

Janice N. Harrington's Poetry

DRYING APPLES

Kneeling, she leans onto one hand
and with the other pushes apple slices
and rings of apple, spreading them
wide across flattened flour sacks
beneath the heat and desiccant air.

Even sweetness is labored for, even
this moment disturbed only by distant
sawing, only by a crow's desolation,
and by her hand moving out, around
and out again, unsettling the morning hour.

Earlier, she snapped wennish apples
from their stems and dropped them
into a bushel basket. She washed them
with well water, throwing aside the ones
that floated, the ones too wormy. She sat
in a straight-backed chair beneath a pin oak
with paring knife and five-gallon tub,
curling away the blotchy peel, stabbing
seeds and woody stem, cutting away
the spoil and all that was not pap or apple.

Now, unworried, she presses a papery sliver
against her tongue, holding its wedge
between brown lips—an epistle
that life is reach and bend, is arm, is leg,
is back, is imperfect, is rot and worm,
is too small, is not enough; it is bitten,
it is chewed and sucked, it is swallowed
or spat out, and it is sweet, it is sweet, it is sweet.

Now she spreads apples atop a shed
she built herself, atop its slanted roof,
spreading and smoothing pats of appley

flesh that will wither and dry, wither
and brown. She will shuffle the pulpy
ruffles into cotton sacks, reduced
and ear-like, ears filling both palms,
relics of a martyred saint or the wizened
tongues of castrati singing hush hush hush,

but . . . no, they are only apples,
only dried apples in a flour sack
light and easy to carry, a bounty set aside,
preserved for need or long winter
or an appetite that craves splendor--
not its shape but its remembrance.

TURNING

In the sideyard, this small hub: a child
clasping a cotton string bound to a June bug's legs.

Maybe the iridescent minstrel will weary and die.
Maybe its leg will shear and cast off its bridle.
Unfortunate machine, maybe it doesn't know
we are held and bound by prescribed orbits.
Yet the child will never weary,

not of a June bug's hums, the way it strums the air
like a sawmill in the distance or the low murmur,
m-hmm, of a Baptist Church on Sunday morning,
nor will she tire of its turning. How many times
around? Never enough. Turn

and you are that cotton string, a well's rope,
an unraveling doily, or the yellow thread
that cinched Webster's tobacco pouch. Turn
and you are a June bug's dolorous drone.

Traveler, believe the stars are bright beetles
tied to strings of light. Believe that a brown girl wields
these lambent arcs, that wild vibrations
tremble the tips of a brown girl's fingers. Believe

that you are a June bug tethered
to a cotton string, ceaselessly turning
but never enough, held by implacable delight,
your blue-black wings flared and ringing.

REVIVAL

Through the cooling dark,
they walk, Lillian, Webster, Riley, Anna,
MacArthur and Eurel, returning
from Heavenly Father and Yes, Jesus!,
from paper fans with little brown
girls in Sunday bonnets "M-hmmmm"
from the communion of sour juice and crackers,
ah weh-lll, from church mothers in nurses' uniforms and rills of sweat spilling from black brows.
Have mercy on us, Father.
Look down upon us, Father, and give us
your blessing, in Jesus' name . . .

Above a darkened bough, a wing
beats, and in the pitchy shadows crickets
shrill, and a frog repeats, repeats,
repeats. Maybe Anna holds her father's
hand. Maybe the boys tussle and pitch
stones into darkness while their mother
watches, humming and holding
her Bible more firmly than an ax handle,
or maybe they go weary on and quiet.
It is only their steps you hear, only shifting sand.

On a rural route, a family walks
while the night begins its long sermon, and the miles go by, and the miles go by.
If an owl calls from that darkness,
then someone will die. If a hound keens
one long, longing vowel, they will shudder.
If a star plummets, that too will have meaning.
This is faith, the road that takes them home.

ASH

Vernon, Alabama, 1961

I think about that winter in Vernon
when it was just the two of us and cold,

and December sifted snow over the red
dough boards of yard and roof,

and you made the terrible pilgrimage each night
in bare feet from bed to stove, to stoke its embers

and add the meager coal. Afterwards, you shivered
across the linoleum, across its worn and cinder-

bitten roses. Do I remember you leaping
from petal to petal, your fallow feet shining

like beacons? I don't know. It was long
ago. But I know you climbed beneath

the sheets and "opening your shirt"
placed my hands against your belly.

We lay banked beside each other, unmoving,
asleep in a house as slanted as a cant of snow,

where we were Websta's gal and her baby girl,
where we waited for the colored serviceman

who belonged to us, until waiting
was also winter, a weather we knew.

How lovely we were then, the two of us,
huddled in that darkness, surrounded

by the dull glowing of red roses
and comet-cinders, cast out and briefly bright.

SHAKING THE GRASS

Evening, and all my ghosts come back to me
like red banty hens to catalpa limbs
and chicken-wired hutches, clucking, clucking,
and falling, at last, into their head-under-wing sleep.

I think about the field of grass I lay in once,
between Omaha and Lincoln. It was summer, I think.
The air smelled green, and wands of windy green, a-sway,
a-sway, swayed over me. I lay on green sod
like a prairie snake letting the sun warm me.

What does a girl think about alone
in a field of grass, beneath a sky as bright
as an Easter dress, beneath a green wind?

Maybe I have not shaken the grass.
All is vanity.

Maybe I never rose from that green field.
All is vanity.

Maybe I did no more than swallow deep, deep breaths
and spill them out into story: all is vanity.

Maybe I listened to the wind sighing and shivered,
spinning, aw whirl amidst the bluestem
and green lashes: O my beloved! O my beloved!

I lay in a field of grass once, and then went on.
Even the hollow my body made is gone.

Is It Beauty That We Owe?

To M

I stir a glass bottle filled with glass beads
and remember your lesson: to leave a flaw,
a bead to break the pattern, to free the maker.
Not an error but humility: We are not gods.
The last bead molded into a fist, a grit,
a clog that stops the machine: No tidy endings!
Wrong color, wrong shape, wrong size,
the last bead set like a door or a period
or the stone before the tomb's mouth. Pattern
revealed as fraud and feint. I purposely
err, as you taught me, and choose
odd and ugly and unlike, and into every making
I weave fault: Erotic disruption or ember.

To the White Girl Who Scolded Me That Not Everything Is about Race

The moon is in its highest seat.

We try to position the telescope.

You insist it's the Sea of Tranquility. Dust on the lens, I say.

Over our withering tree marigold,
a hummingbird hovers, then winks away.

I think the large blue-white trumpets
are morning glories?

Such silly cabbage moths. Sufi-dancing, they whirl,
and, whirling, they listen and listen and listen.

She has a collection of mussel shells
on her front porch: *heelsplitters*, *fatmuckets*,
and *threehorn wartybacks*.

My brother left us years ago,
refuses now to speak to anyone.

Particulate, splendiferous, skillet, and jubilee.

I truly believe the tallgrasses are beautiful,
the way they daven and lift their seedy panicles.

A ruined art installation releases its plastic cups, mylar,
and cellophane over the reconstructed prairie.

I am not adopted and yet I am
not the same skin color as my mother or my father.
How do they know me? How do they call me daughter?

Rise and bow down. Rise and bow down.
O pilgrims—don't you feel
the light on your face?

Whatever happened to that garter snake? The one
that left such a lengthy sentence beside the garden hose?

No, I said. Not everything.

Wind Shear

Under the magnolia, a winter-starved hare stills
and pretends it is not there,

and wanting less of fearfulness
I pretend that I do not see my camouflage, the wild promises
in my gaze, and step carefully by.

Morning, bitter morning—
lack and awful patience wait at every compass point.
Mourning, mournful, the prairie seals wind-scored stems with snow.

Here inside a stalk of goldenrod
a gall wasp will ride hard winter out.

Here between my ribs, wasps of lonely, wasps of
not yet, not yet wait and ride hard winter out.

Such a slow season, laggard and mean.
I can't explain the cardinals I've seen of late,

but the crows' black fists, the way they bully
eave and air, stab the morning with the sharpest awe,

I understand it now. I see the reason and agree.

They All Sang

1.

Even the cast iron skillet sang
of grease, and heat, and bloodied meat,
summoned the reaching flame,
gladsome despite its heavy skin.

Even the well bucket rang like a Baptist choir
or a man toppling down a stair who laughs,
denying the frailty that his child has witnessed.

They all sang: the saw, the hound,
the clamoring crow, the cow's shofar,
the tooth against the dipper's rim,
the whetstone, and the kudzu's hem.

Only the persimmons did not sing,
choosing instead to cinch pressing
lips and draw them tight with discontent.
But the bed sang, with the body's
oar and chantey, its springs singing:

Jordan is wide, boys, Jordan is wide.
Heave away, Jordan, heave away.
Find no rest 'til the other side,
Heave away, Jordan, heave away.

And the screen door above the back step sang,
why when going in and *why* when going out,
though no one answered.

And the wasps above the outhouse stench
sang angrily, angrily, all day long, all day long.

2.

Hands washed in a pan of well water sing
of soil and soap and splash and splintery light,
sing abundance and probity,
sing of palms and bodies embracing
in the darkness of a cast iron bed.

And the hands sodden with well water
are the hands that will raise a pine switch

to whip a child: *which! which! which!*
Listen, beloved, listen — in each nick, a note
of blood and a child singing, oh, and oh.

3.

Beneath the eaves of loblolly and *yella* pine
children sing *Little Sally Walker*,
sittin' in a saucer. Rise, Sally, rise.
Wipe your weepin' eyes. Put your hands
on your hips. Let your backbone slip . . .

and *London Bridge is falling down*,
falling down, falling down . . .

Children who know before their sixth year
four synonyms for sorrow — cry, weep,
bawl, and all gone, baby, all gone —
sway and shimmy, standing
on bright earth, dark dancers:

O shake it to the East.
O shake it to the West. Shake it
to the very one that you love the best!

Children who know the falling
down of things and know the hands
that lock you in and knock you
back and forth, zeal's violent theater,
they know the tightened fists and linked limbs
that hold us imprisoned between two towers
and chant in the stunning light, *falling*
down, falling down. Falling

down, two brown-legged girls in cotton dresses,
girl-towers, brow facing brow,
hands raised in an arch above their heads,
sunlight in sooty hair, terrible fire:
they will be the towers
beneath an inconceivable sky,
their arms falling, falling.

Rusty knees and ashy elbows,
children singing, singing,
until one of them is chosen.
Take the key and lock her up!

Lock her up! Lock her up!
Take the key and lock her up,
my fair lady.

And you know they are not singing of death,
my fair lady,

or towers falling,
my fair lady,

or brutality's warders,
my fair lady,

but of vast loveliness,
my fair lady,

brought for safe-keeping into these small hands,
into the spanning arms that make the human cradle,
O my fair lady.

4.

In the night,
 she lies awake listening
 below sleep, below
the sound of her husband's molted breath,
to the city's distant engine,
the wash of leaves and wind-lashed maples.

Three a.m. Early October. Colder than expected.
In the distance, the mournful bay of a coal train,
Illinois Power's phlegmy stacks
and steel rails berating the darkness.

But it is the wind chime that draws her,
on naked tiptoe beneath the magnolia,
muting the metal tongues with a rubber band.

At this hour, memory also rises, like a crone
with an anxious bladder, and memory sings
psalms and blues, dirges and rounds, rounds,
rounds endlessly repeating.

Who would hear me, asked Rilke,
if I cried out among the hierarchies of angels?

Who hears the heart's holler at the end
of the row?

Not long to be here, not long, not long.
Goin' over Jordan one day, one day.
Goin' over Jordan one day soon.

What listens, only listens — nothing more.

Yet still we sing, as if to rise
like Little Sally Walker

compelled from grieving and dust,
in a ring of space
given articulate flesh —

O shake it to the East,
O shake it to the West —

so that we can choose: delight.

Janice N. Harrington
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