,
 taught me: rows of feed corn curling
 up to the sky, next season replaced
 by scuffling vines heavy with pods,
 followed by alfalfa's swaying fingers.
 On and on, this pattern repeated,
 a yarn spun and spun, until it ran
 out of thread.

At the valley edges creep
 plastic-sided houses, sprawl-proud
 on streets named Barnbridge, Oak Grove,
 Farmstead Lane.

When I was young,
 sheep bobbed where driveways sweep
 to Liberty Hill, a retirement community.
 On that hill, a weathered barn, the sign
 of home, dismantled, except one lone silo.

III

*They're always watching, since George died.
They know what's happening here,
my grandmother said, pointing out
the window to the fields and woods*

that surrounded her for sixty years.
*After the surveyor left, an Amish man
came up to me, asked "How much
do you want for the farm?"*

*They're so hungry, tongues hanging
out of their mouths like dogs.*

Grandfather, watch as your acres spooling
above you will sever like snapping
chicken legs from the carcass, joints
and cartilage torn with calculated yanks.

But I'm spinning this yarn wrong:
you never wanted a legacy.

IV

Like my mother,
my stepmother claimed
her pots, but left
a few glass plates,
miscellaneous bowls
for my father to use.
Out of pity, I suppose.
She took her grandmother's
bureau, leaving
the scuffed one behind.
She clung to fabrics
of her former life;
my father kept the rest.
She'd have taken
the cats too—instead
she bargained
for half the farm,
part of the debt
he owed her,
the debt he began
to pile up the moment
he swigged a beer,
let his eyes roam
across the room,
past her, past all
the women he knew
and loved, over
the hills he dug
himself into,
reaching
for silence,
reaching for something
always flickering
behind his eyes,
flickering inside
his head, the trees
whispering
their secrets
for his ears alone.

V

Father, the day your father sunk
 into the ground, you told me, *things*
are going to change. Voice slurred
 and broke, the fantasies of change

spread out from you like ripples
 of disturbed milk. Expanding,
 they touched the sides of a vat
 and bounced back, blending.

But change marks our only
 constant, like the wind,
 shearing bark from elms lining
 their burials along fence rows.

You've always disregarded borders,
 the calf that slips under poly wire's
 flimsy defense. Your Alexander,
 the father that towered over you,

is dead, Egypt, Persia, Palestine
 divided into little empires, ripe
 for the hungriest bidder. We cannot
 live like the father and daughter

I met in Imogene, Iowa; the girl
 swinging on his arm, squishing
 flip-flopped feet in muddy cow pies,
 venturing in high grass, unafraid

of ticks, their arms arching together
 in their tiny, prairie universe. How
 I wanted us in that portrait. But we're
 green glossed ruptures, expanding

away and up, our branches dividing
 the sky in separate kingdoms.

The Hoover Vacuum Cleaner Guide to Post-Funeral Clean-Up

How many strokes with my vacuum cleaner are necessary?

For maximum efficiency, imagine the carpet as unclipped fields of alfalfa and orchard grass on your grandfather's farm, unspooled from the Appalachians. He hasn't cut the fields in years, La-z-Boy-ridden. Bed-ridden, can't even cut his own hair, the carpet of his head disheveled, unkempt. Imagine each vacuum stroke a brush through his wispy white hair. Imagine the wind combing swallows from the woven fibers of alfalfa.

My cleaner is not working. Where do I take it for repair?

Unfortunately, the cleaner's warranty expired, like your grandfather in a hospital bed. He lingered in his Ohio Depression boyhood, when he milked cows thin as string beans, repaired frayed ropes, rebuilt old fences, saved every tin can for future use.

But everyone replaces things now; no one repairs.

What does cyclonic/multi-cyclonic mean?

A storm cloud in your head bursts at the slow growl of your grandfather's name: George, George, earth-worker, solid as the bales of hay he tightened from the fields. Solid as the pine trees he dug from the Appalachian woods, and planted on his plot of land. Solid, as the ground he lies under. The pines sway above him.

Since you are the carpet care experts, do you have any advice for removing stains from my carpet?

We suggest the following:

1. **Mix one tsp. of mild detergent with one cup of lukewarm water. Dip clean cloth into solution and gently blot the stain (Don't rub too vigorously, though we know that's what you want); continue until no more stain is removed.**
2. **Mix 1/3 cup white vinegar (Taste the sour vinegar) with 2/3 cup lukewarm water. Apply a small amount, then blot; repeat if necessary (blots fill your eyes; repeat, repeat, repeat).**
3. **Place a half-inch layer of clean, dry tissues or other white absorbent material, over damp area and weight it down with books or a heavy object (your heart will work nicely). Allow to dry.**

You might want to keep a can of Hoover Platinum Collection Professional Strength Instant Stain Remover on hand for emergencies like wine stains you spilled when you heard the news. The stain sinks into carpet fibers, your guilt for not attending the funeral a dark purple blotch on a cream colored rug. It joins yellow splotches, mutating to bruises. You bruise so easily, like your grandmother, who walked away from her husband's grave first.

Lessons in Eating Pickled Beets
from my father

soak purple juice in rice
stained by cow's
blood, pulp root
gristle, suckle
pickled dirt, taste
tart alcohol
trotting down
the throat, land heavy
and small, pebbles plunking
in the stomach, building

this weight:
carry and absorb it,
carry it even if
you're drowning

Geophagy

For G.R.F. (1927-2014)

Dug from the earth like groundhogs
 my dog robbed from their holes, I steal
 dirt in my mouth, words mud-thick, transform

into an earthworker, like my grandfather in overalls
 marked by pulverized beetles, who read encryptions
 from soil only he could decipher, his eyes roving

the ground, a stream that lost its banks.
 Soil etches scripture on my tongue, absorbs bones
 swimming in worm tunnels. I cannot get enough

of his voice inside my head, even if he says *don't go*
into farming, it will ruin you, his body
 bulbous and crooked from the ground luring,

beating him. And he growls from below
 as I dig and dig to unearth his final breaths, scrape
 until I'm caked in clay. I lick my hands

clean, a pica girl, full
 and empty in my search, dirt humming
 behind every word I speak: *all flesh is grass*.

Red Clover

We unfurl prophecies
in crimson orbs, heart-rounded
leaves. Fortunes form

from our image—
carved hunks of meat,
thick flushes of milk.

Upstarts, we claim
ground not ours, stalks
sneaking through stone,

gullies beside streams
of cars. We're here
to stay. You imported

us to ensure
harvest, familiars
aiding the master.

When you cut us
with steel, slice off
our heads, sour our blood

under sun, we come back,
subdue the natives, sway
above field mice

and worms again,
eager to finish
the work you started.

NOTES

“Intervention in Seed” is inspired by a presentation given by Monsanto’s PR representative to the Iowa State University Master of Sustainable Agriculture program’s colloquium.

“Dissected History” is in conversation with William Cronon’s book, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, chapter five entitled “Annihilating Space: Meat.” The chapter explores the changes in the American meat industry wrought by advances in technology (trains, refrigeration, consolidation). The impacts of trains and aggressive policies towards buffalo extermination allowed for the expansion of the beef industry in the Midwest.

“Subdivision (I),” section I is in conversation with William Cronon’s book, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*.

“Subdivision (I),” section II is in conversation with Elia Wilkinson Peattie’s short story “The House That Was Not,” and Karen Russell’s short story “Proving Up.”

“Subdivision (I),” section III is inspired by a lecture entitled “Farm Transition Issues,” given by Kathleen Schomer Kohorst at the Practical Farmers of Iowa 2015 conference.

“Perseverance” incorporates research done by Paul Kindstedt for his book *Cheese and Culture: A History of Cheese and Its Place in Western Civilization*.

“Geophagy” is defined as the eating of earth, particularly clay or chalk to aid in nutrient deficiency or as part of a cultural practice.