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Living Loess

*A Celebration of Portland Hills Silt
which lies atop the Tualatin Mountains
and is estimated to be 34,000 to 700,000 years old
In memoriam J. Mary Taylor*

Before *Homo sapiens*, before the last Ice Age,
longer than the memory of any being now living,
old as some oceans, a rising and settling and filling
of cracks and outcrops and canyons: *loess*.

A word that's flecked with mica.
Rub it between your fingers; your tongue tastes what moles sift
through forepaws as they heap mounds beneath lilacs.
The silt of syllables underlies our language.

I've had it for breakfast as plums,
for lunch as tomatoes, for dinner as chard.
I've scraped it off my boots, washed it off my knees,
wiped it off my face, patted it with my hands.

The stratigraphy begins with grit under fingernails,
deepens with rodent tunnels, down to damp springs
where rough-skinned newts mate in the dark.
Who knows how far down to reach basalt.

Brown as milk chocolate, gummy as clay,
dusty as wind-sliced desert, cement-hard in summer,
it slips downslope with houses and roads,
slips because it's mere silt lying atop basalt,

alluvial silt, loose and light and moveable,
silt whipped up-ridge millennia ago
from the Columbia River's eternally ephemeral floor.
Wind-delivered, there's nothing holding it to bedrock.

A neighbor says a house used to stand
below the fenced part of one street
that's wild now with red alder, maple, and fir.
One day, the whole hillside just collapsed.

Among the young houses stand old conifers
whose roots enjoin with these mountains' concreted past;
they sip the silt that once was river bottom and knit themselves
into the slope and hold the slope and become the land.

I'm just a biped inside one century, a soft-skinned mammal
lacking fossorial features except for a shovel, tool rather than appendage,
knowledge superficial. But I do love how the ground's grammar
proves universal in that most particular of particles: *loess*.