

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: RED HILL

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Red Hill collects narrative lyrics organized around seasons, the New England landscape, interior domestic spaces, and a reckoning with the marital history of a family. The impetus of many of the poems comes from a consideration of works of visual art while others explore vivid memories.

RED HILL

by

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For Adam

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VALLEY FARMS, 1934

After the painting by Ross Dickinson

They look like dirt heaps, these mountains
that hold no water. When it rains
they must release themselves
and gush their yellow and orange clay,
the colors of sun nutrients.

It seems they deposit themselves
for the cultivation of white farm houses
and square green fields that backed
their way into where the mountains
join corners for protected crannies,
bare mountains on which not a scrub brush
clings or waves in high summer.

These mountains give too much!

It's so hot they burn and charcoal smoke
rises over the far back ridges,
and standing here, holding
your hand in this museum
as a white river runs through
this greedy valley, and the slope
on which we stand begins
to slide towards this green hole,
I pull away so we don't fall
into this world.

THE WREATH BURNING FESTIVAL

Those pagan leaps over fragrant flames
of dried out lavender and hyacinth,
that purple warmth from sprigs
so brittle and crisp against my finger tips
transform this island into a mating ground
where young women search glasses
of sea water for their true love's face
and I claim a seat as if I'm certain
of the one who would waver in the water.

ENDEMIC

We thought we knew what to expect as we prepared for my leaving. We watched a documentary and learned that some things only exist on these islands. I thought

this meant creatures were formed here. You have spent so much time in stories of Galapagos, you read Darwin, can identify his finches, I read a poem. How unfair then

that I beat you here and discovered it all rose from the ocean floor, that everything here has traveled, that everything here has left reminders of its presence elsewhere.

When I arrived I hadn't expected the brown dry shore, the ferry and buses full of residents, the tortoises also making their way from the island's fingertips

to the highlands where they spend the summer. Traveling with them on the one road that carves the largest island's diameter I thought of your constancy as I watched

it change while seeming to stand still, watched it green as we climbed, watched determined turtles lumber towards their mating and feeding places (farmers string the lowest rung of their

barb-wire fences high enough for them to pass under). I passed through the island's heartbeat. "Galapagos" I whispered and it sounded like the deep breaths of a giant tortoise.

The Spaniards named the archipelago after their saddle shape before anyone discovered it also moves like a tortoise. Every year it drifts inches eastward.

Nothing here stands still. I thought I was traveling away from you, but the island was slowly returning me. Can you see my huge shell, smooth as a fingernail, bobbing with the current?

HOUSE HUNTING

Too bad it isn't
like target practice at camp
where a hard pull back
on a once-yellow bow
launches an arrow
if not into the crunch
of paper stapled to Styrofoam
then at least
into a dull-thudding dirt bank.
Some say it's a trek,
but there's no marked trail to follow,
and you don't have a compass,
and the sun is at its peak.
Or, it's more like fishing,
but not with a pole, hook,
or worms squirming
in a coffee can.
Rather, it reminds me
of flinging out a chalky net,
how I held the circle's crown
while the rest found
what was neither water nor land:
the muck that makes me pull up
my feet and swim.
You have to let the web rest a moment
before reclaiming it
through a twist and gather.

TWO PICTURES

I'm familiar with the first one out
of the envelope, their wedding picture,
my mother in a big hat, my father
already balding and wearing dark-rimmed
glasses, curling his fingers as if to keep
his ring from falling off his knuckle.
This copy is in good shape, the colors crisp,
my mother's dress still yellow, not the murky
cream of age in my framed copy.
But I've never seen the second picture –
my parents sitting on a couch
upholstered in orange-flowers, on the wall
above their heads a black and white print of a harbor,
row-boats lining a wharf. They must be
in the living room of the small house
they owned before my sister and I were born.
They lean into each other, settle into their touching arms.
I almost don't recognize my father, his smile
loose and easy, light catching his glasses
and blurring his eyes. My mother smiles too
and reaches for his hand. They used to
sit together in the family room when
I was growing up. My mother would watch PBS,
and tuck her feet up next to her while my father,
feet on the ottoman, read a book.
How could he concentrate with the noise?
But the smell of the well-oiled leather couch
and the tan and white striped wallpaper,
the crowded bookshelves, the cat flicking her tail
would draw me into that room only big enough for four.
For a time, even after they separated, they sat
in that room after dinner every night, and at bedtime,
my father still slept on his side of my mother's bed.

MOVE

A sun fly
settles in late afternoon
light and vibrates.
We pause in forming a
new home – relieved to be done
with in-between spaces –
and listen to our fly
keep the advance
of summer.

AFTER EDWARD HOPPER'S PAINTING *HOTEL ROOM BY A RAILROAD*

The curtains are pulled back,
the walls in the room are shadowed,
an older man stands at the window
dragging on a cigarette, his face
is one of the few things illuminated,
the line of his right cheek-bone clearly defined
as he waits for a train to rattle the vase on the dresser.
Why does the woman look ashen sitting behind him
in her slip? Why hasn't she gotten dressed yet?
And why does she let him keep his back to her?
My grandfather too could sit for hours
in front of the picture window in the living room,
staring off, watching birds and the train track
where I would spend much of my time
during summer visits lining the rusted rails with pennies
that I'd pry up after a train whistled by,
the heavy rush of warm air still ringing around me,
the now-smooth and oval pennies hot in my hands,
my grandmother claiming they would bring me luck.
Someone once told me that all the women in Hopper's
paintings are his wife. She's often dressed in pink
and looking out a window, but here she looks down.
That's always how he painted her, gaze turned,
face severe and grey. I wonder how my grandfather
would have painted my grandmother
as she sat in her blue-velveteen chair
facing her living room, her dining room,
her kitchen separated from both by no more than a countertop.
Blue-greys would form his palette, and his timid strokes
would outline a window and my sturdy grandmother
in front of it, double-chin lifted, brown-black eyes
piercing his canvas. She was the kind of woman
who wouldn't tolerate a turned back.

FIFTH YEAR REUNION

It began to rain more heavily as we sat over the remnants
of our dinners in the new dining hall with its grey
slate floors, big round particle board tables, and chairs
that don't need to be squeezed back together, remembering

how sometimes we liked to lie in the grass with a book,
the weather having softened, the maples just beginning
to unfurl their shade over the lawn that was here, unconcerned
by the day's passing. That used to feel like yesterday,

but as I listen to friends and their stories of work and marriage,
their plans for the summer fast approaching, our years here
recede until I almost can't make them out, until they become
a distant figure. I cannot tell if it is walking towards me or away.

At some point they announced the fireworks would go on
despite the showers. We trickled down to the pond
in our rain jackets and under our umbrellas – I had to tip mine
back to see the bursts over head, and the rain misted my face

as the air filled with flashes and cracks, sulfur smoke and embers.
So close were the rockets ignited that soon
a low-lying haze obscured their brightness.
After the finale, fingers in my ears, I went back inside
before the smoke could settle or be carried downwind.

RED HILL

From the town Dad and I can make out
the twig-like fire tower that sits on the peak.
During dry spells in summer a man hikes up
every morning with a pair of binoculars
and keeps watch over our wood-frame houses
and the meadows and the groves beyond. He hikes down
when the violet dusk releases us into the hill's keeping.

There are two ways to approach her,
but we keep the lake on our right before taking
a sudden left onto the Bean Road which rides
gently into her lap. I look back over my shoulder
for a view of swaying poplars and smooth-as-glass water.

Off the trailhead we pass a granite cellar
with a little sign about the family who built
their house here to make a living sugaring.
Their dwelling must have cast light
into the little visited forest. Now the trail is eroding
and when it rains, water courses down this gully
a full foot lower than the banks on either side.

Resting on the side of the trail half-way to the summit
Dad chuckles about his high school graduation party,
how he and his classmates trekked up the steep trail that night
while his friend Steve Blake drove the booze up
the old gravel logging road in his grumbling Chevy.

Now the gravel road serves as the main trail,
but Dad knows where to look for the old dirt path
mostly erased by maple saplings. The land surrounding
Red Hill was once all cleared, her heights exposed
and wavering, like the pompom my mother fixed
to my hand-knit winter hat. Now the trunks of
the surrounding trees are too large to wrap my arms around
and to see the seven lakes stretching out below her
you have to climb at least half-way up the fire tower.

REENACTMENTS

I'm sixteen and standing
on the sidelines, another
day-trip with my father
to a tall grass battlefield
in Maryland. Or
Pennsylvania.

The re-enactors gather
in their navy and grey wool,
sweat like the original
soldiers, but don't
flinch as their blanks
crack and smoke.

I already know
how it ends
out here, in history.

LUNCH AT RED HILL DAIRY BAR

I had finished eating whole-belly fried clams
with my cousin Linda underneath
a red and white tin umbrella,
the black metal benches hot to the touch,
our used napkins greasy and transparent,
the parking lot and the lake stretching out in front of us,
children running on the sandy beach and splashing
in the shallows, when I asked her, again, how she
met her husband, how they became engaged after only a month,
how Linda had just graduated from high school,
and how when she told her mother, as they sat
across the table from each other (almost the way
we are sitting now, my wedding approaching as quickly
as the end of summer, our elbows on the table,
Linda's hand cupping a cheek, wrinkles creasing her face)
her mother didn't say anything, just bit her lip.
Linda and Bill will celebrate their fortieth anniversary soon
and it's hard to imagine Bill as anything other
than white-haired, loud-laughing and hard-of-hearing.
I ask her if they've been a good forty years.
She looks at me as if searching for a truth I can hear
and says the only thing we've ever argued about is money.
I can see Bill's cluttered garage that he
rummages through whenever I need
anything, a set of knives, a table, a dog leash.
I don't think my parents ever argued about money.
I don't remember them arguing about anything,
and they had dated for years and waited what Linda's mother
might have considered an appropriate while.
As we head to the car, ice cream cones
in hand and dripping, the heat bears down.

IMMIGRANT WOMAN

Ellis Island was once left to collect
dust and pigeons in the rafters.
Benches, now polished,

were heaped and rotting.
None of my people
came through here.

They came before this island
was intent on counting, but still
these tiled halls and bench lined walls

feel so familiar, are inhabited
by dark haired women pulling in
children who want to explore

after so many sea sick weeks.
I follow one of them, a woman
with a red shawl covering her hair.

She chases a small boy
into the medical wing where a window
opens on the Statue of Liberty.

I take in that lady's stance,
how one of her shoulders slopes away,
how she tucks her chin in

just a bit. If she held her hands behind
her back, or traded her book
for a swaddled infant, she could be

my great grandmother,
that picture of her,
hanging in the old parlor, captured

when she was still a young woman
in Canada, faded sepia.
There is something

that makes me want to claim
a space in this newly shined
building for her, makes me want

to record her in the book of
altered names; if she stays fading
against the floral wall paper

then one day there might be
no record of how she arrived
in New Hampshire speaking French.

Already the particulars have
faded with my family's generations.
All I know is she came
down, crossed the border.

GREAT GRANDFATHER'S MURDER

This was his last
vantage point,
the drooping stoop
of the wood frame
house beneath

his feet, the cemetery
across the street
waiting to receive
two knife marks
in his chest.

From what I'm told
his married lover
never walked out
her front door again.
Her husband did.

ALTHOUGH I NEVER KNEW THEM

Although I never knew them, on days like this
when the poplar tree casts a long shadow
over the front porch and the neighbors and
I have hung our dried Indian corn to welcome fall,
I can see my great aunts swaying in their rockers,
watching over the street in Laconia, New Hampshire
as my grandmother, the young woman with wavy hair
and crossed arms, walks back to them from work
at the bobbin factory. They nodded while my grandfather
collected my grandmother for summer-time dates
in his beat-up car, the door hinges rusting
and threatening to break, which they finally did
on the way back from a John Wayne movie.
As my grandmother held the door up, two hands sternly
clasping the outer silver handle, they wore deep,
laughing grooves into the porch boards.

A SKETCH

On arriving home late
through the large kitchen
window I find you

washing dishes, your tie
thrown over your shoulder,
its silk belly winking

under soft yellow light.
Do you ever pause
the way I have tonight

to inhale the crisp dark
and admire my movements?

MYTH OF THE PARTRIDGE

Making for the back yard, the hammock
that droops between two old oaks,
I almost stepped on a dead partridge.

Bending in half to examine her mottled loveliness,
I see her neck relaxed and stretched back
into her shoulder as if she's ashamed

for having mistaken the bedroom window,
with its curtains pulled back, for an opening.
This reminds me of a story I heard.

A jealous teacher pushed his clever student off a roof,
but the boy, remembering how hawks hover
on warm air currents, whirled in midair,

vanished for a moment into his center
and then landed a red-legged partridge.
On all his flights after that he kept close to the ground

and never managed the same pirouette.
He had to learn to make his nest in low hedges.
I've fallen often and always land in the same form.

Leaning over I pluck a tail feather
for a straw-hat remembrance.

ELEGY

– the vet tech
placed a towel
on my lap
so I might
hold you
into that longest
sleep.

She lifted you,
still and limp,
from my arms –
your tongue hung out.
Fecal matter
almost escaped.

A month later
your ashes arrived
in a plastic bag
closed with a twist tie
inside a lacquered box.
With a white plastic spoon
I spread you
around the roots of an old
hydrangea bush
which bloomed blue
that summer.

INDIAN SUMMER

This morning while locking my front door
I felt my back start to dampen and cling
to my too many layers, and like a snake
I molted, left my extra hide on the floor
for some deprived creature, always gnawing
on his own cheek, to eat and so be sated.

REMAINS

Scorched Virginia
interstate and car corpse.
Seven years
in the same cafeteria.
I remember your
red hair, obliging smile, unrivaled
height. The newspapers
know more about you
than I do – moved to Texas, research
assistant, dog owner.

STORAGE SPACE

After buying our house, Adam and I dressed in thin-white-plastic body suits, work gloves, and plastic goggles as we pried up boards with a crow-bar and fed a big hose up the pull-down ladder to blow eight inches of fiberglass insulation into the attic knowing things held there would only be left behind, the heat and humidity slowly eating away at their durability. Earlier that year, my father and I had weeded through my grandparents' closets of green bowling shirts, pin-striped suits, shoes, and moth-eaten wool skirts. We emptied the space under the stairs where grandfather had stored extra buckets of white paint from when he sanded and then re-painted the wood siding on the eastern face, and where someone abandoned a small pair of ice skates thinking others might have a use for them. All of this and the attic's foam life-vests, molding leather suitcases, the light-up plastic Santa lawn decoration (there's a big hole in his right foot), and falling-apart-cardboard boxes of who-knows-what, all of this we loaded into the back of his truck, dump bound. When I held the ladder steady while Dad pulled himself up into the attic's darkness through the hole in the hallway ceiling, the panel pushed aside, I remembered I used to think ghosts lived up there, but it's my grandparents who are buried there, among the things they wouldn't throw away.

AUNT LEE

I was afraid you wouldn't recognize me
as I waited for you by the sign for trolley tours
in the station's great room, afraid too
that I wouldn't recognize you, unable
to remember anything but your blue eyes,
piercing, like grandmother's.
I almost thought maybe you missed
your train as waves of passengers flooded by,
their footsteps echoing around me, the arrival sign
dropping your train off the list. But it only took you longer
to navigate the funnel paths. In your too-big jacket
and your elastic-waist pants, you'd grown old.
While we ate a lukewarm quesadilla and sipped
over-priced coffee at the café that sprawls over the marble floor
I asked how you were doing since Pat died.
You've taken up gardening, but the man-made lake
behind your house keeps rising from all the rain
and drowning your begonias.
I think I only met your son once
when you drove him to visit us in your hulking blue van
with the electric handicap ramp.
My father put down a plank so you could wheel him
up the front steps. We all sat in the kitchen
and Pat smiled while I stared. You said
he always smiled, and you showed me the silver bracelet
you've had engraved with his name and life dates.
I can't imagine wearing anyone that way.
You said you wanted to send me a present
for my engagement. I received your package
later that week, with your note:
*These were my grandmother's. You're named
for her.* You had used Pat's Depends to wrap the china.
I've put it on display in the white, corner china cupboard
where it peeks through the lattice doors,
big white flowers splay across a crisp blue sky:
ozone papered with white blooms and their
falling petals. Some of the plates are discolored.

ALL DAY I WATCHED THEM TAKE DOWN THE DEAD HICKORY TREE

A man wearing spiked shoes and carrying a rope and a chain saw
anchored himself by leaning away from its central mast,
his harness secured by the tree's girth.

As he climbed above the last live branches
into the rotting remnants of a sprawling canopy,
boughs of dark bark eaten away, baring
the tree's heartwood, gray and brittle,
and as he pushed through this timber with his saw –
the sound of its cutting and its splintering,
and the heavy falling sounds that left
deep trenches in the sloping, newly-green lawn –
I was reminded of when I was small
and overwhelmed by panic, standing stiff
as if in a forest being cleared. My father called
these moments "losing my head" and told me
how, as a Midshipman, he was required
to jump off a high platform, almost forty feet high,
into a pool. The trick to not hurting yourself was folding
your arms across your chest as if being blessed,
and stepping off into the air holding still as if practicing
a jump from a sinking ship and then you'd
find yourself bobbing in the pool, a tilting buoy.
But the stubborn pieces of this hickory
are being pulled down segment by segment
by men on the ground with a long rope.
Composure, he would say, is being able to quiet
your pulse, to step out despite instinct.

YARN

From among the folds of tissue paper
in a white sparkly bag, I pull a note
on paper bordered with yellow wild flowers

and begin to read aloud to women
I'll soon be related to as they
eat key lime pie and look on –

*Dear Marian, In my lifetime, I've heard
and witnessed my grandmother,
a coal miner's wife, braiding a rag mat*

*for her dirt-floored home in the hillside,
my Aunt Berchie baking gingerbread cookies
that looked like us, my mother Mary Ann*

*sewing a quilt for her husband
to celebrate their first anniversary.
In keeping with tradition*

I give you starting materials.

The cotton yarn, navy and smooth,
crowds my lap as I look across the room,

past the woman who gave me this gift,
at my mother, her hands folded in her lap,
her head tipped to the side. She is smiling

at the names, their old-time sound,
the coincidence that I almost share
one of them, and she's remembering

knitting a wool sweater for my father.
It was light brown with small
white embellishments on the chest,

the yarn was coarse, heavy and itchy,
making the sweater too warm to wear inside
so it was wrapped in tissue paper
and kept in the cedar chest.

THE PAPAYA THIEF

I was walking my usual route over the pedestrian bridge, through the neighborhood with lots of for sale signs, and around the wooded path in the nicer park, when a man in a navy windbreaker suit stopped to pet my dog Henry. He cocked his head over his shoulder and said, *Your dog looks like my dog. I had to leave him in Ethiopia, but he had the same fat head and strong shoulders. They're gifts to us. I remember my Sama once caught a kid stealing sweet papayas from my orchard.* While he talks, I imagine juice rolling down a young boy's gaunt face as a dog, brown like Henry, but mean, snarls him higher up the trunk of a tree. The child's legs hook at his ankles. His hands are in a slipping cling. I might think that tree bore coconuts – same diamond pattern on the trunk right below the fruit. The man reaches the end of his story. *I gave Sama goat meat that night.* Then, after a moment, *He ate the same as me.* Henry, too, rests by my feet at the end of every day.

GOLDEN VIEW NURSING HOME

This morning the hall is quiet,
the TVs aren't turned up too loud,
and we drift into my grandfather's room
to find him dozing with the window open,
a sometimes wind tossing the curtain.
Father decides we won't wake him,
so we sit in two folding chairs, listen
to his deep breaths. We've waited in quiet before,
the summer grandmother lay dying, comforted
by morphine, an air conditioning unit humming
like a moth's wings against a fine mesh screen,
the family seldom farther away than
the living room or a shout, her wheezing dog
keeping vigil from her bedside rug.
Every morning that summer I walked
the railroad tracks from the house to the trestle
that spans a small brook feeding the lake.
There the forest opens, there I could breathe
as I carefully placed one foot and then the other
on parallel ties and stared between them
at grey-green running water – that's where
I could picture being released into mist,
rising off the lake as the day warmed.
As we wait for the elevator to open
my father says that before he gets to
that point he's going to go for a long walk.

I WOKE TO GREY

The gravel in the middle of the road
was wet, darker than the pieces at its edge,
and the bay's slate-blue water churned.
As the morning stretched open, so too
did the cloud cover carried out to sea
by a gale that could have taken me from
my perch into its current over the dunes,
the wind engraving its path over the rippling
shallows, and suddenly, before I could twist
out of the rush, the earth fell away from
the water's surface and darkened, my earth-bound
fear of falling or being caught in a riptide
deepened until the wind died down
and dropped me into the depths,
where after surfacing from the cold
and viscous sea I lingered, treading.

SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER

the storm passed with its winds
that caught tree branches in a whirl
the way a parent might hold her
child's arms and spin to make him fly,
and the rain stopped cascading
and soaking the towels we placed
at the base of our basement door,
we drove to the shore to survey
the damage. A fog had yet to envelop
the road and our headlights lit
the haze creating an eastward path.
That night, the damage hid from us,
but in the morning it emerged from
houses and piled itself along the road,
piles that matched the height
of sand that used to form dunes.

NUPTIALS

My father likes to remind me
that he received
sex education

from the fathers
of Saint Bartholomew's
in the room I'm

to be married in
before it was remodeled
into the ballroom of a hotel

named Church Landing.
As we leaf
through pictures

at the florist's,
as we sort possible
table linens, and as we

taste salmon crusted
with dill, I keep wanting
to remind my mother

that this is my wedding,
and not her
third.

To determine seating
we sit at our
dining room table,

pencils in hand,
my parents eyeing
each other, your

mother crackling
into the conversation
from the phone on speaker

in the middle of the table.
They don't let you
throw rice anymore.

Too much mess with
another service right
after ours. So instead

I drag you to Party
City where we buy
five cases of small white

bubble bottles with white
bows on the wands.
Walking the grass aisle

I have to remind
myself to walk
on tiptoes

so I won't sink.
Until I see
my Aunt blubbering

I don't
stumble.
The food wasn't

anything like
what we tasted.
And even after

reminding the wedding
planner about a green
vegetable for the salmon,

only a skinny sprig
of parsley for color.
I had told you

not to mess up
my makeup
with cake

so left you
speechless and
sticky,

with a blue
beard and nose.
After we've been

announced and paraded,
toasted and congratulated,
after you've slid

the garter off my thigh
and shot it across
the dance floor,

I ask you to undo the long
line of buttons down
my back and hand you
a crochet hook.

YOUR PHONE CALL FROM INDIANA

Over the phone your voice is the texture
of the field of broken corn stalks piercing
a layer of snow outside your grandmother's

nursing home window. I wish I was with you,
that there weren't miles between our bodies
as you watch her sleep and try to show her

pictures of our wedding. So I picture my
grandmother's dying, her shrinking, the loosening
of her skin as her flesh evaporated, her mumblings

about meeting her long-dead mother, and when
you say, maybe she'll get better, I say, maybe.
Later I wake with a start, but the room is unfamiliar.

Slanting streetlight filters through a small window
so I can see silver-framed pictures lining shelves,
a bedside table: we're holding our first child,

smiling at her, not at the camera, I'm showing her how
to hold a trowel in front of yellow summer squash blooms,
we're older, I have my grandmother's forehead wrinkles, you've

gained a stomach and your beard has turned pewter grey,
but we're holding hands while we nap in white
Adirondack chairs, our feet stretching like long shadows.

In the murky light I reach for you, find a cold space,
our present, and your description of fading family pictures on
your grandmother's tan wall. From her perspective they're slanted.

DEMOLITION

The backhoe started by knocking down
the brick chimney which scattered like
dried leaves in a gust, and the walls and framing,
as the claw struck them, broke as crisply
as match sticks. This house is older
than anyone I know, my grandfather
stayed in it for a time after returning from
the war, a shame to have to bring it down,
but the floors threatened to give out
and the walls were covered by old sheets
instead of plaster. I had wanted to
bring him to watch the hoe head
open it up like a demented doll-house,
but it rained, and the air was thick with plaster dust.
So, we sat in the car, the windshield wipers
running, the debris and heavy machinery
hauled away and the foundation hole filled.
All that was left were piles of hand-hewn
beams plucked from the structure, some split
where dry rot had eaten away at them for decades,
and old granite foundation stones darkened
by the falling rain. Stakes marked
the corners of the ghost-foundation
so we wouldn't stumble into unsettled ground.

LONG EXPOSURE

Sometimes, when we lie together, your hand resting on my hip,
your leg thrown over mine, the moon's light bleeding into our room,
I'm reminded of a photograph we saw by Hans Schink,
who would set up his camera at specific coordinates and leave his lens
open for an hour, capturing the sun's path over a meadow, through a stand
of trees about to bud, their branches veining across a sky that looks hazy,
over-exposed, but the trees are stark, skeletal and reaching towards
the black sun. Where they touch its path there's a momentary eclipse,
a bright-white line through the dark line, a negative image cutting against
the sun. Is that what passion should feel like? The blaze around the edges
of a hot body that registers black, that seems to burn through these trees,
that actually comes close to burning a hole through Schink's film,
its reflection too intense to capture? We started that way
in that falling-down apartment where we waited until late at night
to make love, to keep my roommates from hearing.
Most nights now we're asleep by that time, and I wonder,
had Schink focused on the landscape beyond our bedroom window,
had he opened his lens to the moon for a long exposure,
would it have appeared as black as that sun, once developed?
I think it would be more monochrome, the moon running from one
corner of the frame to another, giving off some light around its edges –
the yard beyond our window, the maple tree turning, the rose bushes
we planted together, all the silvery grey of shadow.

WRAPPING CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FOR YOUR PARENTS

I went to town
picked out some things
I thought they might like,
wrapped them in
silvery paper with red
reindeers, and labeled them
from both of us.

POLLARD FARM

We both witnessed
the barn roof's
dramatic curl,
then its collapse into

a heap of splintered boards
covered by
the first snowstorm.
Once, Pollard Farm

encompassed this hillside,
everything from the weathered
granite post
to the lakeside, where the land

dips its fingers
into the green-black water.
Dad, you've taught me
this landscape. Through you

I know it, could plot it
as a surveyor would:
short red dashes
distinguish crumbling

stone-wall borders
from soggy blue-shaded
wetland, and yellow cuts
imitate the hill crest

where a little buildable plot
sits next to an old graveyard,
the headstones moss dappled,
and the writing illegible.

Walking this map
with you, in thick clothes
so the burrs won't pull,
I feel your intention, it rumbles

beneath us as if the land too
were ready to shift backwards
out from under abandonment,
the pucker brush.

The soil remembers
what it felt like to be tended,
remembers its healthy sprawl
and apple orchard,

remembers how the Pollards
took in your father
when their old blue
farmhouse was still

a place you could live.
It remembers
how you hid
from your brother

after he caught you
reading his love letters,
how you fit behind
the trunk of an apple tree.

But the land can feel
farther back
than we can. It knows
who's buried

in the little graveyard,
knows they aren't Pollards.
They're protected.
An easement grants

their long lost descendents
access over your property.
If I resurrected their hillside
would I find myself

in the beginning
of this clearing?
Would I help one of
these unmarked men

pull a bucksaw
through old evergreens
and birch trees?
Dragging the saw, back and forth,

pulp smell bleeds
from the trunk
as my hands blister.
My triceps and biceps

squeeze together.
Then the next day I split
downed trees for lumber
(building on my mind),

or swing pickaxe
up and over
to break up rocks
embedded in the land

by the receding glacier.
And the Pennacook fisherman
wonders why I'm
letting so much light

into the forest.
Back in our own easy time,
you breathe in the clearing
the forest wants

to reclaim
(saplings poke through
the snow like new
grass through straw).

You're wondering
if this is the right
year to re-build
the farmhouse, to pound

stakes into frozen ground
and string out its walls.
You have time
to consider. Building

season won't be here
until mud season
passes, until
the ground hardens

enough for large
machines to break it.
I wish building
a house so like

the one that stood here
during your childhood
could return us
to the times

we remember.
I wish raising
a plywood frame
could resurrect

the scenes we're tracing.
But Pollard Farm
will continue to pull
more moments

into the clearing.
For once I reach
far forward
(for once not back)

and sense that your
descendants,
then my descendants,
will also be

formed here.
Their graves
will be gravel clay,
their limbs the peel-away

bark of spruce trees,
their organs
water shadows
of us.

THREE FIGURES

After the sculpture by Betty Feves

They seem to study me with their hands clasped,
shoulders squared, chests concave and glazed
in contrasting colors, the middle figure is all
yellow-tan but for brown insides, her flanking

companions, joined to her at hip and shoulder,
peep out from brown faces through yellow-specked eyes.
Their cloaked and angular bodies, their long arms
flexed the way a bird might stretch its wings

forward and away before flapping into flight,
remind me of the Fates. As I circle them
I almost ask for a prediction, but they must know
where I have been – they have watched with me

from my front porch the woodpecker hammering
into the poplar tree with a jagged limb,
they have seen my grandmother demonstrating
how to fill a cage with suet and hang it

from the wash line that ran from the corner
of her house to a half-dead oak, and they know
that in Spring I'll hang a feeder full of slippery
millet seed to attract skittish brown finches.