

Carolina Clay

All I wanted was to sink a new fencepost,
to replant what the chestnut filly took down
last evening
when she bolted at the crack of lightning.

But this red soil bakes hard and dry in the kiln
of a southern summer.
My shovel stubs the terracotta earth and bounces off.

My father the farmer would say, *So. Use the right tools.*

I fetch his hand auger, the brace and bit he used
a hundred years ago
to tap the sugar maple trees in a softer Connecticut climate.
And his 24-pound crowbar, shaped from the front axle
of an ancient Massey Harris tractor.

Before he died my father showed me how to use a foot-powered grindstone
to sharpen the crowbar's tapered end.
But I was only thirteen, and alone. So the steel
still bears the marks from the last time he sharpened it for me.

First, the auger.
Sliding my fingers onto the oak spindle
leaning into the earth
I drill five neat holes into redbrick clay.

Next, the crowbar.
Wrapping my hands over his palmprints
hefting its good balance
I let the weight drop straight into each hole.

The clay chips
curls away
in red-earth flakes.
When the hole is six inches down, I pour in water and let it seep.

A red-shouldered hawk glides above the pines, riding an unseen thermal.

I watch the hawk
until the clay softens and melts
terracotta turning to potter's slip.
I scoop it by handfuls into a sloppy mound.

I wear the clay;
my hands and arms are slick.
Ochre presses into pores,
smears into sweat. As it dries,
flakes of clay peel off like flayed skin.

My brother the potter would say,
The clay lives! You can create beautiful things.

Before he died my brother showed me how
to work clay on his wheel
to turn and shape common earth into elegant vessels.
But I was clumsy and impatient. My pots cracked in the kiln so I threw them away.

If I can remember
what I am made from
perhaps
I can rebuild the broken bits
from this red Carolina clay.

Perhaps
I can fire this earth into hard red bricks
trowel my tears into ashes
make the mortar to point up
what has crumbled.

Perhaps
hold everything tight.