

Spring 2019

Touch the Soil

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

TOUCH THE SOIL

submitted by

Kirstin Elizabeth Fierro, Class of 2019

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2019

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Foreword

I want to work into this foreword with a bit of a backstory. Before setting out on winter break this past semester, I had identified a couple of themes that had emerged in my poetry up to that point. I seemed to be fixating on my childhood and the essence of place, specifically that of my hometown, Ringwood, in the mountains of New Jersey, and my grandfather's hometown, Montella, a mountain town in southern Italy in the province of Avellino. Before formally beginning the writing process, I spent the first half of winter break mulling over the themes that I have just identified. I was lucky enough to spend the second half of break visiting with family in Italy for my grandfather, 'Poppy's,' one-hundredth birthday. I spent about a month or so in Rome and traveling up and down the coast before concluding the trip in his hometown. While traveling, I began writing short, sketch-like poems built out of observations and interactions. I began writing down words I heard or local dishes, towns, and parks in my pocket-sized notebook. This resource became a touch point for the poems I wrote once back on campus as I racked my brain to remember every last detail. The time in Montella was spent with family, great uncles and cousins of all sorts. It was regenerative for me, as it always is since Italy has somehow consistently provided me with a renewed perspective and a sense of gratefulness; hence, many of the poems in this collection are rooted there.

While in Montella, the day after his birthday celebration, my grandfather passed away at 12:02 AM, two minutes into his one hundredth birthday. Although this event was traumatic for me, since I was present in the instant he passed and then spent the duration of the trip dealing with the aftermath, it allowed me to become closer to his family—my family, and to the Italian culture and its way of grieving. In my eyes, my grandfather's death happened the way he'd planned, the way just about every other thing happened the way he planned. He had been

organizing and imagining the trip for years prior to his big milestone. He wanted a full circle, to touch the soil. The phrase “touch the soil” was one all of my relatives in Italy used when explaining what they found to be the motive behind his return to Italy before passing on. Italians believe an individual must return to the place, the soil, of their birth before they can pass on to the afterlife. Local newspapers in Montella and the surrounding towns used the phrase in articles about my grandfather.

Since I was very close to my grandfather, his passing was an event that I had spent a great deal of time thinking about beforehand. His death seemed to be a turning point in my poetry and its subject matter. I noticed a somewhat obsessive tendency emerge in the poems that were birthed from this period of time. Poems that I originally imagined to be about something completely separate would always find their way back to being about him.

But my collection, *Touch the Soil*, is not only a reflection on my grandfather’s passing, it is also about my roots, my childhood and upbringing in New Jersey, and my family’s heritage in Italy. Throughout my childhood, I spent a lot of time in Italy during school breaks. I also spent a summer semester abroad in Rome. I grew up hearing stories upon stories of my grandfather’s adolescent to young adult years. I couldn’t help but spend my own formative years falling in love with the country and wanting to absorb as much as possible in terms of culture and memories.

My grandparents began their lives together in New Jersey, where I have lived my entire life. As a young girl, and even now, I am mesmerized by the nature of my hometown. I have passed countless hours in the woods, which is the setting for many of my poems centered in place. This location is even more so rooted in my relationship with my grandfather, since he found and purchased the land where both my immediate family and cousins now live. Before he passed, he also lived on our street, at the end of the block. Throughout the time I spent with my

grandfather, my parents, and my brother, we were engrossed together in nature. This taught me to appreciate the natural world and to be aware of my connection to it. Beyond Ringwood, my notions of childhood are centered on my relationship family members, which is why most of my poems feature immediate and/or extensive family in one way or another. To sum up then, *Touch the Soil* represents my roots.

Following these threads, my thesis begins first with poems about my grandfather, starting with “The Independence,” a piece about my grandparents’ journey to America as newlyweds. The poems that follow are in chronological order, moving from my Dad’s childhood into my own, then to the loss of my grandfather and subsequent attempts to continue to communicate with him in my day-to-day life. Since this portion of the collection ends with my rendering of his final days and funeral service in Italy, it then moves into poems that are rooted in Italy. These pieces are set both in Montella with family and in Rome during my summer term abroad. Moving from summer in Italy to a summer in New Jersey, the next gathering of poems offer an illustration of my hometown, Ringwood, narrating both my child and young adult life there. These poems, still centered in nature, serve as portraits of my parents and older brother, conjured mostly from childhood memories. From these poems, the collection moves into pieces encapsulating my cousins and other grandparents, ending on a somewhat dismal note with the death of my oldest cousin Bart. The contemplating of his death is followed by three final poems in which I work to come to terms with saying farewell to my college experience.

In terms of the formal aspects of this collection, I try to think about the line and enjambment as a way of giving a thought space and then expanding or transforming its meaning. In terms of sound, this collection is more focused on internal sound patterning rather than end rhyme or set rhyme schemes. My poems are mostly free verse, although there is a triolet in the

mix. Throughout my writing process for this thesis, I turned to received form when I felt like I needed a bit of structure, especially when turning out so many poems in a short period of time. As previously noted, most of my metaphors are rooted in nature and connect it to memory and the rendering of the body. In the majority of my poems, I include bits and pieces of Italian language, and most of my poems stem from close-up imagery.

Throughout my writing of this thesis, I struggled with a few things in particular. For one, thinking of fitting titles was difficult for me, especially since I left the titles to last. After my grandfather's death, I became somewhat transfixed with writing about his passing. I think this was my way of expressing the emotions I had been repressing. I had to take a step back from these poems and revisit them later because they were too focused on evocations of emotion and removed from the imagery that guides most of my work. I forced myself to vary the subject matter of my poems, allowing some to be rooted in imagery while others were more concerned with the releasing of internal thoughts. During standstills, I returned to consuming mass amounts of poetry. I read the work of different poets writing about different themes in the issues of *Poetry* that Professor Berry was kind enough to lend me. I have always been in awe of Sylvia Plath's poetry, since she was the writer who initially stirred my interest in poetry. Once I began writing, I spent the majority of my time reading poems by Louise Glück, Monica Youn, and Ada Limón. I scanned their work for interesting ways of relating nature and grit to life more broadly. I initially gravitated towards their work because it also often dealt with place and a particular way of seeing into, and writing about, the natural world. I was also drawn to their work because it shared my interest in connecting plant life to memory and body.

For Glück, I had been reading through *The Wild Iris*. The collection's title is pulled from its first poem, "The Wild Iris", in which the speaker addresses death, a topic I attempt to confront

time and time again in my own poetry. The speaker commands, “Hear me out: that which you call death,” before turning to a depiction of that same speaker in nature, “Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting / Then nothing. The weak sun / flickered over the dry surface” and later, “the stiff earth / bending a little. And what I took to be / birds darting in low shrubs.” Throughout this poem, Glück includes the speaker’s internal thoughts, “It is terrible to survive / as consciousness,” recognizing a fear of death, of suffering, and pairing it on the page with bleak and then lively descriptions of plant and animal life, existing all together in the same moment. It was through my reading of Glück that I attempted to follow the same format in my poems: an ornate description of nature, followed by the admission of some sort of internal turmoil, and then the return back to a focus on nature.

In the later half of my thesis writing, I had the opportunity to go through a small selection of the poems included in *Touch the Soil* with Ada Limón, just after stumbling upon her work on an online platform that posts a plethora of poems for inspiration. I was intrigued by her poems included in *The Carrying* and *Bright Dead Things*. Limón makes gestures to the soil and gardening repeatedly in both of these collections, which was a decision I had subconsciously made while writing my thesis. I turned to Limón in order to root my collection’s themes in solid ground, uniting subject matter and imagery. In “The Burying Beetle,” she writes:

“And I don’t want to pray, but I can picture
the plants deepening right now into the soil,
wanting to live, so I lie down among them,
in my ripped pink tank top, filthy and covered
in sweat, among red burying beetles and dirt
that’s been turned and turned like a problem
in the mind.”

This passage differs from the one previously cited from Glück, as here, Ada Limón places the speaker in the landscape of this natural world, first considering the perpetuation of plant life,

growing and “deepening” into the earth, then personifying the plants, allowing them to have a sense of intention, being they want to endure. All the while, the speaker is submerged in nature, describing the movement of bugs digging themselves into the dirt around her. Limón begins with the inclusion of “I don’t want to pray” and ends with “dirt / that’s been turned and turned like a problem / in the mind.” This portion of the poem moves from thought to imagery and back to thought, similar to the work of Louise Glück. However, unlike Glück, Ada Limón is more declarative in her inclusion of thoughts and feelings. These instances appear in text as a straightforward statements rather than a thought that could move one way or the other throughout the course of the poem. She also directly names the events that incite her poems, which is something I wanted to do in my work for to the raw emotion it provides. It allows the poet and the reader to be on the same page.

For both of these poets I combed through poem after poem, clinging to their styles and techniques, questioning how I could borrow and transform their work for my own purposes. Glück, Limón, and Youn all possess their own ways of describing the same garden/plant realm that I revisit throughout my collection. Glück offers phrases like “great birch trees,” “cool rock,” where the adjectives fit perfectly, making the imagery more present in the line. Glück also includes an array of plants in her poems, providing me with the chance to research and then include them in my poems. Monica Youn’s work in *Blackacre* aided me in detailing the same garden or wooded scenes but in different ways. Her diction in words like “heartwood,” “fissure,” and in lines such as, “a rain-washed road” and “the roots go / ribboning down” helped me to approach the images included in my collection but with different twist, combining natural matter with unique modifiers. Ada Limón uses interesting verbs to describe the actions in her poems, in “Overpass” for instance, she writes “minnows / mouthing the sand and silt” and in “Trying,”

describes “I’m trellising / the tomatoes in what’s called / a Florida weave.” I hoped to emulate her techniques in *Touch the Soil* to root the action of my poems in its imagery, and expanding with an emotional connection to those descriptions.

All in all, the process of pulling together this collection has involved immense reflection. It has provided me with an opportunity to work through my grandfather’s death while also contemplating my love for Italy and New Jersey. I am now left to question what both of these places mean to me without him, and I am sure I will continue to explore this question through poetry.

The Independence

A cousin's wedding, June of 1945. Sicily.
Bluffs on the coastline of mutually adored shores.
Nanna, Italian-American. Poppy, pompous,
from the southern tip of the boot.

They took the immigrant boat, Independence,
built by Bethlehem Steel in 1918. One year before his birth.
The ship was four hundred forty feet long.
Steam Turbine engines, single screw. Nearly ten
thousand passengers aboard. Two masts, one funnel.

Ellis Island records say he brought five items of luggage
aboard. 1951. At sea for a week, two beacons of light
sitting upright amongst packed sardines,
refusing black bread and stringy beef.

The ship was scrapped in 1957. Fieldsboro, New Jersey,
about an hour from where they planted shared roots.
His were makeshift. Tugged by the peninsula.

Bed Joint

Your car sloped downward into the cul-de-sac.
The burnt orange Thunderbird matched
the clay bricks rimming the driveway
you and your dad had made the summer before.
Dad grew up to be a mason. A mason's son.

Together you laid a footing, a bed of gravel
six inches deep. Wooden planks. Forms framed
the border, the base. You square shoveled
in Portland cement, striking it to level,
floating to smooth, trowel to edge, cured
with a blanket burlap. He was there with you.

Now you're sixty, sinking
in a pool of nostalgia
as large as your front lawn
on Chamberlain Ave.

Your aching bones connect to metal knees.
Ears insist that the TV volume is turned up.
Full blast. Ash in your hair and layered thick
over your worn-in clothes. Cracked hands
and cuticles mended with *New-Skin*.

You remember him in flashes.
I hear you talking in your sleep.

Gardener

When you lived the sky was pink, swelling,
drenched with promise of tomorrow. Clouds
sputtered rain and pine needles fell in clusters,
shading the ground from sun luster. Your bright

light. I tucked you in on the back patio,
on a lay down lawn chair. You stayed out under
waffle knits and wool sheets until the sky melted
down. Transfixed, breathing deep, you lingered

in the backyard seeing what I could not. Saying
The river runs deep past those pines.
There are things greater than us out there.

You sipped cranberry juice with crushed morsels of ice.
A crossword book planted in your lap. You tracked
slight drops in temperature, deciphering highs
and lows of the day as you misread

the thermometer mounted on the stucco wall. *It's cold
for late April*—but still you waited, fading. Just before
the riverbank the garden slowly thickened with sprouts
neglected by your withering hands. I remember

when you'd wake up at dawn to pry weeds from crevices,
healthy ones with steady heartbeats. In the dawn, you
gathered intruders with wiry stalks, their roots dangling
from a clenched fist. The green buckets overflowed

before your seven to five. Laying bricks. Rows
of tomatoes dredged by walker wheels. They told you
to watch from behind the sliding glass. I snuck you out.

In February, I look for you beyond the pines.

Corona

Blacktop cracked from the heat of Paterson sun
while its fissures filled with sprouting grass
and dandelions blown astray. I sat on the stoop
fisting uprooted clumps of red soil, sifting dirt
mounds through the spaces between my fingers.

You scraped the crevices of chunked tar with that tool
you called 'the rooter'—a nail attached to a mop stick.
We did this for hours until the driveway was without
weeds and the sun sank below the mountains. Waiting
for tomorrow. I'd lie on my back as the tar cooled
down, asking why the sun was wearing a halo.
The sky is full of angels, you'd say.

Lately, my room has been glowing after hours.
Pearled light jolts me awake from sound sleep
as it seeps through my blinds, shut tight.
I'm moon-bound, flutter kicking in stiff sheets,
breast stroking hundreds of miles from where
we once lived together, where I've been threshing
raw earth for months. I still haven't found you yet.

Phantom Pains

I talk to you on Sunday nights
after the house has gone to bed,
when my skin becomes sticky
from the heat blasting overhead.
The thermostat in the hall is a hoax.

We shoot the shit until 3 AM
when I open the window all the way
as school emails discourage,
letting in sirens and honks
and the chirps of confused birds.

I let you go in the light of day.
Now clear air fills the empty space
a winter cleaning couldn't
fix, the void it couldn't fill.

My body has been cramped, limbs
aching to stretch, numb in early March
cold. It snows every Wednesday.
I squirm in sheets to fall asleep.
I watch the windows while a flurry blurs
the lights of the apartment complex
across the way.

On Thursdays, I see you
playing cards atop crushed pistachio
shells and fig remnant smears
on the vinyl tablecloth.
Your accented swears rattle
my brain when I freeze
like I do more often now

when my boss mentions
that pastry she loves.
Those powdered angel wings,
the one she hasn't shown
her grandchildren yet.
And I think, *shit one of my
grandparents is dead.*

Banyan

I wait for May, a setting spring, for a summer
knee deep in brush, in forest. From my window

I hear you wailing with bullfrogs in the gloaming.
They croak and bellow, colder...colder...now

warmer, inching me closer. Eyes shut, I see you
again. Your trusted cane of heartwood steps out

like a third leg. Its carved shape, snakelike with eyes
beckoning me deeper into woods. I can smell the dampness

of peat moss growing over logs in the creek,
of a small child's sullied feet after slipping deep

into mud. Fever that scalds day lays low, viscid after dusk.
Dew drops settle into the goosebumps on my arm.

You told me the last breaths in a place feel weighted,
tacky. They adhere to the walls of gray lungs, yearning

to stay put, trusting weak vitals to breathe once more.
In the end, you feel the molehill of every moment

prior, neglected in seeming abundance. You wring out
those seconds for their nectar, the sweet syrup of morrow—

the aftermath of spring.

Co-pilot

Tuscan sun set orange in between rows of finger shaped trees.
From Rome to Montefalco, I settled into the passenger seat
of our borrowed Fiat. Poppy's copy of *Heidi* rested in my lap,
its fabric cover worn, patterned with miniature horses. I slept
with that book as a child, in fear that it would disappear in the night.

Last year he lent me an encyclopedia of Italy's plant life.
I studied it all summer, retracing his adolescent steps
by train through the mountains of the homeland.
I've come to know the slender Tuscan lamp shades as Cypress
trees. I saw him every week meandering in quiet shade.

I hear stories of his lingering in the kitchen at home,
entranced beneath wide windows. His heavy cheekbones
slabbed under thinned skin and his broad chin contoured
by the beaming light of sunrise, caressed by the calm
before anyone was awake. Somehow Appalachia became
his Apennines. He trekked, committing trails to memory.

I think he was afraid that they, too, would disappear in the night.

Poppy

was a shaman
though purebred Italian.
A healer upon touch,
a raconteur. He told stories
of home,

of climbing mountainsides
with the country's last prince
out back behind the garden
shed where small rivers
of Aglianico wound up
to a peak,
where cattle wandered
down broken road,
without restraint.

In the damp hours
of the morning,
his voice rang out
like a chapel bell

gonging on the hour and the half
to summon me back.
In Montella, hot fog rose
slowly from snow mounds,
from the burning logs
of his old wooded town.

I heard the same tales
from the backseat
of his Mercedes Benz.
I finished them
with their proper endings
as he began to forget.

And it was beautiful baby—
he'd tell me.

January 14

In Verteglia, the trees
are rooted in the dirt
like rows of matchsticks
waiting to be struck.
Strands of leaves grow
sideways out of the bark.

Near the ravine
hollow trunks bunch
in the chestnut grove,
dipping their tangled roots
in freshwater streams.

In Verteglia, I rooted
the cutting of an olive tree
into rocky soil
to halt
my own splintering.
To make amends.

I hoped it would grow
to reach him,
since I can't anymore.
Crown shyness—
its branches
wouldn't touch the others
in the canopy.

In Verteglia, his lungs
drew in their last pull
of air. Did he know
all he's known
was over? Where
there's beauty,
there's pain.

In Verteglia feel it
everywhere.

Two Days to Roam

Honeysuckle at daybreak.
I've been awake
for burning hours.
Numb, waiting for you
on the splintering planks
of the back porch,
sinking into the vinyl
of itchy lawn chairs

while the souls of lost ones
linger for the last hours
of two days,
beyond the spaces
I have come to know.
Scarlet Tanagers
pluck hollow worms
from the fresh loam
of early morning dew,
swallowing them whole.

You are gone now; my eyes sting
in your absence. My ears
worry they will never hear
your voice again. The traces
your hands left have vanished
from my paling skin.
I tell myself you don't matter
you were never here at all.

Touch the Soil

I left my grandfather in Italy
in a cedar casket in the aisle
of Chiesa di San Pietro,
a saintly man among effigies
cast in solid gold, separate from us
behind their own walls of glass.

When I was young, he introduced me
to each marble statue,
showing me murals etched
into the domed ceiling.
I saw our shadows
together in the back hall
at his service.

The mass was in Italian
at the crack of dawn.
Pouring rain slapped the roof
while the Bishop slumped over
his white cloth altar,
talking about Pop,
digressing from the man
who was.

My cousins' voices buzzed
from pews behind me
until they drilled the coffin shut
with metal bolts and we all wept
in parting desperation.
There's a culture to death here.

Outside the church,
the manifestos mocked me
Si e' spento serenamente oggi...
(He has serenely gone out
like a candle today)
They hung around town,
in storefronts, on stucco walls

while his graying body
lay untouched for twenty-four hours
in the room beneath where I slept—
where I still felt him there,
when I kissed the firm skin

of his cold forehead,

where we'd celebrated
one hundred years
the day before. I'm selfish
for dreading his instant death.
12:02. Green skin sunk
not olive but sallow,
like a shriveled seed
yearning to be planted
in the soil of his birth.

I latched onto sorry hands
at his service, counting people
while shaking. They kissed
me, one by one, on each cheek.
We didn't speak the same tongue
but I know they saw him in my eyes.

Piazza Ferri

There are tipsy eyes
gleaming in the courtyard
and they all look mine,
sun-drunk from the feast day
on the mountain
and Ciliegino
in square shot glasses.
Small sweetness waits
for me on the balcony.
Chestnuts.
Cherry liqueur.
Shared blood.

Via del Corso

There are children playing
in the courtyard
beneath the shade of lemon trees.
Their grandfathers were the brothers
of mine. I watch them
from the third story balcony
while immersed in the fragrant clouds
of secondhand smoke. Vines grow
up the wall of marble slabs to wrap
around my ankles. The kids stutter
sweetly before English words,
knowing more than I do in Italian.
I brought them trinkets from home
because they want America
and I want to stay here forever.

Giardino di Tatorre

Zio is neck deep in brushwood
and twiggy fruit trees,
working the garden
with a gold handkerchief
slipped in his front pocket.
The sun barely touches me
in the shade of the tiled porch.
I gaze up at the monastery
as I wait for him and his bushels
of citrus. We squeeze lemons
into frothy water,
letting all the seeds fall in.
I see my grandfather
in his hands, his face,
trailing his shadow.

To Cope with Food

They gather on weekends
between cobblestone walls
with stalks of lilies and crocus
forking out from Terra Cotta
planters. My cousins
stuff casing with cured meats,
wild boar and fennel seeds,
while spooning
honeyed ricotta
from its wrapping
of parchment paper.
We palm Amaro
in brown bottles
that not even the sun
could pass through.
A *cin-cin* to him,
and to our youth.

Pearwood

I ate fresh pears at Roseto Comunale each morning,
peeling back firm turned soft skin
with my front teeth.

All the while, summer ripened into sharp heat.
I learned not to avoid the brown bruises
where the fruit began to russet.

The skin of the pear holds the most fiber.
As a young girl, I would buy pear juice in glass bottles
from the fridge of Conca D'Oro.

Pop and I would saunter downtown, two blocks
from our brick house in Jersey, for our weekly fix
of Italian newspapers and crossword puzzles.

That first week in Rome, I found the same pear juice
at Emme Più, a six pack of miniature bottles
with the green twist off caps.

I carried them up the Aventine and hid them
in the depths of a shared dormitory refrigerator,
behind collections of milky cheese and takeaway pizza.

I never reached homesick, never
longed to be anywhere else, but instead,
to exist in each moment for even a breath longer.

With a pear in hand I walked through mazes and streets.
I pretended to get lost in Rome the way he told me he did.
He said it was the only way to truly know a place.

Roots

No matter how fast I run or how long I go without looking back, these intricacies will be ruminating about in stale air

like they always have. Like they always will, with my parents in the first house on the cul-de-sac after I move out in June.

With my tired Mom in her worn-down running shoes as she drags her feet, packing my childhood room

into cardboard boxes. With my tiny girl hands beside my pubescent brother's, imprinted in the cement

that my dad smoothed out to cover boulders in the backyard. On the street my Poppy named in 1999, where my uncle lives

and my grandparents no longer do. Down the road from where my cousin's ashes were spread, in the creek

that winds for miles leading to the reservoir. Near the tar pad that wasn't there when my mom and dad dated as teens,

where they played bocce on warm nights in the soft grass of my now garage. Where the woods were pine, dogwood,

northern red oak. Where the foxgloves grew faster and taller in the wild. Along with butterfly weed, cow wheat, and culvers root,

as they tangled themselves in bunches at the base of great trunks in deer land. Where I'd lay in patches of moss atop cold rock

with childhood friends, telling secrets and tracing constellations. Where I'd run for hours beneath tree canopies, playing pretend

until I heard mom's bell at five-thirty sharp, calling me back home.

Ringwood

There is something to be said about
rain-stained tar, the way the road smells
when heat rises from its sticky, black base.

There is something to be said about
a sun-drenched dock and its hot wooden boards
in the middle of August.

There is something to be said about
burning your feet on pavement,
the scalding you give into
each time with bare, calloused soles.
And so they blister once more.

There is something to be said about
the outline of mountains, of timeworn pines
ringing your wooded hometown
during sunset when you realize
every problem has suddenly gotten smaller.

There is something to be said about
sneaking into the park after dusk
where a sign cautions trespassers.
You're a local, so you steal it
after midnight to mount it in your room.

There is something to be said about
feeling daytime cool into twilight,
about breathing in and knowing
you've finally made it home again.

There is something to be said about
our brief time in every place.

Prime Solstice

Kerosene lanterns rim the thicket of the yard.
Hazy mirages float over an electric blue lip.

Night inches in as day clocks off. Ink darkness
seeps through the sky, staining it pitch black.

Fireflies retreat from the depths of the wood
towards the patio, storming our bright lights.

Ladybugs cling to beige stucco in heaps,
each one with six legs and a different mission.

Gnats plunge into brimming glass pitchers,
swearing allegiance to sweet nectar.

Buckets of ale sit chilled in lukewarm water,
each bottle buoyant among melting cubes.

Dad's old records hum from the wooden Klipschorn
speakers. Depeche Mode. "Enjoy the Silence."

The synthesized beat meshes with the buzz of cicadas weaving
poisonous homes to kill mom's trees in a couple of weeks.

Mosquitoes pierce skin on bronze ankles, extracting
blood from red bumps we will deal with in the morning.

We aren't lost. We're here, tucked in between
the mountains, their trails, and red summer heat.

It is midnight, mid-July. All is ripe
and life is becoming more alive.

Gossamer

I remember September in the backyard,
we swayed to-and-fro with the late-summer wind.
Lying on our backs with our feet up like sails at sea,
I remember September in the backyard.
We hung wrinkled sheets out to dry, stretched
and tacked them up with wooden clothespins.
Rainstorms rewashed our linens as grasshoppers turned
up in clans, harmonizing through a sundown rinse.
I remember September in the backyard,
we swayed to-and-fro with the late-summer wind.

Garden State

Shadbushes flower white,
edible, berrylike
but only in June or July.
July is a favorable month,
favoring bright sun
for ripened life.

My mother is a gardener
whose son prefers the snow
under which nothing grows.
We grew up in the shade
of the mountains,
at the base
of the Appalachian trail.
Our childhood was spent
learning to hike. To scale
requires strong lungs
to withstand the absence
of oxygen on trails
in high altitudes.

In July, New Jersey
averages eighty-six degrees.

Our state bird
is the American Goldfinch;
the *Spinus tristis*
consumes a diet
of sunflowers, primrose
and ragweed seeds.

When winter comes,
their feathers molt
before they migrate
south in compact flocks.
I've had to migrate, too.

Songbird

She taught us to care for creatures,
winged beings with small bodies
and delicate, glasslike parts.

Detailing their curvatures
with Grumbacher brushes, her fluid strokes
caressed their soft shapes, mimicking

the fleeting sweetness of nature—
how seasons run, one into the next
before you notice their lingering ways.

She instructed us to scan branches
from the great bay window
with hand-me-down *bins*.

Birds plunged to tiny deaths, longing
to nest in the nooks of our living room,
their path halted by our looking glass.

Flying from the front porch, she told
us not to touch. Cooing to our feathered patient
in its pillowed, stayover box. We listened

to girlhood tales of her twin parakeets.
How she'd free them from their cage,
how they'd rest perched on the windowsill.

At twenty-two Mom gives me ancient curtains
of great aunts I've never met. I spend hours running
my small fingers over their thick fabric, inspecting

each stitch of careful needlework. Golden thread
bunches in knotted floral clumps, adorning
the only window in my third-floor room,

calling out, canary yellow.

Forget-me-not

Honeybees in the hydrangea bush.
My Mom plants flowers to forget.
She prunes when blue, and blue blooms
in summer. Last year's 'old wood.'
Her globe-shaped
children blossom
in rich soil. Sun all morning
to cool off in afternoon shade.
My brother never calls;
she asks me about his day.

I see Mom in the flowerbed
with her incubated milkweed,
those cocoa bean seeds.
Tick-like with dandelion fur.
She makes a wish,
tending on all fours.
Deep in soil she says
this spring she's saving
the monarchs
with clusters of little orange bells.
She asks why he never visits
and if he thinks about her, too.

For Mother's Day I gift her gloves,
floral print with eyelet trim.
A trowel and fork to match.
I find it funny when she asks
Dad for shrubs
and bulbs
and potted perennials.
He roots them in mulch
on his Sunday off.
I wonder why
I'm not enough,

and if flowers grow
better in the wild.
Unwatched,
I bet they're healthier
there too.
In one hundred years
we will all be
soot.

Daddy

is a mason, a wishing well
built from cultured stone
and cemented joints,
for the purest water.

His broad jaw opens like drawbridge.
He asks for no praise, requires no silver.

He opens for truth when no one's asking.
After three years he remarks, *that boy's broken,*
he treats you like shit.

In the night his voice echoes
like a cowbell, calling home creatures
in the space between Ringwood and Warwick,
in the plains where hills grow
into sharp cliffs broken by streams
of fresh scotch and canned soda.

My dad is a dried-out wishbone,
pulled apart. I always secure the bigger piece.

Paul's Place

Side by side we rode
in dad's mason dump.
His upholstery was holed,
hardware dusty. My senior photo
was wedged between the steering wheel
and dashboard glass.

The passenger seat was broken,
so I'd sit reclined, stretched
all the way out like the road
from Ringwood to West Milford
over the long pond
and its black water
peppered with fishermen,
their rods and boats,
where Dad and I would night fish
for bass, luring them
with June bugs.

Street lights lined mountain road
as it unwound
into flat land
broken up by lakes
and bridges and lots full of pine
trees. After Friday night games
we'd eat at Paul's Place,
the brown brick building
that looked like a mushroom
cap. They'd threaten to close
once every couple of years,
knowing it was an empty threat,
knowing people like us
would always come back.

Gore Mountain, 2002

Dad called on the phone to remind Mom about Heino's. The trip upstate. *The sales this weekend can't be missed.*

Our Volvo was packed with black valises, weathered from years of travel. Worn out skis on the roof rack. We stayed warm

at old friends' homes. Headlights uncovered blanketed roads. The cabin's storm lights lit the powdered driveway green. Mom hummed Simon & Garfunkel. We were bundled in the back.

I traced my brother's profile in the dark, our shared nose, how the skin in between his eyebrows furrowed when he murmured quietly to himself. My thoughts were simple. His were heavy, puzzling.

We stayed up all night under the skylight, watching soft snow fall on the glass in heaps. At sunrise, I trailed his hand-me-down jacket through manmade mounds. He was blue, glowing,

in a world blizzarding white. Dad shoveled piles around us, two snow angels breathing in stinging pine air.

Big Brother

My older brother came home
in December for the first time
since his winter break in college.
We figured he'd been putting us off.

On his first night back, he went out
to drink away real-life problems.
Rent, over-time, ex-girlfriends.

He festered in an unfinished basement
with childhood friends. Standstill.
All of that flat air and boiling blood.

He'd sold his car to Washington D.C.
a month before. Gave way to the Metro
and foot traffic. Dad woke me at nine
to pick him up.

I stopped at Goldberg's on the way
for a sesame bagel with lox spread
overflowing into the center hole.
The same sandwich we'd split
fifty-fifty as kids.

He plodded to the car from the front door,
same ensemble from the night before.
He heaved his dead weight
into the passenger seat,

leftover whiskey seeping from his pores.
Writhing the whole way home, his body
contorted in the cheap Honda Civic cloth.

I remembered the bagel and passed it over.
He inhaled it and said *thanks*. Around five
I snuck in through the open crack
of his bedroom door. Crawled beside him

the way I used to. I stayed for hours
as he snored. Mouth open, body as stiff
as a board in his twin-sized, little boy bed.

My brother thinks he's lucky to feel
nothing at all. Numbness keeps him distant

like the sesame seeds still scattered
in the crevices of my car.

Wishing Coin

I rubbed your back through fever. You shivered
into the wee hours of the night. Restless
heat rose from your trembling body
into the thin skin of my soft palms.
I coaxed you lovingly saying,
There will be another lover, this isn't the end.

You shut your eyes tight
and wheezed to breathe deep,
wishing I would disappear.
You hid between bedsheets
and our grandma's heavy quilt,
under the warmth of August
that crept through the window crack.

As young girls, grandma would lull us
to sleep with tales of wishing wells
and stories of forbidden love. Of tired villagers
uttering a dream. Sacrificing their last silver
coin into sacred water. For gods. For honor.
For a wish. With the hope that life would go on
after lost love.

I thought to myself, *it's a shame*
we want what we can't have,
and what we can, we don't want.
So I lay there for hours, wishing
I had a wishing coin so that you could
have your wish.

Troy, Maine

Aunt Trish had fifty acres to roam. Three horses,
one for each child. I always wondered why
my cousins had freckles and blue eyes.
They lived in a big, green house,
that was set deep in an empty plot
with lawn chairs waiting on a long wrap porch.

Their house was mostly wood, elm,
with hand-carved banisters and floorboards
that creaked when we snuck out, barefoot,
into the meadow of their front yard.
Bluejoint grass was yellow tipped, coarse
and taller than I was at ten.

My small frame sat pining, childlike
among the older ones. Jeb sang
John Mayer and played chords on guitar,
So much sacred in the month of June
beneath three skylights in one room.

Aunt Trish painted the cover of *The Maine Eagle*
each month. With pastels and oil, she rendered
midsummer Waldo County. Morning light
filtered in slowly. When we held hands and walked
through the forest, she showed me the same Troy,
calling each wildflower by name.

Lupines with their tall pink spires,
begging for sunlight. Asters, fireweed,
ten feet high. Touch-me-nots tangled
themselves in and out of every ditch
along the main road.

That last summer we stayed at the motel
in the center of town. Mom brought worn-out sheets
from home. I wondered why
Aunt Trish's hair was shoulder length,
She said, *The summer is for removing layers
and becoming anew.*

Landlord

On weekends, my grandfather used to carpenter birdhouses out of scrap wood from the lumber yard at his day job. He'd carve holes just large enough for cavity nesters: birds who needed crevices to sow twined homes. An inch and a quarter kept out starlings who stole small spaces. A deep box let the nests lie low, making robbing fledglings more difficult for predators.

Grandpa would check on his row of birdhouses at least once a day. They would hang, strung up on strings to sweet maple trees. He'd inspect each hand-carved home, evicting house sparrows who claimed the boxes in late winter. He'd put on purple rubber gloves and remove their twiggy tangles with tweezers each week. Sparrows never made for good tenants.

In spring we'd spy on eggs in the early afternoon when the mothers searched for food. Grandpa would lift us up, one by one. We had a short moment to watch since the nestlings grew cold if left alone too long.

Second Childhood

Her 1964 castle is wrapped in margarine yellow siding
like the I Can't Believe It's Not Butter I'd spoon into
after she put me to bed. A librarian's granddaughter,
I knew how the fairytales ended and when to pretend
I had fallen asleep.

9 Campbell Road, I'd tell my friends, *like the soup*
she still remembers on shopping lists, with English muffins,
sliced American cheese and Tetley Tea. On weekends
she'd watch the thirteen of us, a baker's dozen,
each grandchild with different hair and our mothers' eyes.
Her four daughters.

Out back we raked dry ground, sowing rows
of packaged carrot seeds, replacing water
with sweat and tart Country Time Lemonade.
With twelve cousins now, the dirt harbors
what we could no longer hold onto.

I sink into the arm chair watching her
bones shrink while her brain decelerates,
puttering to a crawl. I won't stop falling
until I can plant my feet
into something solid again.

My youth.

All Souls' Day
For Barty

Black tar, sharp rust,
angel dust from the wings
of your mother's fresh ink,
your brother's tattoo, too, needled
like your own pale arms.
Heavy blood, the body drop,
blue fingers, drowned lungs,
spirit up. Saved

ashes marks one year
gone. For twelve months
you've been listening
to my wishes, only granting
what's meant for me.

I thank you,
my own St. Anthony,
finder of lost things, of my
self—aching
for you
still now. We all do.

Tangential Thoughts

Swans fly in flocks. Triangles, v-shaped. Skein.
High in the sky. Mid-August. My room is hot.
Soaked in light, heavy on my skin like a thick flannel
blanket. I sweat under it. Scratchy brillo wool.
Pores enlarge, pupils dilate. Mydriasis. Absorb everything
I can. White clouds on a navy backdrop, seen
from an airplane keyhole. On the tapestry hung
on the wall of my cousin's room. What I suppress
comes out at night. In the dark. I read newspapers
that prompt anxiety, seeing headlines with my iPhone
flashlight: *Ponte Morandi has collapsed*. My fear
of death, of my own racing heart, of real-life,
of my future, of what I don't know, of 10 o'clock.
Do you know where your children are? In my dreams,
I have seen every person before. The mind does not invent
new faces. Every gesture translates to a meaning.
I buy myself flowers because no one else ever would.
The lilies on my desk remind me of home,
of my Mom packing soil and manure in the garden.
They will wilt if I neglect to water them.

What's Worth Keeping?

Your first name, strangely Scandinavian
since the letter K doesn't exist in Italian.
The last name you will keep after marriage
and before a hyphen. The stuffed bear
your parents bought when you were born.
The same one they drove back to hotels for.
Your Nanna's ring, your Poppy's chain,
his cashmere sweater you stole.
The tomato sauce stain you wouldn't dare
clean off. That hand-me-down coin
collection your Grandpa gave you
before dementia settled in. The one
you dust regularly the way he would.
Birthday cards and handwritten notes.
Matchbooks from dates and napkins
from abroad. Your old jerseys
from high school. The glory days.
Crumpled drafts and smeared sketches,
the ones you gave up on too soon.
The virgin hair your mother never let you touch.
Friends who check up on the things you've said.
That boy who makes trust feel easy.
The Van Gogh postcard he wrote you
from Amsterdam. The one you assumed
would be blank. Your miniscule New Jersey
accent. The way you stretch out
your As and Os. Your love of joyrides
late at night. The way you drive
with your left leg crunched up, the windows
down and AC on. Your insistence on keeping
the overhead lights turned off. The habit
of always making your bed. How you sing
every note but only in the shower
or in the car alone. The heart you have.
The things you feel—everything, always,
and all at once.

Forty-nine

Thursday nights after 9:10. Half shut eyes.
We squeeze eight at the dinner table
for four. Our living room and kitchen meld
into one with the Marshall speaker bumping
from wall to open window, ringing all the way
down the block. "Cigarette Daydreams".
Hall & Oates. "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac.
I remind myself how lucky I am
that my friends don't have trash taste
in music. Appreciate the classics.
Giddy smiles hover over a standard set
of Bicycle playing cards, shelled out
without the jokers. Each girl with seven cards.
Seven, heaven. Don't be the last one up. Somehow
we've bum-rushed into mid-April with real-life
gaining on our tail-ends. We're bracing
for the bubble to pop. Wincing. Do you ever really love
a place before realizing you have to leave?
We're never on time, usually an hour late.
We forget to turn the clocks forward. Reminders
to set alarms for work in the morning. Drinks idle
in ceramic mugs instead of red Solo cups.
It never takes long for a routine toast.
Someone professes her already known love
for the other chickadees. Clink, clink, hug.
A simultaneous heart leap. I keep them together
on the black and white film of Mom's Minolta.
*If we can find a reason, a reason to stay,
standing in the pouring rain.*