

Romeos

Now I can't remember what my father's feet  
looked like—is it possible I never saw him  
barefoot? He wore work boots in the barn,  
of course, caked with dirt and manure,  
and in the house he wore romeos, hard-soled  
leather slippers that looked like dress shoes.

He was a big man and shy in his magnificent body.  
Summer evenings he sat with his shirt off  
at the kitchen table, his torso pale and clammy  
where the fabric had been, the rest of him dark  
as redwood, like a photographic negative of another shirt  
he could never take off. He liked to read the paper

and half-listen to my mother going on and on  
about nothing much. I can't remember  
what their romance looked like, never heard them  
proclaim their love or fight, though of course they loved  
and fought, their voices low and shattered  
from behind the bedroom door, stripped to their underwear  
in front of the window fan. My father was a foreign country  
I could not wait to leave. I never knew how he felt

about leaving the farm, that familiar cartography of cows,  
their bony hips swaying out to pasture, day in  
day out, muzzles caked with sweet ground feed. I liked  
to follow them out to pasture, taking them  
where they already knew to go. Did my father ever want  
to keep on walking at pasture's end one sunswept morning  
in June? He might have made it to town by sundown, but always  
he'd have turned back, the good middle child. He ran a modest  
farm, learned not to want the things he couldn't have.

To my father's hoarse cry at day's end,  
*Ca-boss, Ca-boss*, the cows came back to be milked again,  
again without needing me, plodding up and down  
the same paths their forebears travelled  
in my great-grandfather's day, back before the state had a name.  
A cow will return to the same stall day after day, year  
after year, then one day refuse to enter,  
though no one can tell you why.