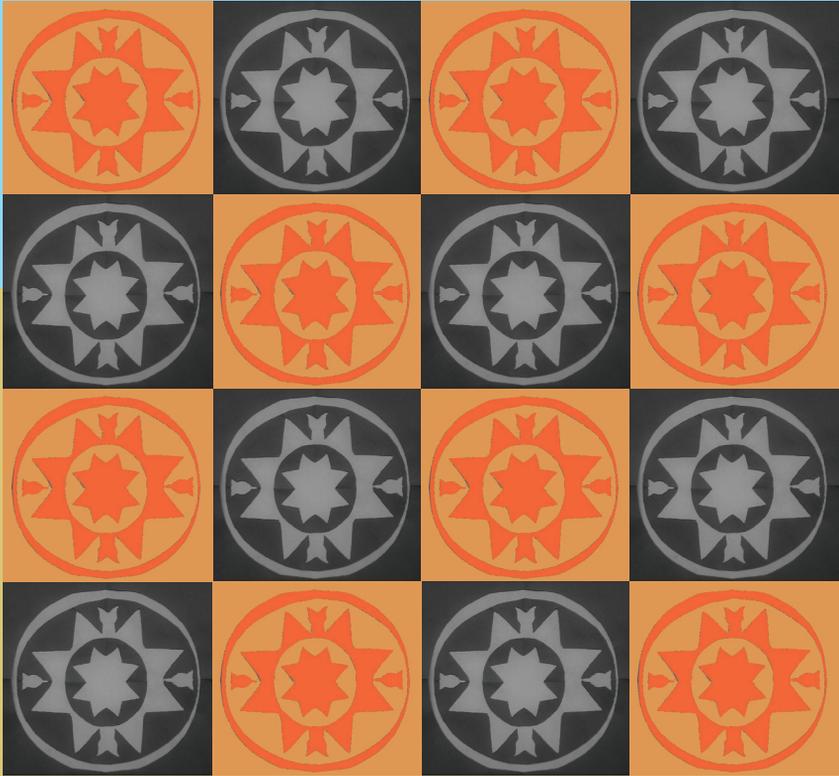


Harvest Time



POEMS

Martin Willitts Jr.

Also by Martin Willitts Jr. from Deerbrook Editions

Three Ages of Women

Harvest Time

POETRY

Martin Willitts Jr

DEERBROOK EDITIONS

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The cover incorporates a paper cut-out of a “hex sign” by the author. See the note at the back of the book.

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I.

Every summer, ages 5-17, I worked on my grandparent's Amish and Mennonite farm. I would arrive briefly in spring to start hand-plowing and sowing seed from a burlap bag.

Harvest Time

I carry a basket on one shoulder
out of the barn and into the balance
making work easy
as chewing on a straw for no reason

there is much to do
I do not know where to begin
so I begin somewhere

I must work hard or not at all
the corn is heavy
with dreams of two dead mallards

the barn is dark with teaching
grandfather peels open the yellow tassels
I am surprised by the yellow
emerging as a new day
slowly as any good ancestry

I do not have time to waste
like the couple courting in cut hay
nor can I laze about
against the sun like a tired hound

there is no time
this is back-breaking work
that must be done
all crops planted
the lessons of my grandparents
the intimacy of the couple wanting
to know more than they are allowed to know

I have no time for this
I carry baskets of tomorrow
heavy as death

someone must do this

Simple Things

cows migrate towards a milking pail
they are Grandfather's clock for a farmer
whispers of light show him
pulling on his boots
heading out

he opens the gate
where he once met his wife
separated by the gate
shutting out temptation

these are all simple things
touching a forbidden hand
pulling fistfuls of milk into a wooden bucket
things any man can understand

everything else moves too quickly
misunderstood
and mysterious as restless petticoats

better to bend time
to the slowest of minutes
it is simpler that way

let other people feel the barometer of their hearts
he tends to the deliberate
slow as night
as his wife shakes laundry off the line

this was how he felt
when he opened that gate
and she slipped through the first time
his hand tumbling into hers
he crowed the morning

Roadside Vegetable Stand

I disliked waiting at the vegetable and fruit stand:
wooden pint baskets; the scales for the nervous
wanting assurance they were not cheated;
fruit pinchers making finger bruises,
then rejecting the fruit as having marks;
the ones who asked *what is that*
when it was clearly peas still in their shells.

I disliked waiting for someone to pull over.
Sometimes, they would wiz by so fast
their dust never settled, a blur of faces
like wanted posters gawking at me.
They left their life as gouged markers.

I disliked the patience I had to learn.
I would rather be scything the wheat in high heat,
the sun boring a hole in the sky
like the projector light burning an old movie,
than to put up with their arrogance counting change
five times, to prove I was not cheating them
a penny. And if they asked for directions
to where they were going, I was tempted
to tell them where to go. I knew those words at ten.

But I was told my tongue would blister
if I took on their wicked ways. Keep it simple;
never make the world more difficult than it is.
It was like wrestling with a bull in heat.
Never take on more than you can handle.
Handle every situation as if it was an egg.

When a car would pull over, I would smile
like a cow being milked. I'd mind manners,
count loose change, make certain
they got extra food, more than they bargained for,
thank them kindly, invite them back,
snarl when they drove away, check
my tongue to see if it was on fire yet.

The Sounds Water Makes

Grandmother hated the rusty click-clack whoosh
metallic sound of the kitchen hand pump,
preferring I'd go out: *Fetch a wooden bucket
of water from the well.*

I'd creak-creak the pulley rope
until I'd feel the bucket slap-bottom-touch the water,
go slower, sensing it sink-fill, then
tug-yank up into sunlight, a slushing bucket,
fetched it back.

Water tasted different when from a bucket
or the hand-pump or metal ladle at the well.
I never understood how the texture and flavor changed.

All I knew was Grandma hated the fancy hand pump,
choosing the old Amish, sensible ways,
without gadgets and gizmos. She desired a world
waking up to hardness of life, as loose
as water. But the rest of the world was moving
in a blur she'd never understand, leaving her behind,
set in her ways, her bones too old and stubborn
for there to be any other way than plain-spoke,
careful with words, listening before speaking.

She wanted a time when water was water,
and sky clung fiercely to the land.
She declared, "You can keep your ways."

I was too afraid to ask her what she was going to do
with all that water. I went softly back outside,
floors screech-scratching behind me
like a rope being lowered into the deepest well.

Listening

Mary Louise listens for pauses
you can hear her fingers
pressed lightly on the pulse of the page

she tilts her head
like an owl towards morning field mice

it is the hearing that is important here

so few people listen anymore
now the dark folds like her hands on her lap

she is as still as a bookcase with a vase
decorated with a picture of a thrush
as still as pink blossoms
willing themselves into apples

she is fierce in her listening
as certain as summer trails spring

she is consumed by loss

the kind of loss that hears
what it does not want to hear

her heart is wrinkled as the carpet

her sister Grace reads to her
from a well-preserved book

it is the heritage of sisters to share
and share what one has
but the other one lacks

so this reading out loud
is chewing of words
picking out the mouse's bones
using a thesaurus
from a room full of books

pages latch onto bric-a-brac
present themselves
for anyone listening

poems beat with owl wings

The Workweek Never Ends: a neighbor's complaints

1. Monday Peach Canning

the mason jars pregnant with sliced peaches
open their mouths
like newborns seeking nipple milk

steam from the double-boiler is yellow
a Chinese junket
in a sea of koi

as hot as a smoke house for ham
or reaching inside a Guernsey cow
to turn a stuck calf

2. Tuesday Delivery Day

deliver us from this heat
make us lie down on cool sheets of shade
pour us a spigot of lemonade showers

here comes the milkman
clinking bottles
taking more to leave on doorsteps

the iceman brings a block of ice
carrying it between metal tongs
I fan myself with a hymnal to coax away heat

3. Wednesday Pig Slop Day

I toss leavings of turnip tops
wilted broccoli heads
unsightly soft potatoes and onion skins

reminding me of loose papers
having something important to say
orange rind like surfaces of the sun

bacon grease for flavor although
I doubt the pigs are more discerning
than my husband

snorting and runting at his trough
feed pieces flailing
I need a raincoat when he feeds

4. Thursday Laundry Day

clothes churn in a whirlpool
grinding *20 Mule Team* into the fabric
into the folds of my palms

the wash pulls through the wringer
like pulling a mule the wrong way
when it refuses to budge without carrots

underwear flattens into retribution of cleanliness
water gushing streams of tears
the size of pearl onions

the washboard is rough as a preacher
reminding you of sins
you never committed

when done I will have put an end
to filth until my husband plows
the whole week of work into shame

5. Friday Attic Cleaning

our daguerreotype lives are on sabbatical
its aperture allowing deposits of light
filtering what needs illuminating

we can close the shutters yet light still enters
like a wedding dress exposing
images on a silver-mirrored surface

a failed marriage is like bread
if you open the convex cover too soon
it will warp into itself

a marriage can be loaves still warm
smelling of baking powder or lilac scents
behind the ears or a sachet of potpourri

like the process of developing film
marriage takes patience and time to develop
with successful exposure to the right elements

like tintype with a positive appearing
negative on opaque metal plates or
Victorian shadow drawings of outward appearances

I open the cedar chest in the attic
to find my veil and my vows reoccur
a force of reckoning lightning

6. Saturday Baking

mixing batter and baking cornbread
in an open-hearth Dutch oven is a mother
and daughter sharing as old as wooden spoons

the ingredients are as important as conversation
passing quilts of wisdom and gossip
like spools of black thread for a treadle machine

stitching secrets into the fabric
as measuring cups of shifted flour on wooden block
or adding a pinch of salt to make things rise

huddling shoulders churning butter
we mix in white lies with the buttermilk
tomorrow is more sacred

using bacon dripping and pouring the batter
as it sizzles like a first kiss
the cracked eggs opening in sworn confidence

I glow with recalling my own stolen kiss
from the freckled-faced boy whose arm
caught in a combine

a secret I never confessed not even in dreams
was I married the next best suitor
which turned out not so bad when I'm not looking

7. Sunday, A Day of Reflection

heirloom seeds passed through generations
are trusted more than promises
producing for centuries

we grow together in a spiritual manner
talking in a language of understanding
and trust what we cannot see

we merge together at a Meeting House
where no one is excluded
and even an errant husband can return to the fold

a desperate wife can seek shelter
in a stormy marriage
like seeds will reach their natural conclusion

I try to take each teachable moment
as a mare takes to a saddle although
I do not always understand the message

In the Cornfield

there is hesitation in the cornfield
I am waiting
still as a breeze caught in the heat
when nothing moves quickly

I'm trying to remember what I was going to do
I should have written it down
even if I wrote it on a sleeve
or the back of my hand

there are fields behind
the same endless fields ahead
no end to the fields needing work
the yellow edge of a woman's body

Spring at the Farm

under the new white apple flowers
resting under a hot goldenrod sun
far from the fox filled hills
taking it all in
hoping it would never end

these days
of lovely sun rises
playing forever
under turning of aged stars
beyond the roan horse stable
tossing rains of loose straw
careless and easy
and the far away hills
calling me to join them

no matter how fast I run
I never can catch them
the sky filling lungs
with colors from bluebonnets

the days were pitchforked
the grinding mill moved
once stilled water
but never moved ducks
I ran my heedless ways
goldenrod clinging to my lungs

Laundry Hanging Day

She knows it is probably the last day
to hang laundry, as long as the weather holds.
The season is thinning. The days are colder.
She studies the cloud cover blocking the sun,
willing the clouds out of the way. She pins
hope. The clothes are heavy with water,
so she twists them out. That will have to do.
She is tempting the rain; she knows it,
but it'd be worth it to have pine scent
in the sheets when she goes to sleep.

The fabric will remember the trees
and woodpeckers and the small,
sensitive ferns closing when touched.

She looks to the clouds for a sign,
any sign. Will it rain? Will it clear up?
She tries willing the clouds into moving.
She hums like a bee. She hears her husband
hammering loose shingles before winter sets in.
The woolly bear caterpillar was as fat as her thumb:
a true sign the snow will last as long as her laundry line.

Will the weather hold just a little bit longer?
Geese spread sheets in the sky.

Perhaps, the day will remain perfect, just for her:
unspoiled, unsoiled, dry to the touch. Please,
she prays, let something be perfect.

Goose Feathers and Farm Implements

1.

When I first laid on a goose-feather mattress
in my grandparent's farm house, I sank
like a seed into earth. Cloud-like. It was
as familiar as diving into bushels of leaves.
Waking up to the rudeness of a rooster
and needles of light, all summer,
I was told, *Feed the goose.*

When Grandfather butchered it
for a Charles Dickens-like meal,
I felt I'd betrayed it. I was sick for a month,
unable to sleep, especially in *that* bed.

I hid in the attic, crying to sleep
on a green army cot,
killing nightmare armies of my grandfather.

2.

In the attic, I found a round-top musty chest.
Being naturally curious, I unlatched it
and found letters bound in twine.

Light through the cross-breeze attic vents
angled like a goose's neck
on my ancestor's words,
ten generations back.

3.

A wheat thrasher had multiple blades
staggered in such a way to cut,
so if one blade missed, another might not.

A pull-saw worked on gravity-feed.
You put wood at the top and a leather belt
tugged wood towards the saw
making two even divisions.

A person could lose a hand either way.

I dreamt gruesome ways to maim Grandfather.
I had too much time on my hands.
Working sun-up to beyond sun-down
would cure me of that.

4.

When the sun cut through fog like a thrasher,
far-off geese called out in the thickness.

The moon came out of the round-top chest
still wearing a white night-cap.

I was reading my ancestor's mail
from the Revolutionary War.

Wind was thrashing fall leaves. It is strange
how time came to be both past and future.

When I read the letters, I fell into earth like seed.
I did not need a goose-feather bed.

At Five, I Learned the Purpose of Life

My first instinct was to chase the chickens.
My grandfather stopped me from such foolishness
by proceeding to kill one in front of me.
This was how I learned the purpose of life.

I learned death does not always shudder out.
Blood was on me at an early age.
When I was asked to summarize,
I had no words for pleasure or gruesomeness.

So, I said nothing, kept silence as my only friend.
To this day, I still do not know what to say.
What do you say about the purpose of death?
I know I wanted to kill my grandfather that day.

How do you speak of this anger? Not directly.
And as they say, the chicken did not die right away,
any more than my grandfather did years later
when his heart no longer wanted the purpose of life.

Waiting during Summer Solstice

This is the longest day
when the world is most fertile.
I am waiting for a cow to give birth,
but no one can control the timing.

I hear another cow having trouble
giving birth. I must reach inside
to turn calf around.
That is messy work needing to be done.

Above, the sun has gone into stillness.
It takes whatever shade I had.
The sun is swollen and pregnant,
taking its time, moving with difficulty.

Another cow is struggling.
How many more will I help to deliver?
It is like the heat had shrunk their birth canals.
Waiting for babies takes patience.

Working on My Grandparents' Farm

I'd get my hand slapped if I ate without praying first;
or scolded if I didn't spin wool thin as forgiveness.
Grandmother warned me life wouldn't be easy.
I'd be out before the roosters woke,
rain or shine or extreme punishing heat.
Clouds of swallowtail butterflies
would swish out of the fields
as dogs rounded up the sheep.

Grandfather seldom talked. His silence
was a different language: one of intense concentration
and repetition to get what needed to be done.
We'd work hand-in-hand, never speaking,
and the lessons I was learning weren't in a book.
Roosters set their clocks by us. His approval was a smile,
a sideways glance to make sure I got it right.
I'd hammer horseshoes on an anvil, sparking sunbreak,
or tan leather until it was smooth as butterfly wings
or split firewood, deep center, one blow, evenly,
or scythe with a swoosh-swing in a golfer's stance.
Swallowtails would spin up in air
into storm clouds, as if chased by dogs.

I'd work like a hound in the dog days when the earth steamed,
so sultry and tormented all I wanted to do was go limp.
Yet I'd work twice as hard. And I'd get little rewards:
Grandfather no longer demonstrating
but trusting I'd do it right,
or Grandmother smiling slowly
when I made a blanket on a loom, shooting the shuttle
though with a *snap*.

It's All a Matter of Perspective

My grandparent's farm seemed to get smaller
as I grew taller. A rooster will impregnate
as many chickens as you give him,
but when he started looking longingly at the cow,
we drew the line. They would pay the preacher
with green beans and he had 50 ways to serve them.
A full moon looked larger in a girlfriend's eye
until she ran away with the broom salesman.
Maps have a tendency to fold the wrong way.
What was the practicality of a three-seat outhouse?
When days got longer it made impatience shorter.
When Grandfather went to slaughter,
he could not find his animals;
the axe was never where it belonged, either.
If you fed chickens buckshot,
would they explode when you cooked them?
Once, I accidentally plowed up the sun.
I had a hard time forcing it back where it belonged.
At seven, I never understood why Grandmother giggled
when Grandfather looked at her a certain way.
I believed it was because he puckered his lips
like he tasted lemons. Later, I found out what it meant.
My girlfriend made the same giggle when she ran off.