

A Local History

My grandmother's house was always full of flies.
They'd crawl across each other on the windowsill
or would be spinning out their noisy dying

everywhere—so many, you could sweep forever
and not get all the dead flies off the floor.
Downhill, in a marsh of bristle-sided reeds,

milkweed pods kept cracking open, leaking seed
across the air, renewing the existence of their species
in the way they'd done from year to year.

Way back when, some hard-handed
Methodist pioneer had somehow wrenched up
every stone big enough to break a plough

and piled them all throughout the woods,
where they still were, in mounds, when I was growing up,
like barrows heaped above the decomposed

remains of the violent Saxon kings, whose grave-goods
featured large in my imagination.
My grandmother's gone. Before she died

she lost her words, her house, her name.
But for me, she's still a hard old woman
walking downhill at dawn, long into autumn,

to skinny-dip in her weed-choked, freezing pond.
A hedge of wind, a wall of suburban snow—
my father's father's ashes are in the ground

in southern Ontario. Something I read in college
and for whatever reason have not forgotten
is that the ancient Saxon barrow-makers, living

among broken things they could admire
but not rebuild—aqueducts and roads the Romans
left behind—saw themselves as late arrivers, as

an after-folk living on the graves of a greater folk
who'd gone before. Where is the horse, where
the rider, some now-nameless Saxon

wrote, grieving for a people who his own
people centuries before had annihilated,
assimilated, or driven into the sea.

from *Hazlitt*