

*Six Poems*

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**My Grandfather's Hands**

When I think of hands, my grandfather rocks  
 on the back porch with a wonderful  
 pipe and cane. Wine cellar summers ripen  
 three decades into memory—black  
 grapes in the vat, fat bottles and new  
 corks. I rush to his knee believing  
 time spills over.

Everything reeks in the space between  
 beams—brine from the cabbage  
 crock, pork slabs hooked  
 through the ribs, wisps of cinnamon  
 stick and watermelon rind, mash  
 beneath the still. It is in my grandfather's house  
 on Park, its number hard  
 multiples of four, where I recognize need  
 compounds the past, the vintage he renders like  
     some  
 withered Merlin, wise old oak  
 leg and peg teeth.

What he brings to my life is a kitchen  
 feast steeped and salted. It gels

on the rim like a catch  
 in the throat. Sauerkraut steams. A big fork  
 pulls the sausage from a cast  
 iron pot. It's a harvest night  
 when pepper moths brush the creamy bowl  
 of his pipe and he rocks to the flapping  
 of the screen door. I'm too full to know  
 all brew is memory, the small fist  
 buried in a great dark palm.

**Migration**

How we used to find grosbeaks, sometimes  
 a purple finch on fall mornings  
 outside our school. The mountain ash  
 brought them in hoards and sent them south  
 spinning with the taste of long  
 full days. I watched them all  
 through catechism, stories of saints  
 brushed clean by the wings of grace.  
 When they reached the town's edge  
 birds grew common, stale

brown as tenement shacks, mud sparrows  
huddled between the logs, old men

who lived alone. Sister Alicia taught us:  
“Blessed are the poor. They shall rise  
to the kingdom of light.” At night  
their tin cups clattered beneath the roof  
slats, their rag and stick rhythms  
broke my sleep. I could always sense  
their coming—a peg leg slapping  
on the pavement or rapping at my door  
with mason jars to peddle, the honey man,  
his beard white as sugar crystals

forming on a glass rim. Unlike the birds  
who left each branch worn  
chamois smooth, old men stayed the winter.  
They walked the tracks behind coal  
trains or dragged the rotting ties back  
to camp. I’m wake in the cold to press  
against the pane, watch the smoke  
from their cabins catch the streetlight  
glow and play with it, swirl  
it like rare wine, bright birds

rising. Because I stayed on too, pausing  
now and then at windows, waiting for trees  
to darken with another flock. I remained

that fall the housing project cleared away  
their shacks and the hobos packed up—  
a late sun bouncing off their gypsy  
clutter, jars and cans and stove pipes  
swaying in flight.

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**The Difference in Effects of Temperature Depending  
on Geographical Location East or West of the  
Continental Divide: A Letter**

I had a mind to begin by scraping April  
from the ridge. When in doubt, the saying  
goes, dwell on weather. Haven’t we been blessed  
with dusk, a thousand ways to grieve the sun  
receding? You must find spring a welcome  
change where little changes. It’s easy  
to spot along valley fencelines—the new  
calves, Hawn’s mended coop, snake-edged  
alfalfa oddly whipped against the wind.  
Rain doesn’t mean as much here. Pigeons  
clutter the eaves, softball’s late  
starting but words wear thin for clouds  
in season, the sting of long drives home.

At fifty-two hundred feet, torn buildings  
soar. You left before mines with names  
dull as Alice closed Butte. The big strike  
settled like copper rings on branches.

Cottonwoods wrapped around sewerlines to pop  
 them at the joints and dusted days took  
 root. I only mention it because land to us  
 is personal as choice, whether it swells  
 in bluffs, plateaus or Indian Corn,  
 we both know what's enough. Yours gives back  
 what you put in—grain, slim tops  
 of asparagus, early beets. Mine demands  
 something hard to thrive, a red metal core.  
 When it's gone, dying's less complicated,  
 slow, as one house at a time boards up,  
 another promise of work falls through, ground  
 that's left overlaps its people and keeps  
 them from the boundary of their dreams.

It weighs my mind to write this way  
 with sky in doubt, bringing April when gray birds  
 sulk in the eaves. There was more to say  
 but news is smaller on the page, neighbors  
 nice to lunch with, the friends we knew  
 still close. I wanted to tell you nights  
 are filmy and alive with bugs, invite you  
 for Shakespeare in the Park beneath a peeling  
 signboard, find a part for your eyes to play  
 out in stages or fold you like a paper star.  
 But I know what mountains divide, some  
 common ground unsettled. The best country  
 is one we can sow and leave with fewer words.

And the best letter brief, seasonal as wheat  
 or old town affairs. One that closes before  
 weather wilts ridges between with love.

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### The Golden Years

What a pink smell my mother's dress leaves  
 along the cupboard this June  
 morning, 1952. I watch her sprinkle  
 flour on the dough she's kneaded  
 since dawn and tire  
 waiting for odors to sweeten  
 the kitchen, of tales I know  
 by heart—one princess turned to stone  
 by a kiss, another locked  
 away in a tower, all those years of gold

let down. Outside legends flounder  
 in the heat, mineyards overrun  
 with buttercups, gravel  
 strewn beneath a battered sluicibox.  
 Yet glitter keeps me burning  
 to wrench it from the earth, hold it  
 hard in my hands and have nothing  
 else matter. My shovel  
 is only a twig that scrapes  
 the surface, while below me in a mine

tunnel, my father drills the damp  
timbered walls, praying for stone to turn

his life toward the sun. Between summer  
and November, my pockets fill with yellow  
rocks. I linger on the front porch  
steps to be swept up in a moment  
of soil and stubble to his cheek, the hard  
set lips, lunch pail  
banging at my heels. My mother smiles  
when she sees us, her eyes dark  
as old stories. We sit at the table  
for years, a single bulb shining  
on a plate of golden hot rolls.

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### **Ballad For A Butte Miner**

4000 feet down the Leonard shaft, my father forked  
drifts from a slab of bark and the beam shot  
by a rusted headlamp. When cables popped  
or caps exposed a copper vein, he mucked out  
the dream every miner stakes on deep tunnel mud  
caked red on his knees.

Load up. We'll buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing

till the Irish curse their green.

The war raged for air in '22 from the stench  
of Black Rock silt. Turned despair by '34 when  
stopes closed  
with a blast. Some dug the ruins for silver chunks,  
others a leg or son. Mercy had a name that year:  
Union scale, first shift down, round in. Round out  
the last one up.

Settle my ass. Buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing  
till the Irish curse their green.

Remember the Kelly cave-in, timber rot at the Lex,  
sulfur  
burn and shattered words that raise day's pay  
by the book. Lungs get hard after nerve goes limp  
or sinks into a bar mirror. Overtime, wage cut,  
time and a half, cut back, part time, lay off,  
draw your time.

Strike. Buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
The scab we string in effigy will swing  
till the Irish curse their green.

Miners choose poison like levels onshift: Silicosis,  
bootleg, gamble or bum. The mineyard thief who strips  
his fire from Belmont fence, dark corn bottled  
in pool rooms. Break out the best before cages drop  
the midnight crew, slush buckets block the crosscut.  
Pour the house three fingers and shoot for more.

Keg up. We'll buck the Company contract.  
Suck the guts from this bastard drift.  
Cut down the scab who swings in effigy  
for the Irish burn our graves green.

the winter slope. Love dies. You learn to flood  
the shaft that fails, dig for veins  
you have no stake in.

Aren't all claims ancient where we settle our remains?  
Do words come after flowers dry or white stoops sag  
in the rain? And life we drain from timbered drifts—  
will it still burn like the peacock rock it bubbles?  
There's little shelter in mines that work  
their own shift. No memory survives  
the short way home.

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## Homestead

Dog days in high country offer no relief. I hunker  
where trails climb to claims that turned the century  
rich, ore Cape-bound for Scotland like a dream  
of easy ways back. It must have paid panning  
the creek with stillwater eyes, snapdragons to flutter  
in spring. What words came after dredges tunneled  
through for greed? Did old ones linger for a nugget  
or sunday lighting up the ridge?

Roots and stone. Reason for returning autumn nights.  
Pictures yellowed under glass, faces torn or buried  
by the gray waste heaped behind, nothing grows  
when you find the road to town. Cold sky deepens