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We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.
—Willa Cather, My Ántonia
I.
Humboldt Fault

As children
we pirouetted, tipsy
ballerinas tripping
through wet grass.

The great fault beneath:
gap like an inverted lens
hidden beneath
square-shoulder fields,

a fact we forgot
by the end of
grade school.

Nebraska
hypnotizes eyes
with slow lines: straight
highway blurring
into horizon.

Lulled in the strand
of our history, we were like
the Platte River,
its mud sluice easy to follow
out through the plains.
The ready-made disaster
subtle as a shift in the wind:
unreadable, all around us.
Picking Strawberries

One in the bucket,  
one in my mouth. I ate them  
with dirt, ate  
until my throat was raked.

My mother told me I inherited a taste  
for acid, a stinging champagne.

The tender skin of my mouth  
dotted with red pulp, tiny seeds  
burrowed between teeth. A little hardness  
to occupy the tongue.

I would eat more as we left for home.  
I would eat as we washed them at the sink,  
hulled their stems.

Those nights, I dreamt  
I gulped, swallowing  
into a red hangover.

I woke. My mouth open and opening.  
I’d inherited a taste for air.
Ignition

Fireworks rushed their explosions, stumbling flung swatches of drunken color. The sky blurred, pink, yellow, red—a whirling slip of lights.

We thought, this must be what adults meant by intense: the red flare, a tongue reaching out, lapping from the clustered fuse.

The hillside slowly bent under the sky’s flame. Scorched paper sifted warm over our faces, heads. Tapping our shoulders, our parents turned us away.

We tried to shake their grasp, look back. In the firelight, ash floated like loose hairs; pricking our cheeks in the cooling air.

Riding home, even as we curled in the pocket of our parents’ stillness, we kept the night’s heat in our fists, ready to knock.
Grassland Antelope

He strikes the pose
of an inquisitive visitor.

Steady legs, craned head.
A flock of alert lines, still angles.

On the plain, a geometric pattern replicated
is a row. Divine the organizing principle.

Note: At times, beauty comes complete
with a roll-back lid.
One-Room Schoolhouse

We dressed
as pioneers: long dresses,
bonnets,
a pocket slate.

Sketching ships
across the waves of grass,
the lesson chalked
our hands.

Mimicking geography
we lanced the morning,
letting sunset seep
across the plains.

The windows
reflected our own faces
back to us,
such looks of desire,

we wanted to reap
whatever it was
the plain dresses
could sow in us.
Radical Blah

In every plains town,
all night trains whistle
a dark bell sound.

On TV, a pet weasel emerges
from between the bed and wall
again and again, body
like a little brown finger,
beckoning.

Outside, the leaves wave back.
The early autumn is
a basket to weave one’s hair into.
I ask for mine to be pulled.

Open the nostrils, tip the head
and the eyes bulge
from their sockets.

Boredom becomes
a bitter pleasure.
Over the landscape, then,
a cold red fit.
Physiography

Flatlands,
the pat of a hand
on your head. A good girl,
a slicing edge. Like a scythe
through grass you learn to love
the sound of cutting hair. An ingrained
lust for a portion reduced. You flat
your body like a white wafer
and you mean it to be religious.
Like a frontier church,
you give yourself up to horizon,
so being put in your place
is like a cross on your flat back.
Sisters, We Must Claim Our Origins

Grandma reads the horoscopes
so our eyes go wide.

There’s a white dog like mist
chained to the back of the garage—
its bark searching the fog.

The pond is stocked
with easy-to-catch fish who eat
table scraps, turn marble eyes up
through the muck.

Grandma says there’s nothing like the taste
of something you’ve grown yourself. Her fingers
and ours glisten with frying oil, salt.

In the old days, the men of the family
kept stills, carried guns. Now, we drink moonshine
in the parking lot at the reunion.

My sister’s hands shake,
but the taste is of fruit,
low register of heat.

We’re not children, but it’s easy
to believe in magic. So much of our wildness
cannot be predicted, though the rust on us
surely is a lesson to be read.
How We Came to the Hill

In that time, we walked
with silver toes:
a chorus of tinkly chimes.

We were girls, a multiphonic
band of gong—all echo

and a thrump: the ax slap
of metronomic heartbeats
ticking in the deep well of hips.

Though we allowed ourselves
to be led to the field, willingly,
we were heart skip, hiccup and up—

that hill, its one stop, its end,
our reckoning—deep
and purple.
Lover’s Leap Butte

Early on, I learned to love
the feel of fingers curled
in a giant rug, some bison fur,
horned head reduced
to a hump.

That beast was quiet,
but later, when I had my first kiss,
I knew the sound of dogs
was what I could expect.

They howled like tongues
whipping the grass. He and I,
biting each other
to keep warm.

I’d grow up, kicking rocks
softly, then pushing
the larger ones over the edge. As if
to test what reaction
the action of falling is.
Radial Plain

As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by someone very strong […] She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her.
—Willa Cather, O Pioneers!

In my 13th year, hanging
the laundry, the white sheets
were like blowsy dresses
and my heartache

was a new
nostalgia, the plains
the leavening,

grasses a long cry,
the hair of my later years
growing before me.

How I spent that summer
like Cather, wanting
the strong arms

of another coming
round me, knowing
that this too was a foretaste
of what it meant to be flattened,
to love like the dirt,
hard, packed,

how fertile then
not to know what
I would become.