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.