

American Pastoral

I am standing at the edge of the oak forest in the place
where I am from, where branches twist up to the light

like my grandmother's thumbs wrung by arthritis. These trees
strike upon winter and bare their forms against the overcast

the sun a gray hole in the sky. Last summer's Rattlesnake Master
weave their spiked heads through the cold breeze, which, like a memory

of the long-tongued bee, buzzes in the dry grass. All this history here
half-secreted from me, and I'm living by its biography, swathed in its ecological

hum—I am nothing without the place I am from. Soon, wherever
they've been planted, the daffodils will unbury their basal sheaths

from the prairie soil, throw open their starburst faces, and wave among
the onion grass. Like them, I am not native. An American, I'm endemic to nowhere

that hasn't, like an apple, been bruised. Like the apple tree, I come spread by the hand
of some Johnny. And This, though it does not belong to me, is the only ground I belong to.

How can I live in the place where I am from? Fool answers arrive on the birdsong of my mind's
astronomical dawn. The thunderstorms moving eastward become the false spring, then spring.

And I am a vessel, temporary and fragile, carrying a story of the world, chronically
unhopeful, but I know what I love. Among them, this pastorate of prairie and forest

due east of the south-churning river, and the river which unbuckles from the ice,
which prepares for the bank swallows' oncoming flight, and bank swallows the size

of a human heart, who skim the runnels to feast on mosquito hawks midair, who redig
their nests into the ancestral limestone, rising opposite in pairs above the muddy

shoreline abundant with cattail. Soon now, soon, now, they'll erupt the dusk
with waves of chirps, flying their bodies, questioning water, praising earth.