

**JOE WILKINS**

**Hayrake**

In that interminable summer of the devil's own breath  
it was most all I did:  
pull the hayrake behind the old Ford tractor,  
the arced cutter bars

spread wide, the circled forks spinning behind,  
gathering two, sometimes  
three thin windrows of drought-shocked alfalfa  
and buffalo grass

together, funneling the fallow, bird-boned, orphan fruit  
of that unpromised land  
into a single windrow that wound the field thick enough  
for the bailer to jaw up.

But, too: that was the summer of Kevin, my older sister's  
thick-necked,  
ridiculous boyfriend. God, but we loved him—  
his jacked-up Toyota

with iridescent silver roll bar, his Wintermint Skoal  
and seraphic vocabulary  
of whistles and grunts. Kevin was from two towns  
over, the county seat,

was something new, something to set against the neighbors:  
the broken old ones,  
the sad fat ones, the ones eating each night boiled mudfish  
and boxed mac and cheese,

the ones with names that could have been the names  
of tractors or weeds—  
say Harlan Wilson or Sandy Russell, their skinny wives  
and gap-toothed girls,  
boys bromidic as their fathers. And all of them, and us,  
dust-stunned, debt-ridden,  
just barely hanging on to the sagebrush plains we worked,  
that worked us. Not Kevin:

he was off to play football for the community college;  
without asking  
he'd flip the dial to FM, throw his massive fists in the air  
when Van Halen came on;

he wore his sunglasses even inside. So the day I heard  
that Kevin's beautiful  
Toyota had like some strange bird lifted him into the dark,  
and he, like my father

and Sandy Russell and Harlan's baby girl, was dust—  
I left the house  
and walked north, to the one decent field we had left,  
where I fired the Ford

and turned myself around that patch of dirt for hours, until all  
those skinny windrows  
were one and good, and there was only one world,  
and God's or not,

I was in it, and I was pulling the iron-winged hayrake.