The Old Sod House

The house is falling back into the prairie.
Switchgrass hugs the walls
as if it has been waiting years
for permission.
The roof has given itself
to weather and sky.

The doorway opens
not into a room
but into silence.
I stand here alone,
though not alone.

The wind rustles through the bluestem,
and somewhere beneath my feet
lie the footprints
of my ancestor.
A man I never knew.

He came from the Russian shore,
German is his spoken tongue.
Crossing an ocean
with more hope than certainty.
Perhaps he carried
a small satchel,
a few tools,
the memory of familiar steppes.
Perhaps he carried fear.

The prairie would not have welcomed him.
The earth was hard,
the winters immense.
Snow buried fences,
filled the corners of windows,
pressed against the walls
like a second world.

Still, he cut the sod.
Still, he lifted each block of earth
and laid it upon another.
A house made from the very ground
that challenged him.

I kneel
and place my hand
against one of the old walls.
The prairie grass has rooted there.
A cricket disappears into a crack.
A meadowlark sings
from somewhere beyond sight.

And suddenly
the years seem thinner.
I can almost see him.
Not as a photograph,
not as a story told around a table,
but as a man pausing at dusk,
leaning on a shovel,
watching the sky burn orange
above a sea of Dakota grass.

Maybe he wondered
if he had made a mistake.
Maybe he missed the country
he had left behind.
Maybe courage
is nothing more
than staying one more winter,
then another,
and another.

The house says nothing.
Yet all around me
are the things that remain:
the cottonwood lifting its branches,
the shallow brook winding through.

The wind traveling west,
the stubborn grass returning each spring.
The same companions
he would have known.

I think this is how the dead stay with us.
Not in shadows.
Not in ghosts gathered around a hearth.
But in the land itself.

In the furrow that remembers a plow.
In the stones turned up in a field.
In the meadow where children once ran
and laughter rose like blackbirds.

The old sod house
will someday disappear completely.
Rain will soften its edges.
Roots will enter.
The prairie will gather it back
into itself.
And one day
no one passing by
will know it stood here.
But I will know.
And because I know,
some part of him remains.

The wind moves again.
The grasses bow.
For a moment
it feels as though someone
has stepped beside me.
We stand together,
looking across the open land,
sharing the same horizon.