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“New Almanac” follows a young woman moving to her lover’s familial land in the Beulah community of Surry County, NC. She struggles to maintain her romantic relationship, while seeking her own identity within the landscape. In their first year working the land, using traditional methods, the lovers are surrounded by bad practices of monoculture operations and industrial chicken houses, but also homesteaders, the heavily storied history of the property, and people who actively reconstruct the supposed, singular identity of the rural, American South.

As I research, live, and work in this community, I am finding music in farm work, in Appalachian foothills accents, stories of struggle and success, and an overwhelming sense that the natural world is integral to identity here. I am convinced that Americans want to understand the context of their favorite tasting tomato and everyone, regardless of demographic, should have access to chemical-free vegetables as they should have access to art and education. Often unaddressed in poetry is the connection between the land, the uniqueness of its people, and food natively grown in a particular area.

In writing so specifically about the agricultural and personal landscapes within a single farm, I am uncovering the complexities of place: varied voices, historical and present, and the human longing to connect with the growing and the growers of food. I wish to write the bitter and beautiful moments of young people farming in the twenty-first century, and to rewrite the notion that our society has advanced away from the value of small farms and the people who make up these communities.

NEW ALMANAC

by

Nicole Maria Stockburger

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For the Man on the Metro Who Said I Don't Have a Southern Accent

I'll be your pregnant cowgirl
in high heels. I'll be your split-
rail fence on a highway, your crushed
Busch Ice thrown out the window.
I'll be your whiskey-drinking buck-
toothed farmer on the porch. I'll be
the shotgun in his hand. I'll be your trailer
park bar crawls. I'll be your three-
legged dog taking a piss in a corn field,
your pork-belly collard greens. I'll be
your spray-painted signs: *Bottoms Up*
or *Sugarcreek*. I'll be your church
billboards with *Heaven or Hell:*
Your Choice. I'll be your cocked fist
pounding the red clay of a man's nose
and get cash for it. I'll be your rusted
barn roof flapping in a windstorm.
I'll be trash piles burning, your
abandoned log cabins, your rough-necks
yelling at the game, *Lady's Nite*
at the shooting range. I'll be your old
goats agreeing, *We don't need no*
more bars, sneaking swigs behind
their wives' backs at the country store.
I'll be your banjo picking festivals,
your sorority girls drunk in glitter dresses.
I'll be your road-side tomato stands,
your babies sipping peach sweet tea.
I'll be your corn maze, your coal miners
asleep on the clock, the dirt on their
faces. I'll be your *Mayberry Days*
impersonator who goes to jail for disorderly
conduct. I'll be your yip-yawing Grannies
betting at the races. I'll be the tractor
you're stuck behind on a one-lane
bridge. I'll be your dashboard Elvis
sitting on the can. I'll be the mountain's
bruised toes jutting out. I'll be your Carolina.
I'll be the sound of the whole damn South.

36 Photographs to be Hung on the Walls of the Old Farmhouse

Moon's pale blade slices Hwy. 89 as if to say, *This, is the county line.*
Buzzards break a deer's soft neck. The ENTERING

SURRY COUNTY sign under The Blue Ridge and its blue
shadow. One long road stretches with truck stops, greenhouses,

mobile homes, the skate-park, Miss Angel's Heavenly Pies.
Like open wounds, soybean fields are ripped by tractors

before frost falls on the county. Mayberry lights another parade.
White mens' hands on their holsters in abandoned

smokehouses. Fifty chicken factories. Banjos
and the blistered fingers that play. In the front room

of the farmhouse, Cleo's dress caught fire. And in the front
yard, she took her last steps. The slit of light in the door

of the Ruritan, pulsing with music. School buses
with cracked glass. ATVs. Dented kids' toys. Car parts.

Early fall, webworms weigh down every branch. Farmers,
with knees to dirt, pray for rain. Cicadas and stink bugs, full swing.

Faces of this county's working class, eclipsed by rear-views,
on the way to Surry Diner for a beer. Collards the size

of an Egyptian fan. A three-year-old in overalls with a mouth
full of muscadines. No stillness in these woods, just the constant

blur of semis strapped with bulls leaving the county. Raccoons scratch
their way out of rabbit traps. The Mercer girl douses her burn pile

with a garden hose. A horse lies down on a hillside graveyard.
Twelve kinds of shotguns. Boys hidden beneath camouflage.

Hungry dogs crawl on their haunches as another pine kicks down
in a windstorm. Mallard ducks head south of a small farm

beneath Round Peak. The day he first brought me here, track
marks of the white pickup leaving behind some other county.

Portrait: Wesley and Elvina Settling, 1901

Before one of our speckled hens died and before
we dug a small grave, before
buzzard chicks cracked from wet shells
in the barn rafters, before the barn
and before its broken interior, before tomato vines
shifted towards the sun, before I cried
in the downy tops of carrots, before we made pickles,
before the farmhouse was a white smear
of paint in a gauzy landscape, before memories
of this place were filched as run-down
houses on a highway, before power lines severed
a view of the hills, before soybeans
and corn, before the logging roads grew
up in briers, before oak groves fell to farmland,

a man with a mustache covering his cleft
palate held his young wife's cotton dress
where it met her waist. He cleared trees, scattered
tobacco, while she hung linens across windows
and smoked meat on a slab of quartz. Nights,
they settled into love on a springy cot, her blonde
braids unwinding over her freckled back, feral
cats purring into the milky sky.

Full Flower Moon

May 21st

Sun burned scales into my arms
and I saw sweat roll

under your beard as we walked
to the red maple—the one

your family saved when they bought
and cleared the land. Between

kitchen and smokehouse, it fell under
last night's moon, barely leaving space

for breath. You said the task was simple—
toss away broken branches and pile

the truck for firewood. But the day
swarmed with beetles, ivy

pricked our arms, greenbriar
tangled our boots. And after you

dumped logs from the white pickup,
I stayed longer, staring at a green

bud beside the stump, still alive.
I took off my gloves,

gathered the soil with bare
hands, and covered its roots.

Questions for the Old Farmer's Almanac

What is the correct term for a gray, cloudless sky?

How many matches does it take

to start a wildfire? And whose hands

snap the first branch?

Why does the earth smell like snow

before we have a downpour? What is the zodiac sign

for Seasonal Affective Disorder?

How is clay formed? Will this be a good year

for carrots?

Is quartz common in my area? Is shale?

Is limestone?

What are my coordinates when I stand at the crossroads

between West Pine and Prison Camp?

How deep do walnut roots grow

at the top of Fisher's Peak? How many rips

of the saw

would it take to fell a hundred-year old oak?

How far is the coast? What is the name

of the nearest mountain range?

Official name...colloquial name?

Will I sweat today? Why does rain

collect in the field next to the creek

and not in the creek?

Is heat lightning real lightning?

Beaufort scale: wind ripping metal roof?

What if it's 70 degrees in winter?

How come a country windstorm

knocks down only one tree

but can lift

concrete blocks weighing down the greenhouse?

How do pipes freeze?

Do chickens like the cold?

Why can't I see the crest of Pilot Mountain

when I'm driving down Hwy. 52

on the way to the farm?

What of the full moons shining

through windows, keeping me up at night?

What of first light

on the horizon so clear and pink

I have to close my eyes?

What of fog on the highway

running a tractor trailer into a ditch

crushing thirty pigs inside?

Why does dark come so early this season?

How many hours of daylight are left

when I'm lying in the upper fields?

Taking Down the Barn

Gray-black boards expand overhead and it's as if I'm seeing
you for the first time where I stand below
the loft, though we've been here daily now, our movements
some kind of ritual: me, ungloved
and musing as I hold the ladder and you are pulling up boards, loud
cracks on the roof. Rotted wood
bends to the ceiling, nails creak. Dust rises. In the distance,
the difference: apple trees gain their first
beige shoots. I love the throttle of metal slamming the ground
and close my eyes to the sound
of crowbar's ache against wood. Warm afternoon. I shiver
still when these beams, blurred
in bright slits of light, lift from the fit that held them for years.
I can't tell if you're working towards the past
or against, bare-backed, boots sticky with damp hay and mouse
droppings. I want to keep what's left here.
Once, I photographed the dark interior of a house set in a bulldozer's
path, lilacs peeling on bathroom wallpaper.
I wonder if you think this way: how to grow backwards, as you touch
wood grooves your great-grandfather
set in place, each nail pulled loose a bruise we continue to bury
as we live here. Curving
a board, you find an empty bottle with WINE written in scrawling
letters. That one alcoholic uncle
I heard about, sent to sleep it off in the barn: *you think he had a stash*
I yell and you laugh, rest your legs on the roof
as the acres open their bloom. I'm split open. Somehow, a ripped
beam, no longer belonging
in this struggle, your body the beautiful force that broke me.

To the Kubota

Show me your switchbacks
on the mountain,
the fixed teeth of your bucket,
filling like a mouth always wanting more.
Let me lift myself into the warm
plush seat and make the engine roar.
Cover me in glass
so I can see the land come through
on all sides. Barren hills,
mud-heavy before snow. Or thick
with moss and new growth.
I'll clamp down the throttle,
muck up a foot of clay and loam.
O cross over the fields.
Tear apart the blackberry bushes
and withered saplings.
Keep flushing slick oil
through your gears and run
from dawn to when the earth goes black.
Slide me down your sleek
body. I'll press myself
into the caverns of your tracks.

Appalachian Summer of Rain

Your rivers drew me
up the hills to fields of squash
and tomatoes bursting, rows
and rows of heavy stalks
where I lay in a blue tent with a wet
mattress and worked the farmer's
ground. I held seeds in my hands
the first time, mounded
cool soil over each one, licked
my fingers clean, never
knowing the land tasted like ash
of all the fires we made
in the woods when I was young.
Appalachian summer of rain,
I heard you in the farmer's anger
over the burning of his wood-
frame house. *I saw the arsonist*
click the lighter, he said,
wrinkled face low-lit, the night I sat
at the small table across
from him, smelled his corn-liquor breath
in the doublewide. God knows
why I swigged, but after, I slid back
the jug on splintered wood.
Appalachian summer of rain ruining
my clothes, your drops tugged
my arms as I pulled carrots deep-rooted,
as I weeded on my knees
the same plot all day. I heard your cattle
moan for dry hay, you
the air opening in sourdough bread, pin-rolled
by the farmer's wife. You,
uncontrolled, in the sound of swallows
slamming the glass window
and you, the black smoke he used to calm
the hives. You, the slime
on my shoulders as I cleared soaked vines.
You, the reason sweat rolling
my hot spine makes me shiver, even now,
in this summer of drought.

Midsummer Day

June 24th

From the window's fogged convex
I watch him trellis lima beans, pull

tight their girlish hair to twine
on T-posts, his browned shoulders sweating

in overcast heat. He weaves around vines
with spotted arms and I remember

how I used to know bruised swans
intimately. Beaks, undressed in cool

banks of the lake, cream-colored
feathers spit with dirt and their own blood.

Now, slate clouds scratch the sky
like peeling wallpaper and my love makes

his way across the fields, though I never
know when he comes to me and when

he seeks shelter from the cracking
sound of leaves against the wind.

The Ground that Gave

That summer was a heavy
feeder, insatiable, sunk its grit
into our arms. Black flies clotted

the corners of our eyelids
as we walked the fields, pulled weeds
from our long hair, cut through

fallen branches. Chewing on their fill
of Buttercrunch, rabbits ran loose
to their hidings, left scars

marking the orchard. The ground
gave us scarlet beets, Swiss
Chard, beans, and we fed

and worked it, churned from clod
to soft silt, early April. We felt
our bodies pull towards the call

of red-winged blackbirds
in that plot of land and smoke.
The ground wouldn't quench our thirst

when lightning streaked the sky so full
the throats of toads burst, cows cried
in the open valley. We rushed our hands

to mud after rain finally fell, dipped
and smeared ourselves.
We touched the ground to our lips.

Full Harvest Moon

September 16th

I didn't know what it takes for love, its bruises,
your hands, swollen as if stung by bees

when the seasons change. Early evening,
your red, peeling fingers are freed

from gloves after sawing dead branches,
hauling manure, planting bitter herbs

and greens. I didn't know I hold darkness
against me like seeds in an apron to set

by moonlight. Was it the day you smashed
rotten tomatoes wine-red against the barn,

yelled like my father at the buzzard
roosting the rafters? Was it when our neighbor

broke the deal, showed up to plant soybeans
in the upper fields and I rinsed carrots

slower than usual, afraid to turn?
First frost, the pipes could freeze, a storm

could shake the power, and we'd have to stay
at the truck stop. Was I sure what I wanted

when I said *I'll rub my hands raw for you?*
I listen to tractors crawl the backroads, trucks

haul cattle up the mountain, and wake before dawn
to the combine's crack, but for now, all I want

is to lie with you on the porch beneath walnut
branches after harvesting the last of squash.

Nowhere, Beulah

Tasha sells amaranth in the booth next to us, which looks like dark purple elephant tusks, and duck meat she butchers. We go to her place in Lowgap, drink sparkling wine and cans of Oskar Blues. She reads our Tarot cards. She says my farmer will have to choose between money and doing what's right. She turns to me. *I see a big change coming for you*, she says. Sourdough pizza cracks on the clay oven. I think, that's what they always say. Tasha introduces us to a couple who lives in Virginia. *In the sticks*, they say. He forages mushrooms and she makes kraut-chi. My farmer hand-rolls a cigarette with the guy, says *What the hell is kraut-chi?* They moved from Seattle to live on the guy's family land. In an Airstream next to a log cabin. I think, like us. I pull her away from the guys, head spinning with wine and sheep-shit hanging in the humid night and ask, *But, what's it really like?*

Cold morning off Hwy. 89 at Brintle's Truck Stop. I'm twirling my plate of buffet scrambled eggs with Texas Pete. I don't need to believe that I can haul fifty pounds of chicken feed just that I want to live with him in the middle of nowhere and have permanent dirt under my nails. We watch the morning crowd fill up the booths. Mostly men in their fifties with long, white beards, sitting alone. Tired from driving all night. As she pours me another cup of coffee from a glass pot, I notice our waitress' name tag: MISTY. Misty's been working here seven years. She has a thin smile and dirty brown hair, pulled in a bun, and too much off-red lipstick. She asks, *Where y'all from?* My chest tightens. I know the answer, but I can't claim it. I want to be from around here, have a thick Appalachian accent, be a worker. He says, too friendly for 6 a.m., *We're from Winston! I'm starting a farm just down the road. Did you know the Yorks?* I want to get rid of everything that makes me look middle-class: this nice cotton pullover, a little dirt-dusted from pulling weeds; my jeans with a ripped knee, more of a sexy rip than proof of wear, but still could pass; my thin-band Fossil watch slipping out from my sleeve. I look up at her to smile or nod or squeeze her arm, but she's already gone behind the scratched metal counter.

Hunting a chest freezer from a Craigslist ad, we drive Haystack Road to its end. The gas light blinks on. Dirty swans float in a valley lake off the road. A semi with WALMART on its side. Retired tractors and rust-brown farm tools. We come to a driveway where we meet a man, glasses, cane, beer belly, big smile. His wife, shapeless dress, apron, long white hair pulled back in a silver brooch. She says, *It's just us now and he don't hunt no more*. Loading the freezer, the man tells us his plan to clear a view of the Winston skyline. *Ain't that just the American Dream?*

High summer. Sweet Sunrise Peppers. Unwashed Cherry tomatoes popped in my mouth. Crab apples hitting the ground. The sucking sound of carrots pulled out of wet June soil. Purple and white okra flowers. A row of Cosmos looks like a full sweep of stars.

He drags the space heater toward the bed. End of October, we've finally had cool nights, made a fire in the field. He asks if I want earplugs. I'm still afraid of the sound wind makes, shaking the metal roof. Coyotes howling. Feral cats and dogs. Barred owls. A hunter with a shotgun and a bad idea. I start on my side pressing him and wake with hardly any covers. He pulls the rest off me, Saturday, 7 a.m. *Big day today, I'm gonna teach you to split wood.* I smell coffee steaming in the press, open my eyes to a sky, cotton-candy-pink. We watch the sun slowly rise over the collards and dying sage.

I remember drives on old NC-16 with no speed limit. *Hey Buffalo Bill, what did you kill?* on a low dial, my father humming along in his awkward way while my mother sat silent as cricket-hunting nights. Miles of fresh-mowed farmland, smelling of skunks or chicken houses. I remember looking out the window for hours with my brother, while my parents searched out cheap land to buy. That was their dream. I remember kudzu, poison ivy, wild turkeys stopping us sharp in the middle of the road. The Blue Ridge Mountains formed in the distance, The New River snaked alongside us. Eleven, I was too young to know then, I was cutting through the landscape, one road that would haunt me as every road I've been on in these mountains. Pine and oak, flush of sun on gravel, crumpled bridges, run-down houses, ladies low-talking on their porches. I was an outsider, maybe I am still, but I needed their eyes to meet mine.

He's already started talking "Beulah." That's what I call it when he says *Wednesday* and *tomato* and *weekend* to Roger and our neighbors helping us put up the barn walls. The ends of words are silent and the *A*'s and *E*'s blur together as if he was singing a Tommy Jarrell or Charlie Lowe song, pining after a woman. He made me a mix CD, years back, with the old-time greats and I listened on repeat for weeks on my way to work at the restaurant. That was before. If he'd slip into these notes when he's talking to me, now, he'd have me undressed in seconds. The men are mixing concrete and yelling about footers and I'm too cold to go outside. Sipping coffee, I put on "Stay All Night and Don't Go Home" and search out a recipe for honey wine.

Dust kicks up behind the white pickup when he leaves. I get sick to my stomach every time I'm alone. How long does it take to get to Lowe's, to haul a truck-load of sand? To make it back? I shovel another load of compost onto a raised bed. What if I'm caught under the weight of the wheelbarrow and no one's here to pull me out? Sweat drips stains on my shirt. What if he's stuck in traffic? In a wreck? What if I have to run the farm on my own? I'm vowing to never wear a bra again, then I hear him laughing and holding down the horn, yelling, *Hey baby* at me, his brown curls bouncing in the windshield.

Leaning back in his chair, he takes a taste of pale ale from the bottle. I've just come up the gravel driveway and I'm still thinking how it must look when someone passes by Pilot Mountain for the first time. Like a big toe with two hairs. Or one abnormally huge breast. I'm coming every weekend, now, wondering what I'll do when grad school ends. Live here? Or where? He hands me a beer. Our speckled hens chase me down the driveway when I go to pick a handful of kale. The hills haven't started to turn fiery red, unusual in September. I slide open the screen door. He says, *I don't think it'll be a good year for leaves*. From the porch, we watch two crows getting into the rye. I open my mouth to tell him I'm not sure what I want, what he wants, but a fruit fly catches my throat. I cough it up and he laughs, and I do too, waiting for him to stop. But after, he looks over at me and I'm not ready to talk about giving up my drives on Hwy. 52 in the foggy mornings, full of coffee, on my way to him, the hills cresting rose-colored somewhere in The Blue Ridge.

Full Hunter's Moon

October 16th

I hate it when you wear overalls,
knock back too many porch-beers
on a Tuesday
like some kind of country man.
All my salt and skin
I have given to the land.
I threw away my dresses, danced the woods
twice, burned firewood with oil
from my hair. I break
the necks of summer squash
with my teeth to boil for supper, beat
metal pots with spoons
to bring buzzards out of roost.
I want the night to come sooner and you
to be the woods that hold me.
I want sweat to roll down
my dirty arms. I want the trails
to switch back and briers rip my feet
when I chase you with nothing to cover
us but the moonlight.
I want you wild.

After Planting Okra in Indian Summer

He undresses outside glass doors, throws
 down his gloves, shirt, belt and comes
slowly on the rock path to the house.

Let me be the bare country—
 wind stirring grasses against the hills,
toads slipping the mud, gnats' golden sprawl,
 hawk's white stomach
flitting to dead oaks,
 all that pulses above
his slender legs, his dark curls.

Let me be the earth, held
 in his cracked hands, brushed
off after covering the seed, and the seed
 on fire inside black loam. One minute
against his skin.

Let me be what scrapes on soil,
 what floats in sky where he moves
in and out of lacquered woods, returns
 from dusk to the edge of the bed
with twigs in his hair.

The smell of sweat on his back
 and I become my wild self,
 native to this land.
His ribs, a ridgeline

I touch
and open the stars.

*Living on the Land Where You Burned to Death
for Cleo, 1915-1918*

With no one watching, I tried
on your twin sister's button-up dresses
in the closet overlooking our garden,

paisley-red and blue-diamond printed
cloth, you will never fit into. Sun heavy
in summer air, I piled kindling

on top of the frayed polyester.
Set the past on fire, I thought, as billows
of black smoke shot from rotten boards.

I won't go near your house at night
and the wind won't stop knocking over
trees in the orchard. What would you have

done if someone begged you to stay
in woods that weren't your own? Our neighbor
says the country breaks a woman,

but what does he know about being a woman
or broken? Tell me, what does it taste like
to rest in the curves of this landscape?

When I throw greens to our hens
or watch my farmer staring at the fields
with his seed catalogue, I feel the silence

of the hills and when I'm walking the property,
I could be anyone. Where did you last hear
a pack of coyotes, see a flock of birds

coat the creek in black? There's a clover patch
the size of a boot-print outside the boarded
front door. I bend there, under the mimosa,

and press the cool grass, feeling for your bare
feet, the sweet smell of cedar on an open fire,
listen for your mama calling you back inside.

Full Beaver Moon

November 14th

We drink in early evening, turning the pages
of *Southern Landscapes*,

and all I want is to touch the grooves
of sliced bark, haunted marshland graves,

battlefields in Virginia, any place
with its scars out in the open. Walking down

the mountain, earlier, from the old Everett house—
rotten oak porch sunk to ground, slate

fireplace broken in half—you said, *We could build
a house just like it, but new,*

and I smiled, pulling blackberry briars
away from catching my sweater, not knowing

if I could really live with you in the woods.
Deer prints on the creek bank looked like a whole

herd mated around a single tree. I keep wondering
if I'm here just to have what pleases me:

you staggering in from the shower, lifting
your plaid shirt to put on, neck-first;

orange yolks that taste sweet and peppery
from our chickens in the yard; morning drives

in the white pickup to the feed store;
a sunset budding against gray clouds for hours.

Or is it the rawness of these woods, the violence,
that holds me? If I left would I miss

slipping in socks on my way to the record player
and spinning the disc to Waylon?

Would I miss nights on the porch, twinkle
lights plugged in, fire in the fields,

getting drunk on thin and smokey wine
from the corner store as the hens

shuffle in to roost? Would I miss the fog
clinging to the road as it draws light

from the sky, the stained rim of my glass
smelling like the coming of a summer storm?

Surry County Parables

i.

Let the crows' flapping wings and the combine
in the lower fields wake you
each morning. Let the chickens
show you how to live
in community. Let the dying light
and apple-falling dark
give you rest from the fields.

ii.

There's only one way
to pronounce *tomato*
and *potato* and *weekend*.

iii.

After one year, you're new in town.
After five years, you're a farmer.
After ten years, you're a fool.
After fifty years, you're a worker.

iv.

When shopping at Walmart, make sure you bring
a flask filled with good whiskey.
And for god's sakes don't stay longer than you need.

v.

A pickup is a man's pride and joy.
Finding the right one is like finding
the right woman.

vi.

Read Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer" poems extensively
and recite to your girlfriend who likes farming
okay but maybe needs motivation sometimes.

vii.

Shut your mouth when you want to say words like *Democrat* or *Organic* or *sub-culture* or *Monsanto* or *Ayurvedic diet* or *my partner lives here with me but we're not married.*

viii.

Never back down from a man that challenges you,
unless he's got a shotgun.

ix.

Sundays are for shooting and drinking after church.

x.

It's acceptable to kill your neighbor's dog
as long as it was on *your* land.

xi.

A man's land is like his mind: wandering, vast, and itching
for the violence of trees shattering as they fall.

xii.

Know that disputes between neighbors can never be forgiven.

xiii.

If a piece of land has been abandoned more than a year
your duty is to take from it what you need.

xiv.

Hunting during deer season:
find a shady spot to set your tent
and spread feed corn.

xv.

When your neighbor insists on coming over
to check on you and your girlfriend every
day and honking down the driveway when y'all're
just trying to take a nap or have sex or eat dinner
make sure you wave and smile when he flirts
with your pretty girlfriend and calls her your *helper*
and says things like *every man needs a cook*.

xvi.

Lock the gate to the driveway on weekends.

xvii.

Don't be offended when your neighbor
strings a dead calf in your woods so he can kill
the coyotes so they won't kill the deer so
he can hunt the deer with his buddy, Junior, and maybe
his son, too, he really just wants to have some man-
to-man time with his son he really wants to crack
a few cold ones and get away from the wife
he's retired and what else is there to do?

xviii.

Buy a shotgun.

xix.

Another neighbor says he wants to start hunting in the woods
on your land and why can't he when there's two-hundred acres
out there full of deer and he won't get near your house or anything
and he heard that you're letting Roger out there.

xx.

Learn to shoot.

Drinking Coffee at My Desk, Dreaming of Your Autumn Fields

You reach to pick the last of okra
 and begin to sweat, collecting
rough fruit in the basket
 tied around your waist.
Or you sow mizuna seeds
 in fresh-turned earth, smelling
sifted soil as it rises up
 the orchard trees. Twenty days
to mustard-bitter leaves
 sweeping down the rows
for you to tear and place
 in your mouth as broccoli
flowers. Cabbage rolls tight.
 In the cold morning
with the shovel in your hand,
 only the ground pulses beneath
you. Brown grass brushes
 tobacco and soybeans, pumpkins
spill from the backs of trailers
 and stain the road, goats' black
tails flap flies up the hill.
 You taste the air, fingering
sweet-rotting branches, fresh
 hay, or lie on the stump of your great-
uncle's apple tree, knocked over
 by the tractor's force, and all this before
I pull up the gravel
 driveway and your wood-scent
rubs off on my dress.

Across from the Tyson Plant

Without notice, big machines started tearing down the woodlands directly behind their home... 12-plus chicken houses, each about 25,000 square feet, sit off the back of the Persingers' property line. Trucks rumble down Chilton Road late at night....The stench is so bad sometimes that they can't stand to be outside...

-The Winston-Salem Journal

Honestly, this sounds like a dispute between neighbors.

-Gary Mickelson, Tyson company spokesman

Feathers and beaks blow through trailer
parks, seep into car windows
as folks drive to work, the ripe smell
of dried blood, soy pellets,
ammonia. Factory lights run all night
and engines crank at dusk to haul
fat birds down the mountain. Waste
sits like a sick monument
on the road. I hear you Surry County
when you cut your tap water
with whiskey and beer. I hear you
when the house won't sell, when you've
been stuck here for years. I hear
you bar your doors, shut down corner
stores when no one comes around, not
even family. I hear you cussing
as you suit up to hunt in a forest nearly
gone. I hear you praying thick curtains
will catch the smell. I hear you
beneath your face-masks, when you're out
of food stamps, when you beat your dogs
dragging innards to porch steps. I hear
you when Tyson won't stop until a house
is on every corner of the foothills
and when they pretend you don't exist.

Winter Solstice

December 21st

We woke to black birds shattering
the sky on their way south, ecru houses
uncovering in a winter mountain.
I know I can't be alone.
In the hollow, here, searching
for an equal struggle, I found a grizzled cat,
pile of blue-brown glass, two busted
lighters, Ball jars, and what looked like broken
limestone. Digging into deer tracks, the wind
was metallic in my mouth. If I stayed
long enough would a coyote's jaws
drag me deep in the woods or would I fight?
Up the hill, he's grading the land
and I can't help but see this need to cut into earth,
to sever bushes, old cedars, even a layer
of soil, and command its shape,
also lives in me. I should be tending to our hens,
washing dishes, anything to show
I'm still here. Early evening on the wood floor, I pass
the ruby bottle back to him and I understand
this partial darkness well: stars flashing
blinded windows, wildfires flaming in the high
country, hunters edging closer
to our land with shotgun-gleam in their eyes.

Beware of Dog

Afternoon run
on a dead-end road,
no one here
but cracked asphalt,
a herd of bulls, eyeing me.
Beulah Church Road,
your rolling hills
are on fire, shoved
against a mountain blue
backdrop. I'm moving
through the foothills'
sweaty underside
where tobacco fields
roil in clay, sun-streaked,
and brush sways
for miles. Pine scraps
and trash burn
in the distance.
As I run, I hear claws
hit against loose
gravel and when I turn
a black tail whips
behind a beat-up truck.
Now, I'm panting
past ROAD CLOSING.
Beulah Church Road,
am I gonna die
in junkyard-rust
with the beer cans
tossed on some backroad?
Before I even see
the shadow of a shotgun,
two black hounds
cut in front of me.
Foam drips
from their mouths,
hair standing up on end.
They snarl and I
can feel their breath
close to my body
shaking numb.

Full Wolf Moon

January 12th

No more deer season
and when I'm running, evenings,
no hoards of men haunting the hillside
or sliding fingers to cock
a rifle from the closed fist
of a deer stand hidden in the pines.
No 5 p.m. start of engines
and no doors slamming
as they descend their pickups.
No work boots to mud. No shotgun
ready inside a camo tent and no
buck snorting to its fawns. No single
gleaming bullet like a bright strip
of moon against the black. No silence
before the shot. Only my breath
beneath the mountain capped
in white and everyone in their houses
and mobile homes. Only hunters
warming their hands around
the hips of women. Only from the edge
of the field I see one man setting
traps for coyotes big as wolves.
Only wind covers his prints with snow.

Light

lives in a forest of its own making, clearing
just above the treeline with its glow. Golden,
runs on the backs of whitetails, as he
breathes next to me at night. In the bare hands
of my love shoveling soil. Warmth cast
on clay I made into pots as a child. Glint
of hen combs, womanly red, as they peck
for worms. Quartz in noon sun, unearthed
with the Bobcat's silver teeth. Evening slants
flood under pulled up rafters, bounce the ground
with crab apples, drift in and out of clouds
as the flocks gone south. Fires kindle from dry beams
of an old house. Windows, lamp-lit, in the trailer park
across the road and in winter steam the morning
after love. A line on his back when he slips
into blue jeans and in the blush between his legs.
In the rush of curls when he turns his head, disappearing
down a backwoods driveway on a summer night.

The Farm, A Glossary

AMARANTH, also Pigweed

Wild, seed-heavy stalks that grew higher
than our trellised tomatoes
Pesto, made from the variety that looks like purple
elephant tusks
The first time we met our neighbor, Tasha, she gave us
a taste of the ground seeds
with garlic and olive oil.

BEER, honey-colored, pale ale or IPA

With you, in the evening after playing frisbee,
summer Friday when harvesting is done,
or on the porch ranting about the week
Alone, reading the “Mad Farmer” poems or blank-staring
at the early dark from a bar’s window

CULTIVATE

To grow and care
for plants under conditions
you can control.

DENT CORN, or Deer Corn

On signs everywhere we’d go on backroads
Made for
hunters, cattle raisers, chicken feed

EVENT

The Black Moon with a six pack
in the bed of the white pickup. On top of the hill,
you said, squeezing me, *I wanna build a house
away from the damn highway* and I said, *yes*.
At a restaurant in our hometown,
we ordered mushrooms grown by a friend
and sipped glasses of sweet red.
Saturday afternoon naps after market
with the windows flung open

FORAGE

Chanterelle mushrooms.
On a visit to a friend in Albuquerque
we drove up to Colorado and I had
elevation sickness the whole ride.

We cracked cans of beer
on the side of the mountain, eyed for apricot
dots shooting out from moss and logs.
“Chicken of the Woods”
grows somewhere in your 200 acres
but we never found it.

GLYPHOSATE, also known as “RoundUp”

Petroleum based herbicide.

The first time you ever yelled at me
we were cleaning carrots in the outdoor
sink. You said I was taking too long.
You turned me around and I held you
to my chest. Our neighbor was spraying
his crop near yours to kill the weeds
and I knew you weren’t angry with me.

HARDWARE STORE

Lowe's,

To watch you carefully pick up a bolt
and turn it in your hand, making sure
it’s the right one, was at once gear-grinding
and seductive.

ICE CREAM, cold, creamy treat, melts on your dirt-covered jeans

Scoops, road-side stand open only in summer
after hopping in the white pickup, cone
in hand, licking my hands,
and yours

Stomach-ache, every time,
but I begged you
once a week to take us
and you faithfully did

JEALOUSY, invasive, similar to Poison ivy

See: WEEDS

Of a man,

wishing I could work the land
full-time like you do

Of a plant or animal,

such as Cosmos, Yarrow, Bergamot,
all flowers, old apple trees, our hens
with such a simple life. I fear these
are more lovely than I could ever be.

Of a place.

When you said you wanted cows
for grazing the bottomland, to milk
them twice a day, I was sure it meant
you wanted to stay there always,
with or without me.

KINDLING

The start of a fire.

LAND

Old tobacco
Love of
Sound of,
 apple trees and plants shaking
 around us in the orchard
 when the baler came to cull
 grass on the hill

MONEY, not much,

 Except what your mother gave
 you to start the farm
And, my grad-school stipend,
 which I used more than once
 to buy us expensive wine
 imported from the Duoro Valley
See: TRAVEL

NASTURTIUM, fire-colored flowers with leaves like lily-pads

 Symbolic for small victories,
 such as,
 Making a few hundred bucks at market
 Getting the hang of using the wheel-hoe
 A five-dollar winning lottery ticket

O, the shape

 Of the lip of a bottle of beer
 when you place your mouth
 around it
 The way you cut onions perfectly
 for “Southern” ratatouille with okra
 and our canned Early Girl tomatoes
 The billow of soda bread
 we make on the grill
 because there’s no oven

in the small house
Our hands, cupping
the body of each chick
to touch their beaks to water
and feed so they know
where to find it

POTATO, root vegetable in the Nightshade family that vines
Sweet, also Yams,
roasted on the grill with butter and salt
Fingerlings,
in a pan with oil and duck eggs
Dig,
To collect after the leaves die back.
You worked around the soil
with a fork and I searched underneath
for tubers on my hands and knees.

QUESTION
Do you want me to stay here?

QUESTION
Do I want to stay here?

RUN
To go for one, to lace
my shoes double-knotted
and trace the woods
for an opening, or deer-path,
when I need to be away.

SPIT
From the porch or in the fields,
freely, careless. How you'd say,
That's my girl if it was a good one.
From hounds' mouths
as they chased me down Beulah
Church Road where your great-aunt
sold off her piece of land, now
full of rusted cars. We call it,
"The Junkyard."

TRAVEL
Emilia Romagna
The farmer stomped ruby red grapes

and I cleaned bruised tomato vines, picking
smashed fruit, sagging on the ground.

Serres

My beautiful week in the southern Alps.
Cheese and bread. I washed dishes at the B&B
until my hands were raw. My first
something like love I had abroad, Yaniv.
Israeli with a French passport, he
came to avoid bomb threats
and cancelled classes. He wrote me
in swerved Hebrew letters.

Madeira, island

Silky, sweet wine and banana leaves
dried on rooftops. Remember jumping
feet-first into the Atlantic
from the rusted wood plank?

The Azores, islands

Where my ancestors immigrated from.
Long afternoons, sulfur-smelling geysers,
watching the Catholic parade,
and the streets were stretched
with flowers.

Portugal, mainland

Porto, where we ate like locals
and you loved the older woman
eating fish grilled on the street,
said *She gets me*,
and Lisbon, with the view of the city
from the small, shared apartment
when I first told you words
you weren't ready to hear,
both of us drunk on sunsets
and eggplant-colored wine.

See: ZINNIA

See: UNDO

UNDO

To take what was made
and reverse

Similar to cleaning up
a spilled bottle of beer
or watching dirt swim down
my legs in the shower
or erasing a penciled letter

To unravel twine
for stringing up a trellis

VINING

Roots,
grasses and potatoes
that creep under the soil

Ivy,
climbs on and around anything
taller than itself, hoping to reach sun

Your arms,
around my waist
in spitting rain

Your legs,
bent over and under
my legs at night

WEEDS

Edible,
Lamb's Quarters, Amaranth, Burdock,
Dandelion, Plantain, Elder, Chickweed, Daylily

Invasive,
Poison ivy, Kudzu, Fescue, Clover,
all non-native grasses

Overtaking
the winter squash that took me
a whole day to plant
See: JEALOUSY

What must be ripped up
around vegetable plants,
such as corn, beans, turnips, potatoes,
carrots, cabbage, Cherry tomatoes, melons,
Bell peppers, Jalapeños, radishes, Sage,
anything that needs saving
See: CULTIVATE

X

Lines, drawn in the dirt to mark
where the new barn would be, replacing
the rocks you set there with your hands
covered by blue work-gloves

YARROW

Perennial, with small shoots
of white and pale-pink flowers

Boil the leaves in a pot
and strain for tea. Good for stagnant,
dull-aching headaches. Maybe like the ones
I have when I write.

ZINNIA

Grows red and yellow
from early summer
to first frost.
A steady beat,
a daily remembrance.