

## Real Farmer's Daughters

He said *You're not a real farmer  
until you've had cow manure  
stuck between your toes.*

It was the summer of shit.  
Of duck boots kicked off  
and slipping into the pasture  
in search of plops.

Black and steaming, punk  
of hooves and silage.  
It is everywhere on this hill farm –  
in the milkweed. The burdock.  
The birch stands. Yet

we come to it anew. Lush and vegetal,  
the secrets of the body. Oh Lord  
of Dark Leavings – we do not

recoil. It is coin. It is quest.  
We are stepping into our futures. Each squelch  
a victory yell unstoppered

with our feet. Toes spread wide, we sink  
in its beneficence. Sway  
with the dung flies that lumber,  
drunk on the fumes.

Seeker. Apprentice. We dance  
across the patties, and only  
the wettest will do. With time, these pies  
will dry to disks fit only for burning.

Not us. We are full of juice  
and mess. We follow my father  
as he drives in the fence posts,  
readies them  
for the coming of power.

Summer's end, we make a line,  
bare our feet for his inspection.  
For surely  
we must be farmers now. Surely  
we must be real.

## Report

So many things in this barn that could kill us or maim us. Hatchet. Handsaw. Long-bladed scythe. They hang, mundane, on the tool room wall. Not you –

smoothbore shotgun, farmer's best friend. You are dark in a lockbox with the other guns – service pistol, hunting rifle – that loom,

folkloric, in photographs. In my father's hands. We held you – or one like you – in 4H class in the gym. Our grade school bodies prone, we brace you in the bone

well of our shoulders, your comb against the soft down of our cheeks. We close one eye, then the other, make the targets hop like jay birds, in and out of frame.

Pump-action, .22 caliber. Just another farmyard tool – to scatter the juncos, the rodents in the grain room. A warning to the small things seeking shelter: *Not here.*

Everything about you is close range – you weren't made for distance. You must be near enough to smell it – all the little fears. Hardscrabble and furtive; the rout

at the perimeter. In the gym, we name your parts. Safety. Trigger. Muzzle. Rib. We load buckshot in your chamber. Empty it again. I don't remember firing.

And wouldn't I remember? That sound – a *report*, that comes as a bearing of news. Two years into my father's illness, we will hear it. We will think

he has done himself in. From the barn – a report. From my mother, a keening. Wolf-low and rising. An animal in the throat. So close, I can taste the unhomeing.

## Day at the Beach

Here come the optimists! Straight past the sunbathers, the children playing in the shallows. They have come to swim under the pier – the one murky fathom in a shoreline of blue.

That's the thing about hope –

you dive in. Right into the weeds. The pier is narrow, but the crossing endless. You'll never have enough air. Yet you do. One by one, you pass the wooden pilings, slick with algae

so you can't get a grip. It's a different world, here in the silt. Veiled creatures with gun-metal snouts nudge your hips, your ribs. The seabed a graveyard of shoes.

The hoops and wires of orthodontia. Look – it's Aunt Edna, still peddling her coleslaw recipe. And the boy in second grade who kept his snowsuit on all day when he forgot to wear pants.

We're all naked here.

A long, cold swim in the murk. In the weeds you link arms with. And there's something ahead that you can't quite see. A current you can just barely follow. You swim.

Until they pull you from the water. The sunbathers, the revelers. They dry your face, pluck the weeds from your skin. Gently. As if they know this is going to hurt.

## Father As Caribou Antlers

Not white as I had pictured  
but covered in green-brown fuzz.  
Rotting, the velvet sloughs from the bone  
like moss plucked from a rock,  
all snipped threads and partings.

*Rangifer tarandus*, also known  
as reindeer. We use *caribou*  
for the ones that aren't tame – the ones we hunt.  
As children, this is kept from us.

Mounted above the door  
of the bunkhouse, its palmate tines  
stretched in a macabre embrace; I must  
pass under it to enter your domain,  
the old door slumped  
in the jamb, clicks and scrapes  
to wake the dead.

And then there's the death smell  
that even a child knows, but who's to care?  
The bunkhouse, long emptied of farmhands,  
is simply a shed.

Sometimes it seems  
the stories we're born to  
are already ending.

By the time you could hold a gun  
there were no caribou to hunt –  
not in the Mahoosucs of your childhood.  
The herds had moved north, and when  
you could, you followed, journeys  
you set off on alone, coming back  
to us with strange provender –

feral meat, dark with the taste of bog.  
Of wet and dying leaves in black water.  
Mud to the knees. Frozen boreal forests  
with their own witches to serve.

Did you know that caribou click when they walk?  
It's the tendons slipping off the ankle bones.  
A primal echolocation that announces to the herd,  
*You are here.*

Sometime in my teens, in need of space,  
we tacked the bunkhouse onto the main house

and made it my bedroom. Years later I stand  
at the threshold, wonder what became  
of the antlers. The door, now true in its frame,  
is silent. I can no longer hear the click  
of my herd.

How far it seems, the journey north.  
Father. Hunter. Tines on a wall.  
We document what we can no longer hold.  
What was never ours.