

Old Windmill and Shed on Abandoned Farm in Gray and Black

I recently saw a watercolor
in an art gallery of an old homestead
and I thought of Raymond,

my great uncle, who was one of ten
children, the one who never married,
who stayed on the family farm

near Oskaloosa and took care
of his invalid father, my grandfather,
who had fallen and broken his back

while patching a leaky roof ...
my grandfather, who I only knew
in his later years when he was bedridden.

Raymond took care of him
and the farm and the chores and the house
with such fastidiousness that one of my aunts

told me, as if it was a great secret, "I'll tell you
something. That Raymond. You can eat
off his kitchen floor." That seemed odd to me

because I couldn't imagine
ever wanting to do such a thing, but
when my grandfather died, Raymond

scrubbed every inch of that house,
so people could eat off any surface
they wanted, I guess.

And then, as the family story goes,
he left through the kitchen door and walked
in the rain to the old gray shed out back

and rolled the log away from the plank door
and stepped inside to carefully
cover all the seed sacks and tools

with burlap, so as not to make a mess
before he knelt, as if in prayer,
and rested his chin on the double barrels

of a 1902 Davenport side by side shotgun
... and ... that ... as they say ...
was that.

And for me, that was that,
until I later remembered having asked
Raymond about the name "Oskaloosa"

He told me that town lore said
the place was named after a Creek princess
who married a Seminole chief named Osceola.

and explained that tradition said her name
meant "last of the beautiful,"
but Raymond said that wasn't so.

"Oskaloosa" in the Creek
language means "black rain"
or "black water."

I liked his stories and today
when I think about it,
it seems that's all that's left ...

except maybe somewhere
in an antique shop that features items
scavenged from old farm buildings

someone will find a weathered shed door
with rusty hinges and words scribbled
on the inside that were once spoken

by a Seminole chief named Osceola:
"Let our last sleep
be in the graves of our native land!"

—Terry Allen

