

Eighteen Thousand Sundowns

Dixie Partridge

For my father, 1914-94

Near a rock slope of hill pasture,
grass grows up through a few old bones.
Again, what's moved past recall
is not past pain. White as the noon-day
moon, the bones are too small
to belong to the mare someone shot for sport
on this hillside years ago,
too small for the Holstein, Sally,
gone blind from tumors.

Above me in the steep hollow
small winter avalanches have left the ground
clean of brush, the earth abraded
to shale and stone.
Scents of sage and drying sun . . .

and it's as though all my days have pointed
to these moments and these views
above my father's farm, grandfather's before—
irrigation ditches filled in, hardly a trace
of the stackyard where deer broke through slats
to raid haystacks, but died anyway
those winters snow deepened to fence tops.

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The past slips ahead of us
and we meet it in the present.
Traces of cattle trails weave between fences;
the sinking ribbed roof of the barn
opens to fading light.
Where new highways blunt-cut through fields,
perennial with alfalfa, larks cry sounds
identical to thousands I've heard before.

Returning is like that paradox
of warming oneself taking long winter walks:
the childhood breaths that wrote visibly on the air,
how you kept wanting to look back
to see what you'd said.

If I wait into dark
for the glistening coal-blue
of the night sky, the far Pleiades
will be sending millennia of pin-point light
still being gathered by anything it touches.