

GROWTH RINGS

1.

Our sex mashed mountains flat,
Clearing Iowa for corn and wheat. Always up
Before morning lit the misted leaves,
She greased her griddle with a grizzly bear
She'd strapped up tight, slathering him with lard
And attaching him to an old ax handle.
Our bar brawls smashed beer halls apart
And hacked whole forests to heaps of dust.
Once, in a fight, she fell into Erie,
Four new lakes forming from the single splash.
She'd splashed it dry! A decade filled it back
But only to fourth of the five lakes in size.
Once, stuffed with spinach, she socked an ox,
Which arched above the early Ozark moon
And fell in succulent cuts of meat
Ready to be roasted for my supper.
Barely broiled on burning forest or grass,
Her steaks were perfect—understated,
With just a crust of juicy burn,
Popped on a plate and sprouting jagged streams
Of red—still cool in the center
And full of raw ox blood to keep me strong.
She spiced her guacamole with pine nuts
She'd get by squeezing forests out above the pot.
Her cakes she cooked in creaking silo tops
When the silage got hot at summer's end.
Hot slabs of killer whale, cornbread, and pie
She cooked in the spout of Mount Saint Helens.
She had a homemade ale that slapped and gagged
At first, then curdled on the tongue
To the delicate sting of clover honey—
More a nectar than ale. We'd sit for hours
Absorbing the smells of beef and bread,

The ale's taste musty from the wooden slats
She'd stripped from old corn cribs to make the mugs.
She'd get distracted, listening to a song
A state away, and, forgetting I was there,
Would wave her fork like a conductor's stick
As she raised it ten stories to her mouth.
She'd bounce beneath me in our sheets,
Arms above her head, bending tree-thick
Headboard bars in passion, and she loved
To look down at where I entered her.
Each day she'd read a book, one finger
Poking her cheek as she read, foot knocking
Against the leg of the chair she always used.
When we were older, she'd spend her evenings
Listening to showtune records, sometimes
The same one for three hours or more.
Later, her insomnia meant the clatter of pans
Moving to her restlessness, the toilet flushing,
And light shining under the bedroom door.
When Glenn Miller got killed she cried.

2.

She walks through the room with her eyes shut.
She boxes the air and mumbles
near speech, mouth always open.
Nurses rush past the door without looking.
She leans on air, and seems to be listening
to words not there. But usually
she stays in bed. I lift her breast,
slim bag of nodes and tubes,
and slide the cloth beneath it,
grazing the yellow-green bruise.
Last week I rubbed too hard.
I thumb her diapers for wet.
I roll her onto her back
every thirty minutes, but she turns

within five to face the wall again.
I let her walk for exercise,
then have to put her in bed
and turn the light off.
She doesn't know I'm here.
Outside, away from the still-lit
supermarket sign, two high schoolers
knuckle into their seats for better dark.
They share their acres of pavement
with eleven shopping carts.
I have a towel to dry her bedsores,
water to keep them clean.

3.

I want to walk that sign-lit lot, cross the swamp to home, and wake
her up with the smell of salmon cakes. I'll cook. I'm not too proud.