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Family Busk

Jonathan Holden

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FAMILY BUSK

I wish this stuff would catch
and cuss us out the way it used to
when we ripped up the blackberry
patch. It's too wet. The hay
on top is caked, half compost clogged
with steam, the smoke inside like
thick, curdled milk.

I wish these were the tangled
bedsprings of those briars we used
to burn; they coiled like whips,
their thorns the size of thumbnails;
when they clung, they could tear
a sweater up into loose string.

That stuff piled up almost too
fast for us—a dried rage.
When we lit the fuse on it, we had
to circle it with rakes, beat away
its heat, sneak in under to scuff out
the skirmishes it set. And there

it goes, all the times I banged
upstairs behind my brother, flung
him on the bed where he contracted,
shrunk his head like a turtle inside
the pillows, bared his arm; the years
I farmed a purple garden on it
with my fist. There go all

the bitter silences my father
kept behind closed doors, trying
to work; the times my mother valiantly
explained what made him tick. There
goes the core: that one, malicious,
carrot-colored tongue, lolling
out of control above our heads—it
spoke for us, it simplified everything
again.

More smoke blooms up, this warm
mist, it almost smothers us. My mother
bravely shovels some wet leaves, working
around the edges with the same deft
patience that she cooks a duck.
This stuff won't burn, and, still,
she won't let go of that stupid
rake she doesn't need.