Marriage

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I.
Smoke drifted from a stove pipe while Mama stooped washing beans in an iron vat. Lusty and dark, she sparkled enough to have been Liz Taylor’s body double in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, that is, if she hadn’t inherited a plot where she spent her summer mornings blanching corn as steam dampened her skin. How many glances out the window could I count if my small shadow could return there now and watch her eyes mull over the fields as my father plowed? Was his muscled frame all that she could fathom, but for a wasp clicking against the pane?

II.
A necessary union: the farmhouse stood beside the barn. Mama and I poured slop in troughs, and Daddy’s anger flew out of the barn like a flock of swallows. *This goddamned thing won’t start!* he hollered. *Wallace, please!* Mama shrieked over the tractor’s sputters and coughs. She pulled me into her hip where flour from her apron powdered my cheek. Grumbling from his seat, Daddy coaxed the farm’s surliest worker until the motor caught, and he wheeled out toward the field.

III.
In the summer dark, I stretched on a sleeper sofa and listened as rain on tin told me stories.
The ways of husbands and wives astonished me as I, a building of my own desire, pictured my mother in the back bedroom lying underneath a man who would give her empty palms and a pain so vast she’d think the trees and fields had turned their backs. A whippoorwill called out to the thunder. Mice crawled inside the walls as Daddy’s moans trailed down the corridors, and the stink of mud and leaves drifted in through window screens.