

## WORKING THE ODDS

**MAUREEN  
TOLMAN  
FLANNERY**

*The government wagers 160 acres against \$18 that  
you'll starve before you can live five years on the land*  
—homesteader's letter

We stood on a bluff overlooking the river valley  
to select a plot of land where we could plant fantasies,  
imagine a farm fertile with the work of our hands.

Most of that first year was spent clearing.  
It took Elias and the boys days to saw through one trunk,  
and there were acres of wooded space.  
Massive hickory and oak—trees so magnificent  
I'd weep to see them crashing down  
with the sound of Armageddon  
and beasts leaping ahead through the underbrush.  
We left the crab apple trees, some hickory for nuts  
and a stand of oaks to shelter the cabin we meant to build.

We knew it would be hard going,  
but no one told us about the stones,  
embedded boulders we'd dig out and drag

till every bone beneath our flesh whimpered for rest.  
Together we cleared all the stones from a field,  
but still every year with the spring's thaw  
more rocks rose up from hell as if the devil himself  
were daring us to stay and make things grow.

Elias put in potatoes and squash, but the deer  
ate the greens just as they peeked above the furrows.  
A fine crop of corn was coming up one summer  
when hail stones big as walnuts  
knocked all the young ears clean off the stalks.  
We plowed them under and sewed buckwheat  
so as to have something to eat come the cold.

That next spring I was little help to Elias for clearing the fields.  
With child again, I hemorrhaged every time  
I tried to drag another stone to the wall.  
I lost that baby, a tiny girl who came before the river had  
swollen.  
We buried her below the bluff near a dogwood bush  
that greets me each spring with the memory of it,  
blossoms as white as the swaddling we wrapped tight  
around all there was of her. I suppose expectations  
of happiness in this place went with that child  
into the hole Elias dug in the rich, black earth.

I took on a powerful craving for color and something fine.  
My niece from back East sent me a packet of hollyhock seeds.  
The hearty flowers took to our rocky soil.  
It gave us all great joy to see the red skirts  
dancing upside down in a summer wind.

We took to wondering if risking our small savings  
on the hope of proving up hadn't just been  
the twice-deceived folly of moon-eyed dreamers  
and if we shouldn't just give it all up and go home  
while we still had some pluck and hope of future left in us.