

ON SCALPING

TYLER MILLS

I question the pear tree my grandfather's ancestor moved,
and a note in *Angell Genealogy* mentions "Thomas"
digging the roots from a family orchard and walking two miles,
the live trunk rolling over his spine while he staggered
past foxes pausing in the dandelions then slinking out of sight.

This for the tree to be near a well. I think about leather seed-pouches.
Beetle-shell bits pushed by thumb into a clump of soil.
Then bright stalks curling & alive & sometimes grafted
like the ancient Romans' pear trees they cultivated near the Coliseum—
pears that last months and months: bitter, buttery, coarse,

right to their cores. Hydrangeas billow and snow the coppery skin
in the fruit bowls of Renaissance still lifes.
And my ancestor moved his tree to a well. Now the water table's infected:
farms leach pesticides across upstate New York
where corn manages to grow in the glacial rock-studded fields

during the sweatshirt, July-length summers.
We grew raspberries in a wild bush next to the garage
and picked bowls & bowls of warm & hairy berries,
drowned the specks of flies out of each bubbled jewel in cold water,
then froze them for winter. Winters blighted the colonist's pears

during the eighteenth century, which is why I question the pears my grandfather's ancestor moved, and a note in this book says the tree was planted in 1770—I was reading about the 1700s looking for the relative from Cooperstown who was scalped by a local tribe and lived. How did he live through it?

What did his scabbed forehead look like, how did the cold knife skim the skull, close enough to the worried tissues of the mind to know the wetness running from neck to eyebrows? I wanted to know: I discovered the French and British soldiers paid Indian tribes for bringing braids,

light-colored, and the soft feathers from a child's crown. As a war tactic, the officers paid different amounts per scalp. Officers paid more for children's skins. The man in my family was a child when this happened to him. My grandfather found an image once, told me our relative, an old man by then, wore a black fur hat.

I cannot find any record of him in these brown pages—but the writer of this book explains how the tree that produced two-thousand bushels of pears was expected to live *at least thirty years longer*. This in cursive seahorses. So it lived. And the writer was right. Thirty more years is a life.