1918 Union Valley Road Oklahoma

I

Maybe it was while reading the 1918 Union Valley Bulletin
   A political handbill given John Hoggatt by a hacking cougher at the feed store
Maybe it was the sour apple gone mahogany black that he’d eaten from his wife’s cellar stash
   He knew he should have given it to Trudy their hog
Maybe it was the six-mile walk to and from his father’s farm in Stonewall
   Just to ask, need help with that heifer, Pop?
Maybe it was the burning tingling running over the top of John’s head
   As if he was being roasted alive, filling him with fear

   He coughed into his fist, no
   Iva honey, lock the gate so the Crowder boys can’t steal our cow
   He coughed into his fist, no
   Iva honey,
   He coughed into his fist
   Iva, so cold.

Winds like a siren whip the Junipers outside, maybe 90 per,
   He swayed left, and then right, and onto their Jenny Lind bed
   A wedding gift,
   Coveralls still on.

II

Shocked into
consciousness
by sunlight
Iva supports
herself with her
arms and leans
forward Eyes
mucus glued
Has she been
crying in
her sleep?

The bed
is cold, the
stove out Her
long black
hair matted by
high fevers. In her dreams, the sound of a gurgling brook She looks at John, her teeth chattering He is completely blue now. She presses on John’s chest. Blood and mucus slip between his blue lips Breathe, John, Breathe.

Don’t worry I gave our baby girl to your sister, Euda Yesterday, the day before, maybe last week, but she’s safe. Didn’t make a sound, just waved bye-bye, Bye-bye, Mommy bye-bye. Like you, she doesn’t complain Like you, she’s more Irish than Cherokee – like me.

Breathe, John, Breathe. Take a breath, John Hoggatt. How many times? Iva curls up by his side, played
out Who hast never bruised a living flower, she whispers. Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Breathe, John.

III

The sun is yet a rumor
   Iva sleeps like the dead
Until she doesn’t.
   On the third day she feels herself rising
   Everything a moving cloud,
She observes herself in the mirror
   Washes her mahogany cheeks
That’s odd, she thinks
   Lock the gate, John,
Or the Crowder boys will steal our cow.

She coughs into her handkerchief
   John honey,
She coughs into her handkerchief
   John honey,
She coughs into her handkerchief
   Hear me.

Yes Iva
   You live in unmeaning dreams, he says,
The grave is ready.

John honey
   Stay

I washed your Sunday shirt
   Hung it on the line to dry
We can bury our faces
   In summer laundry

Taste the scent of sun
   In a field of light
Breathing as one

Stay

IV

Iva is dreaming again
She hears his name, John,
The sound like a bell on her tongue,
    John
    on
    on
    on
    g-

Breathe

—LeAnne Howe