

Cleaning the Graves

The once a year we come here is as close as my mother comes to mourning. These graves are all she has left of land she hated losing. And I am descended from this loss: her mother, a woman who trapped snowbirds for pot pie, who let hens nest in the kitchen in freezing weather so they would lay better, who could wring their heads from their bodies in one motion, who could wrestle down a calf. "Your blood is that cold," she tells me, "but you don't know it yet, never had hard times. Hard times could never kill one of us." The old lie. I know she will always see her mother in that hated, cotton coat, walking four deep, white miles to work. A figure never diminishing from sight, that mother won't succumb to something so gentle as decay. Not ashes, not dust — never was and won't be, and neither will mine; her blood is that cold.

Still, all my life

I have asked after her happiness as if it were closer kin. I watch her wrestle away from the grave the fallen white rib of a sycamore. The smile meant for me is cast, a shadow, past me. *Are you happy?* I have asked her, asking her to lie.