

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: MYLAND FARMS  
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The poems in this collection radiate from the emotional atmosphere of familial life. Foregrounded in the landscape of my grandfather's flower nursery, these poems convert particular energies of experience into the heat of universal understanding. When the metaphysical greenhouse collapses, however, the necessary warmth of language is both absorbed into and released from the surface of the page. In this sense, the poems themselves burgeon new life, each line another root beneath our feet.

**MYLAND FARMS**

Radford Skudrna

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*Split Rock Review*: “Myland Farms”

*for my family*

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## MARATHON

There go the runners. Passing on  
the Baltimore Light Rail, let's watch  
the runners alongside us—see  
their numbers? Count each one pacing  
beside sidewalks. All those faces.  
We're pulled to fluorescent racing shoes,  
spandex, and whatever runners  
pull from those waist packs. Notice stragglers  
leaning on knees, wheezing. What's our  
destination anyway?  
Let's follow them, lace our shoes  
before the next stop. Watch for footsteps  
all around, every scuff  
on asphalt, each breath locomotive.  
Let's strive for first. Weave in and out  
past the runners, breeze by joggers,  
and leave those *power* walkers so,  
so far behind. How much farther  
to the finish? Let's take off  
our shoes and sprint barefoot beyond  
the packed park benches and grids of row homes.  
Let the cityscape run  
into the countryside, horizon  
turning from steel-gray to green.  
Feel what's beneath us. Feel endorphins  
coursing through as we stride  
away from the guidelines, metal guard rails,  
on-ramps, and exit signs, each footfall  
a misstep in another direction  
that stumbles over something stretching,  
challenging us all not only  
to run but also leap or elude,  
escape flat-out monotony  
with the anticipation  
of landing somewhere we hadn't expected  
but endure anyway,  
the imaginative prospect  
of what's coming, unsure and unsettled  
yet somehow insouciant, as if chasing  
our childhood, sprinting toward our mothers  
the moment they discharge us like  
the quick shot of a starting gun.  
Our legs will cramp, insides straining  
beside themselves, but pain is weakness



leaving our bodies. Whenever we fall,  
scramble back up. Get used to flailing.  
Once we stand flat-footed  
and ready, repeat, get set again,  
repeat, repeat until nothing  
remains ahead. Then, turn around.

## TREE HOUSE

Pop surveyed the beech tree: its trunk rooted firmly,  
leaves full and viridescent, crutch high out of reach.  
He measured every limb twice, marking blueprints  
for a platform at the tree's hub, each plank counter-  
beamed and fastened so as not to cut circulation.  
The knotted rope, he said, was for swinging escapes,  
and by autumn, a thick bark swelled around the strands.

My palms, too, toughened. I'd climb higher and higher  
before swinging, letting go later each time.  
Bunches of leaves came loose, drifting from the parent plant.  
When Pop wasn't watching, I'd tie a knot he'd taught me  
around my waist and, from the highest branch, swing down.  
One time, though, the makeshift harness pulled taught, strangling  
as the line caught, my body writhing in suspension.

The limb cradled a quiet scream, my wrung breath  
barely heard. By the time anyone found me, held me  
for slack and unfastened the knot, the swaying stopped.  
Impressions in my skin. Still, to be sure, the rope  
came down before nightfall, an abraded mark where it clung  
to the tree's sturdiest arm, the bark worn, transient,  
the heartwood exposed as he carried me away.

## **PRETENDING TO SLEEP**

I'd pretend to be asleep  
as he came up to say goodnight,  
my father back from working late.  
His silent gaze around my room,  
at me buried under the pillows,  
kept me guessing if he was there.  
My breath heavy, almost snoring  
so that he might hear me dreaming.

Most nights the lights were still on,  
so he'd come in to turn them off.  
I knew the smell of cologne and grease,  
every kitchen he'd ever sweat in,  
the oils and fats seeping through.  
Sometimes he'd sit next to me  
with a labored exhale, his touch  
deepening my pseudo sleep.

Eventually, he'd hit the lights,  
that electric hum drown in quiet.  
Maybe both of us were waiting  
in the dark, waiting for something  
to bring with us into tomorrow,  
but not a single sound was made  
until his footsteps turned down  
the dull groan of the hallway.

## SKID LOADER

When Mom knew my homework wasn't finished  
but had an appointment anyway,  
she'd clear off the long table in the back.

Sometimes centerpieces covered the surface,  
cut stems piled high at my feet. The flowers  
dribbled as she carried them to keep.

I remember the squeegee squelching in circles.  
How she'd wipe her hand across the counter  
to make sure it's dry enough for me.

Then she'd be gone, back into her office  
with a bride-to-be and company,  
their high-pitched laughs breaking the sound of study.

Once in a while, another noise too: outside,  
Pop's skid loader. Its engine turning over.  
Its wheels fixed and dragging across the ground.

From the window, I'd watched him pirouette,  
the zero-radius friction churning  
gravel through the mud underneath.

But even then I knew I knew nothing  
about lift arms and moving booms.  
Nothing about moving the earth below me.

## IN THE CREEK

My brother, seven years younger, follows me  
through the woods to the shallow, muddy creek.

Just the day before, we found a herd of crayfish  
right below the surface. *Farther down the bend,*  
he points out, *that's where I think I stepped on them.*

Barefooted, we feel around for the crustaceans.  
We sift through the mire and slide over rocks

slippery as history. Nick reaches down,  
then pulls up a waterlogged stick, tosses it  
toward the tree stump by the bank. Not a bite.

Still, we keep shuffling downstream, hoping  
the shellfish too had drifted. We looked beneath

our reflection for their camouflaged shells,  
pincerlike claws, the grotesque anatomy  
of a hundred million years ago or something.

*Where'd they all go?* he asks, as if I knew  
everything. *Is it true they swim backward?*

We retrace yesterday's steps in reverse,  
only guessing what we'll stumble over next  
as we make our way back against the current.

## MYLAND FARMS

Even though the frost has barely thawed,  
everything must go: the cracked ceramic  
flowerpots, wrought iron candelabra, boxes  
and boxes of votives; all the garden tools  
my grandfather acquired over decades  
owning the flower nursery, the rust  
of each spade crumbling into gravelly ground;  
each of the mossy fountains and vacant birdbaths  
and once-upright statues of St. Francis sorted by their worth.  
Forget the fresh-cut hydrangea, sunflowers,  
delphinium, and roses—they won't last.

Orchids and palms, though, might make it through  
summer, so I rummage through his greenhouse  
that collapsed under the weight of a snowstorm,  
its colossal exhaust fan weathered, motionless,  
its galvanized steel bows and purlins kinked  
and severed, some edges tearing the plastic film.  
From here, I watch my grandfather disassemble  
his workbench, empty shelves from the bottom up  
past the brims of storage bins, reaching the top shelf  
for a black and white photograph of himself,  
only younger, working a wheelbarrow through  
flecks of daylight, a slight breeze waving  
his hair as if to ask *what're you looking for?*

I wonder what he notices in the picture:  
forearms flexed, tanned skin tight across his face;  
dank soil inside the barrow's bed, its earthy smell  
spreading through the burgeoning garden of his memory—  
how he'd dig top-soil in spring, washing loam  
from under the thick of fingernails each night;  
or, perhaps, how it'll feel to leave, to liquidate  
history before the month's inauspicious end?  
*What's next, I want to know, fertilizer?*  
Still absorbed, he returns a slight nod  
to salvage whatever's left in the greenhouse:  
wicker baskets, hoses, and under a ragged blue tarp  
the wheelbarrow overturned and tarnished.

And suddenly, I hear a shattering and a resonance  
simultaneously, like grating metal under the quake  
of an avalanche, or a felled sycamore, all at once  
its twigs snapping below a deep tremble.

The barrow topples as I turn toward the sound:  
there, beside his workbench, my grandfather's sprawled  
over an emptied toolbox, the picture frame split  
apart to expose a discolored film. His eyes open  
but dazed, mouth slumped on one side, limbs  
wilting like a hyacinth's after a drought,  
the vessel of its bulb hardly pumping  
anything for the axis to absorb, its purple  
resolutions faded to a burnt vanilla,  
each withering petal soaking  
enough, enough, enough.

## **EXUDE**

So often my parents worked late, leaving me at Grandma's.  
The familiar smell of cigarettes billowed  
out the door, wide-open. 100's weren't enough,  
so she lit each one off another. I remember  
stealing away her lighters to a fortress of quilts—

I remember her deathbed covered with those blankets,  
how her smell lingered while her breath faded  
and someone said it was her lungs giving out.



## **GOING UP**

Way anesthesia-high, Grandma sees herself  
dancing in the third person. The mouth sings silence.  
I try to explain that she's in bed, tucked under tubes.

Still, she says, "I'm going up." Maybe a stairway  
of the mind where dreams climb effortless as gas,  
or perhaps a hysterical memory.

When she finally wakes, she raises her eyes to mine.  
Rising, she squints in infirmity. She looks away,  
kneading her temples like staying were even a choice.

## RACKET

Pop handed down his tennis racket though it was winter and all the pots outside his greenhouse were filled with ice. My idea of the sport was just *to whack stuff*, which is why it made sense to bang the aluminum head repeatedly against those frozen surfaces. I remember the racket in my grip shivering like a bell, the sound of wind through the strings, then noticing myself in the glaze.

Chip by chip, I swung harder at my frosted reflection and Pop said I was scaring all the customers away. Still, it wouldn't crack, the racket, gnashed and bent. *Match point!* I thought, and threw down on the ice with everything I had, but the mirror returned my serve with such force it broke my front left tooth right in half. I felt a splitting pang, then a raw, biting wind that nipped the nerves in my mouth as I lied the racket down beside me and said I slipped.

## LATE SUMMER STING

Mom said *careful* as Nick and I ran  
past her, through Myland's side door,  
into the field where a tire swing hung;  
I watched as my brother leapt  
headfirst onto the thick rubber—  
not noticing a wasps' nest nestled  
inside the lining, his innocence  
itself a threat—Nick's scream seemed more  
primal, scared, than softhearted;  
I remember him flailing back  
toward me, how the yellow jacket  
hive swarmed, all at once, around us.



## **OPEN PACK**

My cousins wanted to play  
Old Maid at Grandma's funeral,  
so I found her pack of cards.

I remember thinking  
how cards and cigarettes  
come in similar boxes.

How grandparents shuffled  
them between their fingers.  
That familiar smell.

Earlier that week,  
Grandma dealt me a hand  
that couldn't be shuffled

any better, then smoked  
another Marlboro.  
She burned her last match.

It was still in the ashtray  
when I dealt the cards  
to one too many players.

## WHAT I FOUND

Under the potting table  
in the greenhouse, I found  
my cap gun: a mock-revolver.  
It had been years since I lost it,  
the zinc alloy rusted  
around the cylinder's hinge  
so it wouldn't open.

Just like the Lone Ranger's,  
it had an external hammer  
for showdowns, the long barrel  
glinting beneath high noon.  
I took ten paces, then drew,  
aiming straight at Nick, who  
had never seen it coming.

Unarmed, his hands went sky-high.  
He begged me not to shoot him,  
said he was sorry he couldn't  
have been a better brother  
and promised not to tell  
if I would *please, God, please*  
let him see tomorrow.

When he slumped to his knees,  
I realized he wasn't playing,  
didn't know that stuck inside were  
not bullets, but rust and a roll  
of defused phosphorus  
that won't even snap  
when you pull the trigger.

## CONCENTRATE

To hold the picture is to remember her  
patterned, indigo nightgown, her cigarette, barely  
lit, down to the last tired drag. To trace passing  
veins of smoke would be to look so closely.

Dead center, my grandmother's right eye gazes  
straight through dispersing light, the photograph  
capturing its own flash, her pupil  
luminescent, an image blinking within itself.

## **PINEWOOD DERBY**

Lining wood block to band saw  
as if contouring the difference  
between winning and everything else,  
my grandfather pressed down on  
what would be my derby car's frame  
ever so diligently, gently.

*Aerodynamics*, he uttered, maybe  
expecting a Bobcat rank to know  
what he meant, his only instruction—

I braced the metal table, guiding  
the car slowly into the endless  
blade he said would slice right through  
if I did not pay attention.



## DEEP DOWN

In late autumn, the pots needed cleaning,  
the sycamore leaves clogged inside heavy  
with rainwater. Pop suggested draining  
each planter before digging into the mire,  
so I tilted them and, one by one,  
cleared the sediment from their holes.  
The gravel underneath grew muddy, the pathway  
back to the greenhouse breathing a small breath.

But it wasn't until I stuck my bare hand  
into the soggy decay that I noticed  
the dank smell of life breaking down—  
how foul, but also how familiar.  
*Don't be shy*, he said when I gagged,  
reaching down and deep for the bottom.

## **THESE ARE FOR YOU**

Look how, when we bring flowers, some of us  
don't know what to say, as if our pollen  
might actually stain. How the seed  
passes onto the next delivery,  
face-to-face with whoever hears us  
at the door. Funerals and weddings  
in the same cathedral, bouquet and stench  
in one breath. Say, even a carnation,  
five blooms off a stem, bleeds electric  
crimson, magenta, oxblood, vermillion...

## TAKING THE BOUGAINVILLEA BACK

So what my parents grew insignificantly apart,  
their lives branching: mother in another state  
tending an undue garden; father, always missing,  
learning realty as the housing bubble popped.

So what, my mother's voice stretches through  
the coiled phone line, asking only why  
she doesn't prune the bougainvillea back  
and why the overgrowth rambled so long  
in the first place, its thorny stalks obscured  
beneath ornamental clusters, papery bracts  
extending, taking her hand, puncturing...

She's stuck on *why*, some thorn of reason  
even leather gloves leave her vulnerable  
and throbbing, when there's another call  
on the line, my father's number, reaching out  
of another absence, so I ask her to hold on,  
torn, because there's something wildly beautiful  
about barbs and petals, corollas of imperfection  
growing continually out of another's design,  
the cell walls' needs climbing a fence painted gray,  
the entanglement losing us all deep within.

## CENTERPIECES

Before the spotlighting we place arrangements,  
baby's-breath opening, aromatic; then step back.

Mom sees pin spots through years of experience, I follow  
and align votives with place settings, the wicks unlit.

Looking around a grand ballroom before a wedding  
I feel like a critic—highbrowed and prolific, particular

of the light—judging the foreshadow of another  
wife, another husband standing in observance.

## MOVING STATUES

Pop asked me to inventory outside,  
where the statues stood still, the frost  
again giving way to spring in the valley...

Artichoke finials peaked through,  
then the Somerset Maiden. I wondered,  
turning toward St. Francis, how long he'd hold

the songbird to his chest, the stone weathered  
and split near the base. As I tilted his statue,  
it felt heavy and delicate both,

as if the granular skin I held  
was actually Pop's, his face spotted  
and cracked from a lifetime outside,

so I lined the hand truck with a long box,  
fastened the bungee cords, and prayed  
he wouldn't crumble on the gravel driveway.

## **FIREPLACE**

Placing a log in the fire, my father tries  
to explain where he was. Mom's trying too  
not to see me staring, her focus on the wood  
smoldering below. Fire flickers across her  
eyes like a mirage. He repeats *dark place*,  
a chimney perhaps, bricks black with soot, the smoke rising  
around us as he slides the iron gate shut.



## **EASTER GATHERING**

Aunt Sissy arrived alone, empty-handed,  
and hours earlier than the other guests.

When I offered to take her coat, I noticed  
a thin shadow partitioning her shoulders.

My father, leading grace, blessed the circle  
our family formed, me beside my aunt

beside herself, the grasp of her hand still cold  
from her cocktail, the band on her finger chilled.



## WHAT WE TAKE WITH US

—*after Richard K. Kent*

We pack suitcases with eggshells,  
the thin, broken coverings  
emptied of what could've been.

Having split the cuticles,  
we expose membranes, the insides  
spoiled with breath, our own foul air.

Forget the yolk. Never mind  
the sound of whites in a skillet.  
Don't worry about cholesterol.

Instead, fill the lining full,  
so many shells they spill over,  
yet so many eggs still intact.

## WASHING DISHES

The clang and clatter of silverware echoed through the kitchen.  
Servers pushed glasses through a window for me to rack up and wash.

A ceaseless heap of leftovers piling higher, the plates seasoned  
with au jus and déjà vu. This never-ending holus-bolus.

I'd dream of shattered glass, the shards chipping into the mess and me  
not noticing. I'd imagine the blood rinsing down the drain.

How vulnerable my finger felt when they'd prune, the residue  
in the sink soaking in my skin, the steel wool pad greased and dripping.

## TWO POEMS

### 1. THE GRAPE

Reserved stalk still noble rotting  
above graveled soil,  
its vine earthy, breathing ripely  
until late November  
when dried berries turn to raisins  
and note acid's harvest—

Transparent and dulled with blooming yeast,  
the grape revels in balance,  
its sun-shone skin finely weathered  
and rank, finally ready  
for pluck, so we press the peeled skins  
from rinds into Riesling.

### 2. BREATHE

Katie snapped a picture of me  
swirling Bordeaux under a bayside sunset.  
Red tears well in the glass. She said, *Smile*,  
as though nightfall promised another day.  
*Now look out over the water.*

In the retake my mouth is open  
ever so slightly, a glare from the flash  
against my teeth like a stain.

## **CARPOOL**

Sometimes our commute is silent, your gaze kept,  
counting down exit signs. I glance over your profile,  
outlines under your eyes, to picture what you envision  
in daydreams, or who, wondering if you're awake  
enough to drive when rumble strips punctuate the quiet—

If you're too tired, pull on the shoulder so we can switch,  
the merging guardrails reminding us of nowhere  
to go but forward, so I'll accelerate, slowly,  
in hopes your eyes move rapidly into sleep.

## SPRING CLEANING

Yesterday my mother and I sorted through  
the boxes in the basement. Lining a trash bag, she nodded  
toward the one spilling over with banking slips.  
We flipped through stacks of books on arranging centerpieces,  
then tossed half the pile. We moved the wooden crates  
packed with Myland's crystal candelabra, the candles  
next on the agenda. *What about Pop's tools?*  
I asked, knocking on the steel cabinet.

The drawers, rusted, grated as I opened them.  
In the chest: worn sand paper and uncapped glue,  
wrenches without sockets, no saw, but dozens of blades.  
I shook the spray paint while she dragged the trashcan over,  
not realizing his footsteps coming down, his breath coarse  
as he cleared his throat and asked what we were doing.

## UNDER ONE ROOF

Because we're never alone, my parents laid the ground rules:  
No smoking whatsoever. Pop's downstairs, still living  
through secondhand news, so don't dare disturb him  
with the burnt smell of yet another high noon.  
A gunshot rang from an old Western in the den.  
The ricochet hyperbolic. There's always something  
bouncing off these walls, the hallway, the steps  
creaking as they climb. Almost electric, our senses  
buzz, but before we know it, the cable, everything,  
goes out, a silence fallen at once, and we feel the quiet  
presence of another, distance under the same roof.

Still, we keep to ourselves in tiny rooms, each door  
closed shut. There's little talk between us, Dad said,  
daylight never enough, while everywhere outside  
children chase each other in circles. *Tag, you're it*  
reminds me how the spark wheel fathoms the flint,  
the flick kindling gas into flame, into my lungs  
the question burning: who are you anyway?  
Even the midsummer grass's cut from its root,  
the sheared blades fetched into a bird's nest  
and left to dry. After a while, even that blows away.  
So what's a rule if not broken? The power returns  
to Pop's television with another overthrown headline,  
all of us wondering how we might be alone after all,  
just me upstairs, the doorway wedged with towels,  
windows open just enough to let the smoke go.

## QUARTER CENTURY

I was born the year the last Dusky Seaside Sparrow died,  
its extinction pesticidal. In that time, looking into the sky  
was to glimpse Supernova 1987A, its rings and debris  
blasted across a winter night, or perhaps warplanes dropping  
mustard gas bombs on a civilian town, the children  
breathing the garlic smell deep, the chemicals seeping through  
their clothes, their skin, their families nowhere to be found,  
the year Reagan challenged Gorbachev to *tear down*  
*this wall*, the audience rising with thunderous ovation.

After twenty-five years, somehow I hear the sparrow's song—  
it's in Sandy surging the seaboard, *Curiosity* roving over Mars,  
in the militant overtaking of embassy walls, the diplomats  
inside climbing for the roof, yet overcome with smoke. I hear it  
in the helium balloon twenty-five miles over Roswell, a body's free  
fall, and the parachute of a broken sound barrier. As I close my eyes,  
the lull of an inmate flicking his mattress afire puts me out.  
Those that manage to escape, fleeting over the prison gate  
of another remembered dream. The victims in their cells, singing.

## BODY OF LANGUAGE

Another applause for C. K. Williams  
reading his latest draft of “Vile Jelly”—  
bent lithely above the podium, turning  
a page, eyes toward audience, then reaching  
for a merited water glass.  
His sign interpreter licks her lips.  
She could be tasting the harsh stresses of the last  
sounds of the final stanza in her mind.  
Like a writer writing dying, she  
is a performer performing hearing.  
The signer enacts rhythms of understanding,  
moving line-by-line with reflective delay.  
Names like *King Lear* and *Basil the Blinder*—  
spelling *blinder* by clawing her eyes—hand  
movements toward a countenance suggesting  
some irksome, unconscious something.

Her once-upright posture now hunched  
and tired as iambs beating down the mind.  
The meter of her eyes blinking slowing,  
a *vile chip of blank* surfaces.  
As if wakened by the silencing  
audience, she nods up, eyeballing another  
interpreter, exchanging signals so  
they might change seats before the next  
poem captivates, transfixes her.  
She feels the handrail leading off the stage,  
then sinks into the crowded audience—  
but not before Williams notices her.  
“I wear one out?” he quips, tongue-in-cheek,  
of course, a rhetorical move for ovation.  
The second signer, seated and poised,  
listens for the next title.





## AMYGDALA

My brother explained it's a part of the brain  
that processes memory and emotion—  
said it's all personal reaction,  
how the public becomes social  
space, industry intimate,  
and back again. *Like a front door*  
*in our heads*. Take today:  
Nick and me upstairs, reading  
chemistry, poetry  
aloud, until his closest friends  
arrive, knocking incessantly.  
He lets them in and I get anxious  
because I can't enjoy a word,  
my brain reacting, slamming the door shut.

## VIII OF SWORDS, TAROT

Hopeless to tell if he's dead or alive  
without unfastening the blindfold.

Is he standing freely in the storm, cobalt  
puddles gathering around the adobe

clay of his feet, eight long swords beside him,  
the imprisoned poet, like a whetted gate?

Or is a ninth sword concealed behind the fire  
red drape of his cloak, a stanchion holding

him upright? The slump of his head hung  
silent—a mountain in the distance: abrupt,

expansive, yet towered beneath the heights  
of a dark red roof, prophetic lines inciting

the lone audience in his bridled mind—  
lips slack in passing or contemplation?

## LITTLE BROWN BAT

It must have sneaked, squeaking from the attic  
or piping down the chimney, into the corner  
of our living room and eyes, hearing echoed  
heartbeats like a midnight signal for refuge.  
Must have sensed warm-blooded laughter  
before winging its way toward Katie and me—  
the alto of its song too exquisite to notice,  
this companioned chorus ringing through the air  
as we switch on overhead lights and shriek  
at its fluttered pandemonium.

Of course, she flies upstairs, pulse coursing,  
entrusting me with the hunter function  
of my manhood, so, naturally, I protect  
fingers with mittens and practice swinging a towel.  
Stalking its hanging shadow, I scarcely breathe  
before the menaced prey. The bundle dangles.  
Closer still, claws grasp the wall  
in anticipation, thumbs spurred,  
fingers folded into a narrow fist.  
Its lofty-eared mask peers from a brown pelt.

Then, in an instant, I know Roethke's note  
that mice with wings can wear a human face—  
like a younger me, it wants to be sheltered  
in blankets and carried through the world.  
Under the milk of the moon, I bring  
the little brown bat into the deepest wood  
though it seems gladly transfixed in my arms.  
At first, when I let go, it holds on.  
It dawdles near awhile, apprehensive  
to splay its wings and soar into the unknown.