KEVIN CLARK

STOCK AND ROOT

SACRAMENTO VALLEY

The late October sunlight, elaborate in the withered garden, the melons rotting amid the deflated vines, signal reason for taking stock and root, here and again. Lately, I run against the afternoon light toward the sorrel hills, turn north out the state road to Guinda, Madison and Zamora, the small neighbors ushering their children indoors, the stores shutting, even the police home for dinner. At six miles I curl east, the horizon vanished, and I can hear it, the bass trudge rumbling across fields of feed corn.

In high school every step was a race. Now, as I break for middle age, this noise signifies decline and refusal: I bolt to beat the freight across the frontage road. (Every night I win, though once last year, I outran the angry engine by a tight ten yards and the horn’s blast.) But this poem intends more, how I sweep down the last mile into the neighborhood and walk circles around the house, my dog Jake bouncing at my return, how I stretch in the twilight. Tonight the valley air delivers its special scent of smoke and moist harvest.

The garden comes alive again. My sheep kneel in the moonlight. This is the taking stock. I tell Jake it’s time for supper, and before closing the door behind us, I look into the tumultuous shadows.

I think: if I must die, let it be here, in autumn, during harvest. This is the taking root.