



7-15-1994

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Recommended Citation

Jolliff, William (1994) "Four Men Stack Hay in the Back Mow," *Westview*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol13/iss4/15>

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FOUR MEN STACK HAY IN THE BACK MOW

William Jolliff

This barn has not been used for twenty years.
We work like slow wood bees, my father, my brother,
myself. Blades of light wedge through the cracks

in dry pine siding and wrap our dust grey shirts
with hornet stripes. We sink our hooks between
the wire bands, dragging bales from the wagon

to the back wall. My brother drops, sits a moment
on the mow's edge, then falls six feet to buck
the last bales. Eaves fill with khaki balloons.

Finished stacking, we form a line three forks
abreast to push the chaff across the floor.
Tongs catch on tongued boards, and muscles strain

in hidden bales—work my grandfather left
undone—that wait like hives abandoned
in an orchard gone back to woods. We're strange

Illustration by Rodney Cloud





to one another's work, but hold the even line.
A stack settles on the wagon, and in the morning
we'll haul it back to the field, mix it with the new.

This good day we've spent together, moving hay,
it shames us that we've never caught the habit
of talk. At dusk I shower with a hose

in the barnyard, eat fresh berries and tea,
shoo the bees away from my son, and listen
to his babbling. This is my work: to catch

his words, to hook and stack his first words.