

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: QUARRY HILL

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My poetic project has been primarily focused on discovering the Minnesota voice that seems to reveal little, but under the surface, the narrative delivers a meaning that is not always obvious. While the simplicity in form and language counterpoint the mundane, yet evocative, imagery, my imagination pushes beyond reporting, beyond the farm and rural landscape, and deeper into the experience where the complex human condition and some of its taboos reside. As a collection, these poems work together to create a world filled with characters who struggle with an everyday violence and the silence that accompanies obligations and gender.

QUARRY HILL

by

Allison Rae Quam

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DEDICATION

For Andy Bloedorn

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Off Rural Route 2

In August I like to climb
the bale mountain, avoid the crevices,
and depths of hay. I'm my father's
priority there in the yard, every ten
or twenty minutes. But in the woods
behind the house, I am far off
in the branches, until the horizon
becomes sanguine, then dark blue.
I peer up at the Northern Lights
before he sends me off
to bed, where I cry for mother
to kiss my forehead and give
her blessing that I'll have pleasant dreams
of the worms I saved that afternoon,
and the sparrows that picked my toes.

Cellar

A neighbor calls my grandfather before heading over.
He has predicted a storm. His eyes watch the side mirror,
not the road. He reports a black sky, and avoids

talk of the greenness, the sign of what's coming.
Twenty of us walk down to the cellar. The walls and floor
not sealed with cement: a few boards for shelves

pounded into the dirt. And a space with two rooms:
one for the canned goods and water heater where
adults play pinochle and listen to the radio;

the other, a cave under the stairs where five
of us are told to sleep while lifted into the dark.
I hear an uncle say he can feel the wind move

across the land. I do not feel the earth shake or rumble,
I do not have a weather hip. But I feel the worms,
the charge of lightning forcing them out.

Not jumping from my place, I grind and smear
them on the child next to me, or on my own leg.
They find their way into my sleep.

About A Girl

All day, up and down, over each incline, each cleft,
he knew that road, swore he never saw her crossing.
I watched him reverse, shift forward, reverse again.

Or heard the idle engine from inside the living room
where his only son mixed a watercolor landscape, slouched
like Hank Williams. Or raised my head from counting

two-by-fours and nails for a tree-fort never built.
Or dropped a domino in crabgrass, ending the unruled game
with two of three daughters. I can't be sure where I stood;

I may not have been there. Perhaps my mother told me
while she mended jeans. The panic on that day
might've been a different day, another farm where a pair

of pigs broke from a pen, and from the locked car, I watched
the adults chase them with pitchforks. I remember
her bruised and bloated body under the grain truck;

maybe I was told that too at six. She was ten,
the family field hand rising at four to fill the troughs.

With My Mother Watching

She rushed into January without a coat
when I collapsed the fort, and she didn't see
him. She used bare hands, pulled him out
of the snow, pulled him closer to her ears,
to her mouth. His orange facemask muffled
any sound he might've made. But his eyes
moved, found me rolling snow for a new fight.

She turned to the house, my brother next to her.
She locked me out, my punishment. It was still day,
snow already melted in my boots, through my gloves.
Up the chimney burning maple covered the smell of winter,
the smell of diesel and sweat. She wasn't at the window,
never saw me jump from a birch into a snow-pile
or heard hardened snow-balls pelt cows.
I looked for her in the dimming light as I peeled
off my clothes. My skin became red and stiff.

Raymond or Jesus

He answered to both. He never offered any other, so we gave them to him when he entered our farm town. The first person we'd seen with dreads, the church ladies wanted to clean him up and send him on his way. But he didn't smell any worse than the rest of us whose freshly washed shirts and jeans already reeked of manure and work. He didn't spend time looking for work. He mostly hiked the rusted bleachers at the baseball field that closed in the early fifties when families no longer had nine sons. No one knew where he came from, if he was a Minnesotan or from the West, or if he was a mix of Irish and, we hoped, Norwegian. No one questioned him, at least not in front of him. Where he slept was a curiosity. Some thought he walked before dusk to one of many homes emptied that same decade baseball ended. Others believed he became the night, vanished into the silence of crickets and the last calls of timber wolves. The practical ones figured he crawled under a small clutch of pine. No one spoke to him, but he wasn't ignored. He received nods or raised hands. Maybe he talked a lot before he came, and now wished for silence. I don't know if I stopped him or if he stopped me before he held his closed hand above mine, laid a small bone in my palm. What part of the skeleton I'm still not sure of. It could be a vertebra, a patella, or even something larger worn or cut into this shape, this heart, this form of speech.

The Only Girl

I'm not steering through the rows or unloading
the crop, and my younger brother, barely eight,
drives one of the trucks, so I count stars
on the roof and turn my body from the field
to lose myself in the Northern Lights,
but the longer I look the more I hope
a brother or cousin will swerve into sleep,
and my father will then ask me to see
the cracks in his face and become part of the rhythm
of work without talk.

After midnight will he ask
me to join the harvest ritual and hand me a beer
when the last of it has been brought in?
I want to push the night aside and sit high
as the headlights creep and dip when the land breaks
from flatness, and scan for our dark house,
know the roof would no longer hold me,
waiting and clearing dew from my face.

What My Hands Can Do

Our farm was once full of cats, mostly feral.
I didn't like them, but they controlled
the mice. As with any farm cat, they'd disappear
under wheat, under straw, under ditch-weed,
and reappear in engines, in floods, in fans.

Yet one female survived. I knew her pregnancies,
guessed the date of birth, found litters in old tires,
behind nail boxes. I knew better not to tell
anyone about the kittens until the job
was done. Not that I'd be stopped, but convinced

to use a cleaner method. I thought about a gun,
but couldn't waste the bullets. Considered a water bucket,
it'd be quick enough, but I'd never done such a thing.
Down the road, an empty silo with a cement base,
but the fall, but the landing. As a kid I caught rabbits,

got them with a hammer. I even used it on a piglet
that never drank its mother's milk, struggled
in the corner for warmth. I chose the hammer.
It had to be done. I didn't want to name them,
then find them in pieces. I took no pleasure in the hunt.

Lake of the Woods

When I caught my first sunfish, my brother
caught my arm. He tugged the line without looking
back to where I stood yelping at each yank,
he couldn't connect my voice with his pull.
The lure pierced all the way, my skin like bait.

I hoped he wouldn't tear the hook from where
it had grown comfortable, no blood. My brother's
wrist dropped before our cousin turned to release me
with the pocketknife I'd seen him snap eyes
from perch and bass into his mouth, over his tongue,

between molars, savoring before swallowing.
He always carried it in his front left pocket.
The engraving of loons flying over pines
on the handle was nearly the same as our uncle's
Bowie. He'd wait in the woods and after

a buck stumbled to shots fired, would claim only the heart.
He cared nothing for the points on the rack, the winter
venison, the hide for walls, or the entrance of the bullets.
Later, he'd grill it, season it with salt and pepper,
and carve, with ease, the well-done muscle.

The Government Auction

From the highway it looked like a yard sale:
an oak dining table with two of six chairs pulled out
for people to test the comfort, flannel shirts on
the clothesline, a wedding dress hung from a branch
where a slight breeze would make it swing,
china on a card-table, and displayed in a wooden case
lined with purple velvet, silverware someone polished.

But closer, toward the rear of the yard, Angus herded
into other neighbors' trailers, and closer, the same
equipment my family used to till, to seed, to harvest,
in a clean row behind the auctioneer. No chickens
in the yard. Their heads probably chopped,
their feathers plucked, their meat added to soup.
No more rabbits to raise. My mother bought one

all white and another with brown spots the summer after
she had run over my kitten, Snowball, in the garage.
No proper burial, she flung it in the ditch.
Neighbors who raised foxes bought all the rabbits.
Before two under-priced Clydesdales led a hooded
carriage from the sale, their new owner, Mr. Rice,
invited me for a ride the following Sunday, past the pond

where I'd think about drowning. The sunflower-yellow
house, not twenty feet from all the buying, no longer
had drapes or philodendrons in the bay window.
The plastic deer that once guarded the front steps,
held the sign: *Government Auction, Today*. I was five,
the farm lost. My mother bought a sewing machine.

Home

Somewhere in the old-growth
a maple stands without half its trunk.
I didn't hear it crack or burn
in the storm, and I burrow my arm
into what I cannot see, the fine mulch
too coarse to be dust, the trapped warmth
like the smell of skin in the sun.
Light streaks through the shortest trees,
I reach deeper into the mix of fibers, catch them
in the quick. The rim of charred bark
marks my effort to pull myself in.

Quarry Hill

The night has passed. I am in bed,
not crouched behind the cat-tails at the pond's edge,
An old man in all white stands next
to me, assures me I haven't been at the park
for hours, but I still hear the toads mating,
the constant croaking covering the water,
the grass, my feet. I want to believe
I didn't stand naked on the gravel

at the close of day. I want to believe him
that I'm not in a hospital, I drove home,
turned onto a street I couldn't remember
that seemed right. I want to believe
leaves didn't change into crows,
the wooded path didn't vanish in the middle
of my walk, or the top leaves on the tallest
maple didn't burst into flames on a night

without lightning. He might be an illusion too,
the same one who for years has come to me
as a man peering through a window,
or as a singer in the shadow of pines, or as
cemetery wind that actually made me laugh.
He touches my nose. I want to believe
he is more, but not think he is god.

As He Walks

I too walk across the blue
landscape. I am him.
Of course it's night,
a full moon,
and the quarry is empty.
I walk to the wood bridge
in a stride of purpose.
I'm tall tonight
wearing the uniform
of a patient, blue on black.
I prepare to sway in the ravine.

Setting the Scene for a Murder

I'll smash windows that escaped fallen branches,
pour raspberry soda on maple floors to age
a darker stain, push holes through drywall,
slice a cushion. This house isn't mine
or anyone's. No one's lived here as long
as I've lived, just another ruin of the country.
Someone else will trespass without
really trespassing, since it barely claims
to be private property with mushrooms
and mold, a roof made of beams and nests.
Someone else will come, see the stain, the human
damage, tell a story not of adultery
or bankruptcy. Then others will come.
No one will remember who lived here,
if they gave in to the land, or gave in to the bank,
but it'll be fact that who slept here
lies under the meadow near the door.

White Cliffs

In the night, the Luftwaffe bombs the Royal Inn,
its steel crown pressed beneath dust and rock. Seven days
later my grandfather, one of five, is assigned
to sift through the remnants for bodies. Over coffee
he reports the north and east walls stand with a view
of six floors, with burnt carpet and preserved blue wallpaper,
the other walls in a pile of beds, metal, stone, and glass.
This hotel is the first I've heard him mention WWII.

Even when I salute and parade around the kitchen
in his uniform, the starched one displayed in the backroom
in a wooden cabinet, he doesn't say a word.
In the lobby where one wall fell, where he searches,
he sees the crystal chandelier, unscathed,
still catching light. Near perfection and so delicate
he speaks of it only once, how it lasted through the shelling,
and hangs there, and how he keeps the body
of a desk clerk, or a tourist, or a cook from sliding to ruin.

Amy's Pond

I am no longer an acrobat off
the diving-board. The cartwheels
and back-flips replaced by the shallow-
end with wings. I no longer want
the space under my feet. I want to walk
through water, not dive in darkness
where the pool becomes pond,
where mud softens without a bottom,
and branches close like fingers,
lock me in and wait for my body to fill.

Calving Season

I wait for work to bring him from the barn.
But I'm not here to watch his bonded labor.
Instead, it's the calves that bounce and leap
near cow's hooves kicking up hay, mud,
and manure. Their noses connect
with the electric fence. They lurch,
rush back as if they've already forgotten.
At the age of ten, my brother urinated
on the wires, and felt the surge

through his body like a sting from a hornet.
The fence is not a toy was our least favorite
lecture. But we made a sport of throwing
tree frogs, who could hit the fence five times at once.
We'd scrounge for the longest, fallen
branches to see if we could feel a shock that way.
In the birch trees surrounding the pasture
we pounded stepladders, and what seemed
like twenty feet we'd jumped, but further

up in the branches we were camouflaged
and hurled stones at trespassing trucks and cars.
Sometimes we used cattails, flung
by the stem so that the brown furry spike
would burst on impact. We even laid a plank to test
our weight, and snapped the top barbed wire.
After the ninth or tenth talk with our father
we made a new game, how fast
would his metal fly swatter fix the fence.

The Retirement of the Red Lake County Sheriff

Do you suppose he'll tell about that man, whose hand got caught in the grain elevator, said his sister pushed him? Maybe he'll write about that day forty years ago, his first crime, his first death. Some of the closest neighbors locked the husband in the cellar, he wouldn't give it up, so they let him take the axe down with him. It all happened in the yard. When her two girls were hit, the wife had been in the house. She heard them, rushed out, but rounded back when it was her turn. On the front-steps her hand didn't clutch the door knob. The girls were found near the clothesline, probably running under the sheets, feeling the coolness on their faces and arms. No dental records, but everyone knew their names. The sheriff stayed the afternoon. He chose to cover them.

Blood Cakes

First, stick the pig in the throat, hold the pail to catch
the blood funneling from its neck and dripping
from its mouth as it tries to gather small air.

The blood will clot, so stir fast, I heard
my mother say through the screen when I left
with my father who laid his weight on the pig.

Crossing back over the yard with a full gallon
and blood on my pants, I repeated the recipe:
flour, bacon drippings, pork blood.

I went to collect and move my fingers through it.
This, that covered my hand, was what I looked forward to.
This, would make the cakes sweet and black.

Elegy for the Dust on a Stack of Photo Albums

There's only one photo of our father.
He's next to a hanging ten-point buck,
the blood draining from the torso.

Where were you, brother? Maybe you
were searching the hay bales
for the best angle to shoot sparrows on wires.

Or maybe you had grandfather's hammer
hunting in the unused buildings
for the new litter of kittens. Remember

when I asked you how mom used to carry
her camera with the strap around her neck
and the weight in her hand, you just scanned

the pattern in the linoleum floor, and your voice
was like her eyes behind tinted glasses.
Remember those afternoons we picnicked with her

beyond the alfalfa field, where we sometimes
foraged for the caged rabbits, and past the oak tree
I climbed and scraped bark, until it was bone.

Her House

Not made of rocks, but filled with them. My aunt's a rock collector who doesn't know their names, who packs stones and throws out clothes on vacation. When she found shale, she was barefoot in the October water of Lake Superior, shuffling through the surf. Her favorite sandstone was a gift, rounded by water into a ball. She bought the wooden stand. In Virginia she dove under the shoal water for the slate. She only picked four that day. She won't say *why* rocks, but smooths her palms over the cold, perhaps to warm the water-rounded stone or to make a wish. Her collection, hard and lifeless, has cracks, uneven layers, compressed yellows, browns, and grays. I asked her once if she has any from Minnesota. As a child she went rock-picking, cleared the field before seeding, picked too many to keep. The rocks aren't displayed according to shape and size, lined on the windowsill or table to give her comfort, she says, they feel too much like home.

Before the Darkroom

I shoot the circle around the couple. A ceremony
without flower girls to throw dried petals
below feet, no ring bearer or silk pillows
to carry rings. No altar, no preacher, no pews.
In five days the groom leaves for basic training,
six months before their son's birth.

He's wearing his first tie, solid navy over
blue-brown checkered shirt. The bride in beige,
the dress too tight to conceal. They are in love,
I want to believe. One of eight in the courtroom,
I tell them I'm too broke to buy a gift, offer
to be their photographer, develop the film

and enlarge the prints. They agree, but don't want
the images. I lied about the money; I bought a frame
they'll never see. I want this private scene,
this shotgun wedding without a shotgun, this bride and groom,
face to face, his stunned, hers reserved, the judge
centered between their profiles to become art and nothing more.

An Amish Girl Waves

When we pass her the second time I almost
tell you the dream I had last night
about my first love's body, exhumed.
Not at all how I expected him to look
after the rifle's handle smashed his face.
In the dream, he looked the same.
An archaeologist explained it's normal
for a corpse to have convulsions after years
of burial. I held his hand, said nothing.
He told me to turn him over to death.

When we pass the girl the first time I tell
you I'll be patient pulling up walls
at the potter's wheel when my fingernails
are raw and my lower back pain gone.
We search for clay beyond lost
Wisconsin towns where the Amish wash feet
for communion in their homes, and a woman
finishes her watercolor of a phoenix.
This search is mine. You came along
for the ride, and for the first time you turn
my hand into yours, you turn my face to watch
a hawk not intimidated by crows.

NOFX: A Punk Show

This warehouse in Southeast DC
could be a barn in Goodridge, MN.
The floor sighs after each undressing
and a bath. Through the kicked dust
emerges a visor turned to catch rain.

The rafters are filled with people.
Near my calloused feet, more energy
than a full child igniting her first
firecracker in an abandoned farmhouse.
Bodies press and close me in,

like feet pushing deeper into pasture,
into the mixture of land where my father
labors his own show of pushing cattle
to shovel hay out of their stalls
and hose the feed troughs clean of salt

that's lost its flavor. He paid to be there.
His currency: children and a divorce.
With a pitch-fork slung
over his shoulder, he's caught in a herd
unable to hear the birth of mice.

Northern Minnesota

Grandmothers curse in Norwegian when they stub
toes, break china, chop a healthy apple tree.
Or swear, *Uff-da is living in Grygla*, where underpaid
teachers tell the kids they're not right for school.
Carrying the slop-pail to the pen before draining the pig
for blood cakes is the life for a farmer's child.

Mothers say Uff-da when fathers congregate
each morning in the café with other men who'd rather
pay for eggs and bacon than talk to their wives—
or when she knows he's forgotten about supper,
the black truck parked too long near a culvert,
counting sun-dried kernels and praying for coins.

Neighbors whisper Uff-da when you skip church
every Sunday to gamble in Bemidji, or when you
don't work six out of seven days like a good Lutheran.
You're at the lake not catching fish. Or say Uff-da when
they drive by afternoons failing to catch you locking
the new car in the shed, the car you deny buying.

My first word was Uff-da, I'm told. My mother drove,
while in labor, the tractor twenty miles to the doctor,
with my brother riding high behind her shoulders,
my father even farther away than where we were headed.
Ten miles south, a tornado. She watched it
follow the horizon, never nearing us.

Down the Game Alley

I heard about the raffle on the radio,
but it never said what kind or if bullets
are included. And when my ticket's pulled,

I'll stalk past the cotton candy
and elephant ear stand. Its front
white wall speckled with red dirt,

its flat tire, its tilt forward. And I might
buy a stick of spun sugar, but the first
one made, still at the top of the pole,

gathering gnats and dust. Or I might find
someone's fried dough wrapped
in a grease-soaked paper plate.

And I'll linger by the carnies with their calls
of winning their simple game of darts
or duck-hunting. And people lined side by side

ten feet from the target for hours
or days, so they can leave with a stiff
stuffed dog or bear for themselves or a lover.

It's somehow legal to raffle a gun,
but it's at a country fair with coveralls
wandering through the 4-H barns.

The only killing I've done is shooting
barn sparrows lined on telephone wires
when I should've been chopping firewood.

I watched their bodies hit the gravel hard,
some of them would land beak first, I'd sift
through feathers and skull for the pieces.

And at the chopping block, with the sharp
weight coming down fast, I'd think of the axe
hitting bone, or sometimes a knife—

smooth and sleek, and the moment of not
knowing if a cut's been made.
These people walking over sawdust and mud

drove by me on my bike. I waved
and smiled back. The drawing's in an hour,
I bet most of them hope to win a deer rifle.

I hope my aim is straight,
and practice throwing rings at the stomach
of a body or at the head.

Francis Dommer

If you ask about her face, I'll describe
a woman with the wrinkles and gray
skin of eighty, a woman with darkness below
her eyes, her cheeks and lips waiting
for someone's oily fingers. But I can't,
I never saw her. When she left
her apartment, I saw her shadow cutting
behind stairs. In the halls, I felt her breath.
In my room, I heard her ears tracking me.
If you ask about her career, I'll mention
an exhibit in New York, the gallery
now long closed, and how her work sold,
and sells even now at flea markets.
If you ask what happened, I'll say
she bought back most of the charcoal drawings
of moist bodies and hands that looked
moveable, that looked like bodies and hands.
And she tied them in bundles, shoved the stacks
into the Red River current, storing them.
And what remains are the mums and lilies
handed down to me as a pale watercolor
protected in a frame needing constant repair.
A gift left for my mother, not meant for children.
Where those inherited flowers that smell
of tomato soup and moth balls filtered
through vents hang above the dresser
have all the hints of a shrine, but they're not,
they're just not good enough for water.

A Postcard

I'm surprised the hotel clerks
didn't kick me out. In a Gulf War
jacket, now bleached, and pants
soiled from years of streets, I asked

for directions to my brother Leo's.
Then it was change, a couple
dollars. I got the finger, the pointer
toward the door. On the sidewalk

I approached two men and a woman.
Guarded at first, the woman
avoided contact, but turned her head
and watched me peripherally.

I told them about Leo, how he just
got out of prison, shot a man for a pound
of walnuts. *Ask them for change,*
I told myself. They listened

as they shifted feet in and out
of the gutter, the Chinese symbol
for poetry pinned on their sleeves.
I promise, I didn't ask.

Through the Reservation

I follow the blizzard. Pale oak
and birch outline the highway.
On my thumb, yesterday's news
faded like the bends and turns,
like Grandfather's warning
not to travel south this way
into Indian country, past

the only land Norwegian
settlers couldn't harvest.
In 1962, he drove on Highway 46,
down this road where a Ford
had pulled off to the side. He stopped
behind it. The men offered
off-season venison and trout

from High Landing, where, as a kid,
he jumped from the bridge
into the shoal water. As Grandfather
tells it, the meat had rotted in the trunk,
so he refused. But they demanded
pay for the use of their road,
and drove north with his coveralls.

It's noon now, no one's next
to me watching my jaw tense
as the approaching headlights
filter through the snow. Only if I'm
forced from the plowed
middle to the side without
traction, I'll stop.

Marked

Scattered over the hay is fur from the mother.
And two bodies with ears back, eyes closed,
lay in her imprint. I had known not
to touch them, but held their almost fur
against my cheeks, kept them warm,
left my smell before returning them
to her. When they tried to nurse,
she refused them, then used all her weight.
She moved near the others in the litter,
and I moved the two even closer.

Her Ninetieth Birthday

She's prepared breakfast hours before
the Holsteins are herded into pasture,
where they'll fatten for slaughter.

A fried egg hardens and a glass with a ring
of drying milk sits in the center of her kitchen
table, where she offers me frozen chocolate cake.

She speaks of a pain in her hand
while she rearranges a thermos of cool coffee,
half-melted butter, and Gala apples,

cut last night, too soon, before anyone
would eat them. She shuffles envelopes,
deciding which letter from her Norwegian

cousin will be read once more. Still in her nightgown,
she says she never wished to be the one who prays
in a combine cab at dusk, instead of in bed,

working twenty hours each day, and how
she's never been to Norway, only reads
about the fjords, the waterfalls, and the mounds

of snow like rain through the yard deepening
the tractor tracks. She wets a fingertip
to lift breadcrumbs off her place mat.

In D Minor

I ride in the backseat of the blue Cavalier.
The dark Mississippi southbound as we hurry the northroad.
Particles of dust are pollen against the sky.
A zephyr pushes its way
through the window, and blows my hair
in his face. I tie it in a knot.
He covers his eyes with a tattered fedora,
nibbles on my thumb. Then I dig in the paper basket
for the half-eaten strawberry to chew on.

Trade

The ladybugs appeared undetected,
suckling the stems and leaves
of butternut, marrow, and zucchini.
Without my mother's permission,
Butch sprayed pesticides. The winter
squash won't be infested next month,
Butch said, though not to me.
I refused to eat the boiled fruit,
the orange slop on my plate, so I
was banned two days from the garden.
Back in the dirt, I smuggled peapods.
I hated them cooked, but raw
was dessert. After ten long rows,
my pail was only half-full, a green
stain in the quick of my index finger
and thumb.

After the green beans
and peas were canned and stored
in the cellar, my father pillaged
a few jars. He carted them six miles
to an unkempt acre of decomposed
squirrels and tractors, to a trailer
with boarded-up windows, kudzu over
the roof and what was once a yard
now a meadow of dandelions
and fescue with a footpath
to Butch's door. Butch often drove
the gravel roads to our house,
the color of boiled butternut.
He never entered though. My father
leaned with him against a Chevy truck,
backs turned, and heads cocked
to the side as if sleeping in a backseat,
heading south on the freeway.
They talked about the harvest
or the flooded fields. They listened
to the opening of night, or men
on the surrounding acres who crouched
above hay seeds and examined dirt

pinched in their fists.

Once they let me
ride with them to the Grain Co-op.
I lengthened in the back; my body
ricocheted against the metal while we hit
divots and bumps, I thought Butch
aimed for the imperfections in the road.
I was grateful they didn't invite me
into the cab, in the middle, too close
to Butch's fidgeted speech and his laughter
that only laughed when nothing
seemed funny, and too near the space
where he once had fingers, the smooth
skin grown over the knuckles. They left
me in the dry heat, and passed country
talk with others about the weather,
hogs, and another drop in grain prices
before they went inside. I lay
in the truck, and heard these men speak
as if they entered the Mekong
by Butch's side, his only tour,
as if they knew which finger landed first:
the pointer on the right, or the ring
on the left, whether more sound was made
when the fingers dropped than a crab
apple falling six feet into an inch
of snow.

In the Ekelund Church
basement preparing the after-service
brunch, I heard women whisper about
which parent severed which finger first,
who consumed the most rage or Jaeger
and who held his hands and who held
the knife. At the salon under dryers,
women campaigned their gossip.
One insisted, he was born with four
on each hand. Another argued,
he sterilized and sharpened the bowie
one summer near the end of his drive
on the willow stump. The same summer
he chopped that tree from its roots
in the heaviest rainfall all season, the axe

slipped several times before he cut
a descent wedge.

When I placed
my naked feet without hesitation
on the plow's blades, I heard my father
in the distance telling someone the truth:
"Butch lost those fingers in a combine."
He forgot in the dust to shut off
the motor and propped his hand
too close. And as if by instinct, reached
to catch what had fallen before
he felt the injury. I wondered at his pain,
and pushed my girlish-fingers back
until they touched the wrist.

During
the summers and holidays following
my parents divorce, Butch disappeared.
I'd ride past his place: the yard
an unusable field, a shed rotting
in the weeds, his familiar truck
rusted and flat, and the path
I'd walk behind my father gone.
No one in church or in town
mentioned his name anymore.
The stories of his hands forgotten,
or, at least, no longer the talk
to keep the day moving. Now
the hairdresser talks about my father,
as I suppose she always had, who cheated
with the only whore in our small town,
who drank too much, who napped with his belt
in case the kids wanted him to play,
the classic figure of a country song.
But I only heard about the hands
of a man who wanted a wife and family,
who came as close as he ever could
standing near our garage, hoping
to be asked in for supper, but stayed
on the gravel.

I don't know what
happened to Butch. Maybe he found
a nice farm wife and has a family

five towns over, or died in his trailer,
or lives in Alaska where my father
once said he'd move. My father still
neighbors Butch's place. No one else
moved in; the trailer was sold for parts.
After a case of Pabst he tells his second
wife how hard he wishes for his first
and their kids, and turns his ear
to the bats, waits to be called.

The Family Farm

My father, from inside the cab, sees
his father bend his knee to the ground.
My grandfather gathers a handful of soil,
sniffs it, and watches through his blind right eye
a red or green tractor begin a new row.
And my father drives fast, turns his face
against the sun, hopes for a flood,
an early snow. He hopes for something
to break in his body, for a son who might want
replace him, and let him break the promise.
The promise to keep working the land,
the promise he can't wash off at night.

The Heir

I kneel where the plow didn't turn
over soil, bent in prayer like my grandfather
when he feels for water. He's the first
in the family to know all thousand acres.
He sleeps with mason jars filled
from all the plots he owns. I shove my fist in
to feel something more than dirt
and ants working incessantly. I can't guess,
or be right like him, if the ground is ready for seeds.
It smells dry, which tells me nothing.
I put a clump in my mouth. It's gritty,
flat, so I spit it out, and the ground
turns black. He will be the last
to wash dirt from the cracks in his hands.

Poet at Five

I could stay here with my family
and eat a plate of garden beans
and beef steak that used to be the calf
I bottle-fed. Instead I climb the roof;

a splinter becomes an aching line in my palm.
Crickets surround the house in the dense
pine and oak, where they are safe from shadows
and voices that carry multiple tones.

On the corner of the roof is one cricket,
I step toward the song. As the notes vanish,
I look for the middle star of Orion's belt,
as if the cricket's music comes from there.

Behind the Douglas Fir

On the dock her father built, we burrow in our sleeping bags
to water echoes and asteroids. August morning air
floats across the even water while Kaisie's house settles
on the ridge of the ravine, eighty wooden steps

above the Zumbro river. We hear a pulse of a hundred feet
on the home-made stairs, and the leaves are confessions
in the resurrected wind. Our only light is the torch
that stands unscathed, and illuminates our silent vows

beyond the traces of our lips. For one second
between heart beats, everything is a hawk's wings above
a hare. The leaves become monks and the feet give up
to splashing in shadows where our ears

soak in that chanting water and our womb
of feathers protects us from the girl that died
twenty years before. We count to three.