Mrs. Ramsay's Knee
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CHRISTINE, DAUGHTER OF IMMIGRANTS
for her daughters, Carol and Lois

Before she dies, your mother tells you
of life in the black fields of Germany before she married
and came to this house and this room where she lies
seven years dying of pernicious anemia.

You see as she tells you the black fields of potatoes
like ugly stones stacked in piles and ready for battle,
her hands green with vines she has pulled
and calloused by the spade she leans into,
the edge of her long dress stained with mud
hot and stinking with rotting potatoes.
She tells you of days she fainted in the fields
and her father carried her a long way—

his boots sucking in and out of the mud,
the hem of her dress dragging—across rows
of potatoes to a cart of straw where he left her
unattended for hours in the sun with pain

like the labor of childbirth drawing her knees up
hard against the straw and no water for her throat
so dry with breathing through her mouth and the dark

red flow of her blood soaking through her dress
into the straw and the grain of the wood that she scrubbed
but never entirely cleaned of the stain.