

## Reaper

After hearing farmers talk about planting, tilling, and rock picking, I'm newly curious about fields. I start observing a cornfield along my walking route. When the corn has grown so tall the tassels sway above my head, I notice the stalks are black and foaming, as if they've gone rabid. I hesitate before crossing the buffer grass between the road and the field. Since it's silly to be afraid of starch, I lean toward the stalks to get a closer look. In the oozing foam crawl grasshoppers and frenetic black bugs. I feel queasy. No wonder I've kept my distance from flora and fauna: I'm too squeamish. Calves sliding out of vaginas, maggots hatching, ants scurrying over the unsheathed heads of peonies, hawks tearing feathers off mourning doves pressed beneath talons – life's frenzy is revolting. In the city I watched nature on television, where a horse talked to its owner and even a black bear acted neighborly.

A week or so after I notice the foamy corn, it's gone. That is, the front rows of the field have been harvested. The rest of the stalks still remain, too far away from the road for me to see if they are pulsating with insects. I walk past this field weekly, but have never seen a farmer working the field. Yet somehow seed is planted, stalks chopped down. Gradually, as days shorten and green gives way to faded brown, only the back rows remain standing, hunched against the coming winter. Will the harvest ever be finished? I imagine the farmer wearing for months a partially shaved beard to match his field.

Maybe the farmer is lazy. Then again, he might be frugal. If dent corn is still moist, it must be sent through a drier powered by propane. Perhaps the farmer wants these fields to

dry free of charge, in the wind. Maybe he's busy with a full-time job in the city to support his farming habit. Whatever the reason, his progress is slow and unseen except for silage in the field and, on the bisecting blacktop road, a haphazard trail of late autumn-bleached husks and ears with gaps between shriveled kernels.

Early in December a snow dusting reveals mowed trails, trodden paths, frozen streams and ponds near the field. I remember as a child becoming aware of the veins in my hands. They'd always been there, but I'd never noticed, and suddenly I couldn't ignore the ugly, bulging rivers. This sign of health still disturbs me, but I'm also intrigued by the suggestion of a perfect system, just as the trails etched by snow in these fields suggest a hidden order, a structure visible to the discerning eye.

One day, when tree branches freed from the burden of leaves reach high to scratch at the grey sky, when a nearby field is whiskered by the stubble of cut stalks, my eye snags on a bit of crimson on the trail I am following. I get down on my knees for a closer look in the grass. A drop of blood. Inches away I spot another, then another, then a few tufts of fur so soft I want to brush them against my chapped lips. How, in this immense landscape, did a speck of red, almost dark enough to match the soil, serve as a stop sign? I touch the crimson and check my finger. No stain. The blood is hours, maybe days dry, the struggle for life now stilled. I brush my palm against the brittle grass flecked with green. The ground below feels cold and crustaceous. There must be a way to crack it open, spill its essence. Earth responds: you first.