

*The Family Ranch*

1.

The tawny cow that has moved in  
the closest is my grandmother.  
I am made sure of it by the accusing-wanting  
in her face, the shifting of her weight,  
hip bones I inherited  
wide apart and said to be good  
for birthing children  
and walking to Sunday school –  
in her hands, the over-sized  
black patent leather purse.

From every direction  
cattle emerge and call.  
My blood: their water for drinking.  
Their grass: my hair for feed, my fur.  
Their mammary glands for milking – now,  
my soft tits. And all those bullfrogs  
I shot at thirteen (undressed  
at the grey funnel sink in the corner,  
pulled down their delicate skins,  
devoured their long muscular legs)  
doing the breast stroke inside me, now,  
far away in a chlorinated pool.

In a neighboring field  
the bulls continue to bellow;  
only the white fence keeps them  
from entering where I sit, on the stone  
front step, haloed  
by a red peeling doorframe,

2.

the sloping red roof,  
the screened in porch, the painted green walls,  
the cistern – mouth at the center of the house.  
My sisters and I leaned over its wide lip, saw the  
moon. Below, the bucket being lowered  
brushed against the hollow stone.  
Such a great distance to drop down

the inside of the great beast's body  
that lived always beneath,  
among, and within us.

3.

But, I don't want to use that word: forever.  
To never rise out of the bed of the rattlesnakes,  
join the stars, infinite and miraculously distant.  
As a child I listened to coyotes in the pastures,  
imagined the illumed contours of the salt lick.  
Feeding sugar cubes to horses, I flattened my palms  
so that my fingers would not be ground between  
the flat ends of their square teeth.

4.

In the night: a world damp with heat,  
the sound of the oil rig in the distance,  
an interruption,  
the bright beacon of its drill  
entering the earth. I thought of dinosaurs  
and later birds pecking at water;  
now, in their rhythm I recognize them  
as male, swollen, depositing seed.

5.

There was only once that I ran;  
I could not help it. Something out of  
the corner of my eye  
moved. It could have been wild dogs, deer,  
of the spirit of something left over.

The bodies of Comanches and cowboys mixed  
into this red earth. No one in my family  
was ever a farmer. Movement  
toward settlement  
happened slowly, as the thing  
in the bush was swift.

6.

As soon as I awaken  
to the brown stained mineral water  
poured into the tub, the small mirror  
tilted at an angle over the toilet,  
the deep springs of the bed and the radio  
that reaches all the way to Wichita Falls  
for voices – I am leaving,

Texas, this beautiful  
terrible country where I could  
never again live, born out of  
the urgent bloody placenta  
of calving in spring, those red and white  
frolicking bodies, suckling. Then later,  
the slicing off of horns in an intimate  
acknowledgement of danger. Blood spurting  
through hollow reeds. Blood of my veins. Horns  
litter the dirt floor of the red barn that has finally  
fallen. This dirt, my body, this fugitive  
dust.

– *Howl*