

## ABSTRACT

Title: **Transplanted**

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My honors thesis project is a manuscript consisting of twenty-four poems. This collection of poetry reflects my transition from a working-class upbringing to completing my degree at the university. The many years I spent working in agriculture influence my poetry significantly, so natural settings and elements serve as a prism for my themes of work, the working-class, and the family. The introduction to my thesis project is included to show the departures from my literary influences.

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## Working and Crafting

I arrived at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the fall of 2013, at the age of twenty-five. The five years before this, I worked as a laborer on farms in the Pioneer Valley. The ten years or so before that, I worked in kitchens. I started my career at my family's market, washing dishes, baking bread, and making sandwiches.

On a Sunday in June at the age of twenty-four, on my one day-off from the farm, I was searching through a stuffed bookstore in Northampton while my clothes finished drying at the laundromat a few buildings down. I discovered a cramped poetry section, piles of books knee high in front of the shelves, and I unburied a collection of poems written by Seamus Heaney. One of his most well-known poems, "Digging," was the first in the selection. I remember reading the first two lines, a couplet: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests; snug as a gun." Intrigued, I read on to see what this writer was going to do with this pen, cocked and loaded, ready to write. Triggered by the sound of a spade digging ground, the poem moves smoothly through time, the speaker experiencing the two generations before him working, laboring with the shovel. While holding his pen, he admires them, "By God, the old man could handle a spade./ Just like his old man." Entranced by this admiration of physical labor, and the incredible and clear language used to present it, I read on and reached the last two stanzas:

"The cold smell of potato mould, squelch and slap  
of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it."

I come from two long lines of working-class, Irish Catholic families. My father is one of ten children. My mother is one of eight. Until reading that poem that Sunday afternoon I felt split, divided. I accumulated all the generation's years of labor within me, supplementing the legacy in my own way with my cracked hands, aching body, skinny wallet. And I felt my back beginning to hunch permanently, that was the weight of working, doubling me over. I wanted to finish my education that had stalled under financial pressure. I wanted to go back to school to give writing poetry a serious effort, but the guilt of not making money, of pursuing such an abstract goal with seemingly no definite end — I couldn't find a way to marry my ideal and my reality.

In Heaney's "Digging" I found similar complexities, yet he had found a way to take his aversion from physical labor and his propensity for writing and transform them. He took the conflict within himself and turned it into art that supports and evokes the rawness and truth of work. In his poetry he confronts this truth, "But I have no spade to follow men like them." He found a place for himself within his family by choosing to pursue artistic invention that allowed him to pay respect to the hard work of the generations before him. Instead of digging with his back and a spade, he chose his mind and a pen. Inspired both by content and form, Seamus Heaney's work has become one of the greatest influences in my writing.

Much of Heaney's content is concerned with the presentation of physical work. It is what originally captivated me, and in a sense it is what provoked me to explore my own experiences of work and its related subjects, something I would not have deemed poetry worthy.

In the poem "The Forge" Heaney describes the setting of the forge and the labor of a blacksmith. The first lines are:

"All I know is a door into the dark.  
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;  
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,  
the unpredictable fantail of sparks  
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water."

Within these first five lines Heaney evokes the setting with clear and concrete sensory images: "Old axles and iron hoops rusting" creates a clear visual for sight, while fingers can almost run over the rust flecks of the metal hoops; the "short-pitched ring" and "fantail of sparks" join the senses of sight, sound, even the smell and taste of the heat, of the burning metal, smoke hissing from water in a closed space.

However, all of these concrete images come after the line "All I know is a door into the dark." This line exemplifies in Heaney's craft exactly what I wish to emulate and master in my own. This first line, a single sentence presenting itself as a forceful statement, is cryptic, ungrounded, and abstract. Yet this abstraction is justified by the strength of the images that follow. The "door into the dark," originally somewhat mystical, now becomes an image that reinforces the setting. Heaney's ability to fortify abstraction within his concrete images

throughout the volumes of his work has made a definite impact in the way I try to craft my own poetry.

“The Forge” ends by describing the smith,  
“leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,  
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter  
Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;  
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick  
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.”

Here Heaney displays work and the laborer as both literal and figurative. Heaney writes about work as someone who actually has experienced it first-hand. He dissolves romantic notions with the description of the smith’s “hairs in his nose,” or his beastlike grunts as he returns to his work. In my own writing I find myself sometimes glorifying certain aspects of my days on the farm or in the kitchens. It is easy to embellish romantic aspects of work which can unintentionally deceive the reader while insulting those doing the actual work. Heaney is constantly avoiding and subverting this, and for me his work is a constant reminder of the importance of honest and truthful representations.

In “The Forge,” figuratively Heaney uses the act of laboring to signify his own craft of writing. Similar to the poem “Digging,” he connects writing to the act of working. In this instance, “The Forge” represents the crafting or the forging of a poem. The smith, as the poet, considering the traffic outside his workshop and remembering when it was hooves, may connect to the poet’s bitterness for the dismissal of the importance of poetry. This is similar to how the smith would feel about the dismissal of horse shoes resulting from automobiles. The last lines strike this figuration hard when the smith, as the poet, goes back in “to beat real iron out, to work

the bellows.” This last image is suggesting that the poet is still working, trying to make something “real.” Once again I am influenced by the way Heaney strives to stay a part of and close to his working-class roots by converging his poetry into them, rather than diverging.

The complexity of Heaney’s poetry is elevated even higher when considering his use of form. In this particular poem he follows a relatively strict meter of iambic pentameter. He uses slight rhymes that are subtle and surprising. As I experiment with form, in the way of meter, syllabics, and rhyme, Heaney’s poetry constantly challenges my methods with the way he addresses both form as well as content. Not sacrificing either, but matching them by using one to compliment and support the other.

This kind of expert use of form can be examined in the poem “Follower.” In this piece the speaker is watching and following behind as his father is mastering the reigns of the plough in a field. The poem is supported by a simple alternate rhyme scheme. Though seemingly basic, these rhymes support the content of the ploughing of a field. The rhymes, most of them perfect rhymes, go back and forth in an almost monotonous way, matching the physical act and the mental feeling of plowing a plot of land over and over.

His enjambment supports this as well, in the third stanza he writes,

“... Of the reins, the sweating team turned round

And back into the land. His eye

Narrowed and angled at the ground,

Mapping the furrow exactly.”

The first line ends on the word “round,” the next line beginning with the pause in motion on “and back.” These first two lines represent the hunkering of turning around animal and machinery, the last two, as the father is measuring and preparing for his next go, are cleaner and more exact. The

same content of a horse and plough digging, turning about, and taking time to start aiming to dig again is achieved in the form of this poem. From my own time on the farm, it is hard not to picture the white space above and below each line as little furrows stretching across the page.

As much as I learn from dissecting and closely exploring the form and content of Heaney, I must also take a step back and admire the way he structures his books and certain poems. The poem “A Lough Neagh Sequence,” contains seven different titled sections, and some of those sections also have up to four subsections within them. Each section follows its own set form, some relating closely to others, while some stand out on their own. By adding these sections, the poem is separated into blocks similar to chapters, creating a narrative within this poem. Each section also grants the poet a change in form to support the particular content of that section. In this way, complexities of a subject may be broken down into different elements and displayed in the most effective and creative way. Though they are divided, they still are able to collaborate and keep supporting the poem’s purpose and content. Through countless examples Heaney has shown me the multitudes in which a poem can be structured to complement both content and form of the subject matter.

Now, as I write and continue to craft my poetry with serious intention, that June day in the bookstore still remains vivid. It was not magical. I did not find Seamus Heaney’s poetry and suddenly I was enrolled at the university, retiring my harvest knife and work boots, instantly dedicating all my time to studying and writing. After that day I worked on the farm for another year and half. Even when I was enrolled in my first year of school I still could not help working half-time at the farm. The day is vivid because I saw what Heaney had done. Beyond the incredible poems that Heaney created and which I am constantly pulling from for the form, the

content, the structure — I see, how through his poetic art he was able reconcile in himself such radically different aspects of his individuality.

Many people rightfully honor what he has created by examining his form and his content, understanding on an analytical level the complexity of his relationship between poetry and his heritage of physical labor. For me, I am also closely connected with how challenging it is to forge that relationship within oneself. I too can look back at generations before me and feel the sweat, still warm, of my parents and grandparents and even farther, mingling with the anxiety in the devotion to pursue the art of poetry. That day is vivid because it was when I began realizing I could choose to merge and transform my divided self. I could take the work of the generations of laborers in my family, in the present and from past, and attempt to communicate these efforts and sacrifices. With the same intensity and craftsmanship they embodied, I could attempt to develop and represent their labor through my craft.

**Rainbow**

I need you like rain needs cement.

Drops splattering against the street's asphalt,  
no one noticing the curb's shine. Blunted, the clouds  
blundering about dull and uneven, slow  
in a still-like slumber. That's how I need you,  
like a slap against pavement.

Drying up, clouds retreating,  
the rain is devoured by starving sunrays,  
in the flurry of the feast  
dark spots under the truck, overlooked.

The pickup's frame shedding  
skin in amber specks.  
The blemishes rot the muffler,  
amplifying the engine's chokes,  
forging a corroded trumpet of rusted metal  
exhausted and singing this coarse song:

I need you like someone who needs  
a rainbow, but instead settles on the colors  
in an oil-slicked puddle.

## **Transplanting**

Clutched between my fingers and thumb  
a soggy root-ball dripping; I plunged it into soil.

The waterwheel whines, clicks, and groans.

As pegs puncture dampened ground  
my trained hand punches each transplant down

mechanical as the tractor's tick.

End of a bed, twist of my wrist  
shuts the valve, stops the water flow: Three rows  
embedded straight into earth's curving sway.

Standing on the headland —  
my back unfolding, opening slow —  
my wiry hands rest on my thighs,  
each nail dirt-packed black  
wide grooves cracked and split.

My hands, tools for working and crafting.

My family's unbreakable heirlooms.

My father's chef hands cut quick  
never slipped, handle held with light grip.  
He boasted once, "I could cook a steak with one hand  
while strangling a man with the other."  
My mother's hands have subtle strength.  
She can place six full plates on the serving platter  
mount it to her right-angled wrist, unmoved.  
Pieces of each infused, formed a mold for mine.

The tractor finishes turning,  
humming in idle, two fat tires straddle an empty bed.  
I check my planted rows, roots grabbing hold  
digging deep towards the world's core.

The raised-bed is blank and ready  
soggy root-ball clutched in my hand.  
I start to plant.

## **Making Space**

Shooting smoke rings

into the rain

is a small contribution,

filling up a little more space;

the rain can barely make room.

I release more circles soaring.

Hot jagged inhales

polished by perfected exhales.

I feel the rain

splattering my dusty boots

into paisley designs.

An April storm, beating,

reaching downwards

the impact kneading

ground and earth

loosening up tight tendons

for a prolific spring, summer, fall.

The white stains on the road,

left from salt crystals

ground and spread

by the red-eyed

sleepless plow drivers,

it all washes in milky streaks

down the slight grade

to a culvert

to the Connecticut River

making the sea salty.

The rains dumping, turning

the fields into plentiful bogs,

overflowing the banks of rivers,

leaving riches of sediments and silt.

I'm leaning dry and up

against the dilapidated shed

with the busy rain  
surrounding me in a roaring

hustle. My wet lips  
crackling like embers  
as they wrap around warm paper,

I deliver smoke signals, encrypted  
careful by timing,  
repeating the same message.

**Crop Rotation**

Alone in a strawberry field  
we tasted like hops, weed, tobacco  
and berries soaked in a June coolness.

I could see the farmer's wife  
in the light of the window  
washing his dishes as we left.

That field has been tilled under since,  
this year's yield is winter squash

a tangle of spiked vines and foliage  
scattering pale lumps across the field  
leaving no easy place to lay.

**Down to the River**

Overflowing from the bar  
into the Connecticut  
the banks rise for the mass.

Half-assed backflips  
smack their sweat soaked skin  
against the tritium-filled river,

adulterating the water  
with cheap beer  
gin and tonics, it surges

— that skin emerges  
purified by the water,  
that same skin that grinded on skin

during dance floor congregations,  
meek skin faithfully succumbing  
under the green eyed glow,

that same skin is forgiven —  
that night's sin washed away  
confirming the choices

granting a peace

akin to drunken angels

slapping busted harps.

**Unopened**

Your frame is just a little timid for me.

Finding goose bumps and cold sweats

isn't doing it for me anymore.

You say, "I never broke a bone in my body."

I say, "Especially not that backbone."

You tell me what it feels like.

Feels like a sharpness in the chest.

Like chains or leather straps

pulling you against the wall.

Like someone is holding you down.

I tell you words like love and patience

what they should mean to you.

The thing is, it's hard to put a finger on it.

Pin it down, hold you down.

I spread these arms so wide.

Fingers stretched so they touch

back of wrists with the seams of palms ripping,

torn clean open.

Shoulder blades scraping over  
the back bone – there it is!

And my chest isn't unopened.  
Cracked like the earth down the middle,  
a fissure to funnel everything,  
lacking a filter, fragments cold and wet  
tumble down into me,  
every piece chips a bone or a bit of cartilage  
and it's like a symphony in each echo, each one  
opens me wider and plunges further  
creating one deep unbearable drum.

And you say to yourself "I'm a piece of shit."

And I say it back to make you cry.

**Fallowed**

Untouched for a year.

I'm full, sown thick

with clover, sweet pea, winter rye —

meticulous, organized, calculated rows

overflowing, bursting

onto dirt-packed roads.

Nothing is fallowed forever,

the cut of spades slices,

shredding my growth,

aerating my skin,

pushing outward life within.

Iron implements will drag

through me, across and into me.

Perfect lines sprout

bubbled sets of leaves.

They will rise into blossoms, one day

to be ripped back into me.

**Encore**

I called you “little song,” not opera  
not something loud in my ear  
not building, a collaboration  
commingling with the unnoticed sounds

living in the weeds or edge of the tree-line.

Your voice constant into nothing,  
raindrops splattering greenhouse  
leaving me dry.

Sway, leave all the weight on one leg  
letting the foot take root  
your own tune moves your boughs  
your solo: you dance, you sing.

You stop into something,  
bowing into unoffered ovation.

## **Farm Sequence**

### **I.**

Morning light cuts

a horizon of pines.

August heat punctures

the mist loosely coating

the green river, distilling

light in surface ripples.

### **II.**

Punch-clock pops.

Leather sheaths slap

steeled weight of blades

on sinew thighs in time.

Blue denim fading white,

weathered with soil and hydraulic fluid.

### **III.**

Noon tilled under,

along with anything morning.

Break-neck harvesting:

deft fingers, full-extensions of doubled-over

backs. Loose grips produce tight, full

bunches. No yellow. No slack.

**IV.**

A sun frozen above:

pick-list sanctioned slashes —

wax boxes built in blurs —

melting, thick globs harden over

under fingernails. Cases filled,

counts of twelves, counts of twenty-fours.

**V.**

Packed bushels passed

fast, dunked with earthy hands.

Cold water cools crops

soothing nicks and cuts.

Today, a fresh harvest: palletized, stacked.

Tomorrow, a diesel delivery: crisp invoices attached.

**VI.**

West, a sun jagged and halved

sets behind blank mountains.

The day begins easing.

Worked soil emblazes footprints like amber,

hardened imprints traces of the day's work.

The cultivator's perfect tines

leave beds scraped clean for morning.

**Harvest Knife**

Red, rust-flecked, unsheathed

a harvest knife rests.

Untouched for seasons

its edge still bright silver

sharp from the friction of the file.

It used to separate

head from stem

with a soft finesse.

Uncharacteristic of its kind,

it was gentle,

never once tasting

fingertips, knuckles, or flesh.

Once it separated a snake,

head from stem

but usually shied

the nature of that.

The initials carved

in its wooden handle almost gone,

polished smooth with each stroke.

The blade, buried  
half an inch deep  
into a tobacco barn's wooden post,  
eager for work.

## **Kapa'a Beach Park**

We jumped off lava rock, ocean surge  
washed grittiness from pores  
sea salt sanded us smooth. That rock when wet  
became an exact black. Pink-fleshed, our feet

diluted the hard lava, each damp pair  
stamped and darkened it, leaving white outlines.  
I'd watch them fade, seemingly sucked under  
expansive lava fields, drawn towards faint

and final flickers of the hotspot below.

Locals named this rock-type "lapahoehoe."

Bordering the island, it rippled and  
dipped, a silhouette of the ocean.

The local in the morning who came to shake

our tent never once said that word to us.

He said "camping permit," "fines," and "haole."

We pulled our warped stakes from stony earth

the camp collapsed, the ranger left.

Boiling coffee over a fire

of mesquite branches, feral cat moans matched  
each mongoose hiss: battle cries, tooth and claw

clashed harsh, scattered scraps were victor's spoils.

Watching these invaders pillage, we sat—  
bathing suits starched stiff from yesterday's sea salt—  
laughing. A clear day, so we stared at Maui:

the shadowed, uninhabitable side  
was lit and streaked by whales spouts. Birthing grounds  
between isles, these visitors would teach  
calves to breathe, to breach, to swim, and to leave.

Shaded in our broken camp we still sweat.  
Flinging dregs aside, equipping sandals  
pierced with mesquite barbs, we hop-scotch walked  
tides of lava, then dropped off island's edge.

**Sancho**

Pedro told me Sancho was home

— invading my chamber

making my girl come

sleeping in my clothes — as I labor

out in the heat of the field,

black resin fingers stringing tomatoes

buckling under August's yield.

A curious cuckold, I asked, "how could you know

this man Sancho is not something contrived?"

As a noon sun hit a gold tooth

he laughed "no llores, don't cry"

cursing me forever with an unwanted truth:

"Sancho, my friend, is you, Sancho is me"

Sancho is an establishment, in every country.

**Our Garden Shivers**

Our garden shivers  
beneath winter cold evening,  
blossoms freeze empty.

Crystalized and stiff  
shrubs of sage and thyme shatter,  
the wind sweeps up fine.

Tomato twine droops low  
cradling weightless nightshades,  
frost warping wood stakes.

Woodstove heats our house,  
rigid wet socks dry slow, soft,  
while outside tightens.

Iced skies yet to flake,  
our garden, a frozen-scape  
uninterrupted.

Forgotten, buried,  
void of ritual —  
our garden stops

**Farm Sonnet**

Romaine lettuce

green curly kale

red boston lettuce

red russian kale

green leaf lettuce

lacinato kale

red leaf lettuce

red curly kale

collard

cauliflower

broccoli

beet

sungold tomato

peach

**7:30 a.m.**

The phone rang.

My brother on the other side.

The pause before he spoke: emptiness siphoning pain.

Eventually his gruff voice said our friend had died,

overdosed on heroin.

A face flashed I remembered as hers

then slowly another, others fallen dead by syringe.

My brother hung up. I felt a small bite at my nerves.

Grasping numb hands at wakes, hooking arms at funerals.

Mid-November wind hurtling over cemetery stones.

Gazing, tracing names on weathered granite. The mother's cry is guttural,

interrupting my body's trance. Surrounded, we leave her alone.

They say later, "You're a rock, how'd you never crumble?"

Obligated, I joke, "A rock? I'd say, more like pebble."

**Stone**

“You look like a statue,  
a Greek sculpted from stone,”  
she said under her gaze.  
Glossed from the shower  
he stood naked in her bedroom.

Tight black curls clung  
close to skin,

a body cut and bare  
as worked marble,

his entirety tightened  
by the chilled breeze.

With no Athenian ancestors,  
he thought about his haggard heritage.

His name mythically lacking,  
renowned replaced with ignominy.

Golden fleeces, lion hinds  
replaced by blue collars, steel-toed boots .

Steaming hot ebbs from the shower  
hit cold fronts cast in through the window.  
She thought of him as a statue,  
she thought of him as hardness,  
he thought of her as malleable softness.

Worn cold  
cut and bare

he stood unmoved,  
heat from the bathroom  
pressing against cold air.  
Shivering, he began to dress.

**The Days Stretch Long**

Evening's arrival comes cold,  
my right knee throbs  
keeping time with the temperature drop.

A warm compress of damp comfrey  
peels away heaviness,  
strips it thin.

My sleep is sporadic  
difficult to keep still,  
keep in one place —

like untangling wet knots  
without thumbs,  
only teeth.

Morning, I slide my spoons edge  
into the soft stick of butter,  
watch it sink into my oatmeal.

An English girl taught  
me that trick, but she  
called the oatmeal porridge

she said my purple  
apartment was aubergine,  
which I thought was French.

She shivered that night,  
the plastic over the windows  
crinkled and puffed in gusts of coldness.

Eating my buttery  
oatmeal with jam.  
Stirring milk and sugar into my tea

I read, balancing chipped mug  
on my swollen knee  
between quick sips,

as it cools the  
caffeine kicks  
I keep rereading one line.

The sun rises earlier,  
days beginning to mature,  
the minutes stretched longer.

**Between the Seasons**

Walking up the slope of South Street

snow melts off sidewalk's edge.

In rivulets it flows along

the break-down lane

over rumble strips

forming miniature rapids.

Afternoon is ending

sun lowers the melt slows.

Not time for rebirth just yet,

time for defrost and unearth:

Fossilized dog shit

peaks out from slushy ice,

tip of the glacier.

Cigarette butts, extinguished

in a bed of snow with a quick hiss,

absorb water and swell.

Outside my apartment window

a dogwood will produce buds.

I imagine

their soft fuzz on my fingertips,

squeezing the surprisingly solid  
patient life inside, not yet unfolded.

Between winter and spring  
is a dead season.

The white snow is lifted,  
No flowers adorn it.

Between winter and spring is a cusp,  
the sun a wobbly hinge  
teetering from one to the other.

So we look up, not down.  
Searching for the V of the Canadian goose  
like X marks the spot. On alert, waiting  
with clippers to snip the forsythias'  
slim branches to force the bells  
of butter-yellow bloom.

**Welcome**

I need to be shaken out like a rug.

Flap in the air, crack in the wind

as bits of dirt that cover me

flutter over the banister

scatter in the air.

Then just spread me out,

exactly where I was before.

Let shoes and boots grind mud

into every fiber with hard heels.

Bring in the elements to tear and rip

apart the fabricated strings

holding me ragged and together.

Then shake me out once more,

Then put me right back on the floor.

**Service Work**

I'm here to be honest.

Not to confuse for amusement.

“Eclectic” to me means a  
hard clacking “c” that hits  
the roof of my mouth.

My truth may be hunched  
crooked like my spine, but  
it holds me up

I can wiggle my fingers  
and walk my line straight.

So lie next to me,  
smell the back of my head  
brush tips of toes against my hardened heels  
count freckles on my arms  
notice the pink, purple, white  
scars cutting in between.

So lie along with me  
as long as you can.

Yes, I listen to the clattering  
birdsong rippling over the grass,  
sip and sup drips of ambrosial honeysuckle  
while heady lilac-lavender spins my senses,  
but still trust me,

I'm here to serve,  
to dump out the butts  
keeping that ashtray clean.

Fetch drinks  
ice cold beer reeking of aluminum.

Walk the dog,  
scrape up the cat's dead gifts  
left on the lawn.

I'm here to give,  
a mediocre martyrdom  
barely a blip.  
Like your pints of beer  
I'm the night's first sip.

**Formal Wear**

I keep a suit in my hometown.

It's dark grey and hangs in a closet  
between a few loud Hawaiian shirts  
and my father's pea coat from his navy days  
in need of some tailoring and dry-clean.

In the breast pocket of the suit  
a stock-pile of paper Celtic crosses  
emblazed with psalms of our Father  
keeps getting fatter,  
a thick padding over my heart.

The suit is decent,  
from Men's Warehouse in Holyoke:  
made in Indonesia. Hidden,  
between neon prints of palm fronds  
and dense cloth reeking of engine oil and Kools,

my three brothers never find it.  
Sorry, guys. Get your own suits,  
hoard your own crosses, mutter scripture  
under your own breath. I keep it clean: creases sharp,  
lint-free, black tie rolled neat in the pocket.

It wouldn't fit you three, anyways.

John, Craig, it couldn't fit your swelled frame —

Joe, it couldn't possibly fit your compact, athletic one.

I remain the same. Despite all the changes

I always fit into that suit hanging in my hometown.

Just a quick press is all it ever needs.

**Familiar Flavors**

When he sat a cloud of dust  
launched from his denim jeans.  
A hip of whiskey's glass  
neck pressed a tight circle to his lips,  
not a drop dribbled down his chin,  
warm liquid pooled in his stomach.

He never offered me a sip.

Besides, I had my own —

I nursed a beer in a room  
so cold the glass wouldn't sweat.

A pack of Marlborough Reds  
snug in his shirt pocket,

he didn't offer me one of those, either.

I loaded tobacco in the crease of a paper,  
licked the glossy strip of glue, then  
mashed it between palm and thigh  
until it stuck, forming a lumped cigarette —  
the other hand busy, fingers and thumb

wrapped around my drink.

We could only speak a common tongue.

Words like Northeast and nor'easter —

anything foreign corrupted the taste

shellacked on our mouths; the barley mash

and bitter hops; flakes of resin-brown tobacco

stuck to teeth, marinated in smoke —

he'd clear his throat when unsavory words

spilled, mingled in and disrupted that blended flavor.

Drifting away from the talk that's miniature

was risky: it could become medium talk,

elaborate into enormous talk.

Slumped over our drinks,

backs curved with the same hunch —

similar, familiar flavors stagnant.

Side by side, elbows on the counter

our words malting, careful

and slow as molasses.

**Late October**

We worked in our small kitchen,  
quick. Leftover daylight  
caught in steam rising,  
sweet potatoes boiling below  
flushed bright orange, soft for the mash.

Red curly kale sautéed  
dark purple with ginger root  
sliced small and thin.

Carrots soaked in oil,  
sprigs of thyme, with maple syrup  
all hissing in the oven,  
sugar crystals burnt, blackened  
hard to the pan.

We drank brown ale from cold glasses,  
quiet. The kitchen simmered  
rolled and boiled, the smell of fall.  
The light sunk, gone,  
a new moon invisible in the sky.

I sat, wondering if we were prepared.

You laid out silverware, two sets  
clinking against heavy plates.

We ate hearty food

without speaking a word.

## Phone Messages

The other end of the receiver, a pause,  
an inhale, puckered lips devour slow  
and easy — cigarette, gray ash, each draw  
she pulls within will never leave. Years ago

I called my mother, checking in on her,  
my younger brother, little sister. Our  
talk — rhythmic stops, the cigarette drags stirred  
hard coughs for seconds, minutes devoured.

Our talk then came to me. Night classes, work,  
the bills. A pause, with silence. No hacked coughs,  
the cigarette stilled, strings of smoke still lurked  
— she spoke, her raspy words stung, choppy, rough:

“Well, money.” Pause. “You’ll never have any.  
Find another thing to worry about. There’s so many.”