

## The Horse

Every recess he was there: a gray smudge  
where the eye came to rest, just over the hill,  
like a cloud, or a tractor. Not the kind  
of horse you're expecting: nothing showy,  
nothing tall, just a sway-backed stallion  
with rheumy eyes and moldy hooves,  
a few flies flickering his sides. Still,  
the children talked about him. Looked  
for him after lunch, hearts hungry  
for some sort of news. One ear up  
meant a bad grade; two ears, a good one.  
Lying down and there'd be snow  
the next day. Not there, and we'd worry  
the whole half hour, double-checking  
the view. Some kids spoke of sneaking  
up to feed him. Some did, after school,  
and came back laughing about  
his laziness, his lazy eye. Suburban kids,  
who'd stand at the fence and shout  
*move!* A farm girl, I always said  
nothing. I knew Dylan would mutter  
over the muck on my boots, that Josh  
would crack my stutter like a whip.  
And I knew that I would leave, in time,  
as I always did, that I would never think  
of the horse again. And I didn't. I don't.  
Until this December, puttering around,  
home again. A gray smudge on the hillside.  
How I ran through the grass, wool-sweatered,  
unsure, my adult heart beating faster  
than before. How he stood there, ugly  
as ever, like some sort of God. And how  
he came to me at last, the smell of apple  
sharp in the air, his breath a fog  
between us, brief and mortal.

## Make-up

My mother wore lipstick without fail.  
At 5 or 6, before the long trudge  
to the schoolhouse, its fluorescent hours  
and ratty workbooks, smelling of sick,  
she'd rub roses on her lips, and cream  
her appled cheeks, dust her forehead  
with pale powder, and slide a slim pearl  
through each ear, like a chime. Noon  
or night, she'd smell of Joy or Diorissimo,  
names that sounded like Italy, like wine  
dripped over stars, or snug villas,  
high on the hillside, for so I imagined  
Italy to be, from hours spent looking  
at books. Once a year, at a restaurant,  
we'd dress up like fine women in stories –  
Jane and Elizabeth, the March sisters –  
and order a special to share, then slip  
to the ladies' room to freshen our lips  
with berry or plum. On Sundays,  
we'd trim our hair over the sink,  
black and brown, like one woman's,  
and she'd say how she'd darkened with age  
so I still could grow up like her.  
I'd linger by the cabinet for hours,  
peering at names that told of other worlds –  
Ballet Shoes or Georgia Peach, Rose Rosé –  
things I never thought to have so close  
at hand, to gleam in my fingers, like a story.  
And in the hospital, that first time,  
I knew to bring tubes of buttery gloss,  
and hand creams, whipped with shea,  
pouches of lavender to sweeten  
the drawers. And I knew she was  
the most beautiful thing imaginable:  
my mother, creased after long  
pillowed days, wan in the hospital noon,  
reaching for her traveling bag,  
her bedside glasses, her flat, orange pills.