

DUST
BOWL

Venus

POEMS

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Sixteen Rivers Press

What Grows Here

1. You Remember the Names

You might say we get emotional, when, along 99 South,
we see trucks and trailers pulling those bales, those bales
suitable for consumption, precise rectangles fresh
with swagger and sway, precarious promise
of bit and endless chew, that livestock
fodder. Then trailer of tomatoes, in and out
for pre-processing baths while
factory gates remain open
all August long.

Inside, the head mechanic is a poet,
tunes words and engines, writes lines
on the line. His kind is an heirloom,
a Boxcar Willie or Purple Cherokee
that ripens too late for the cannery
but is perfect for the yard. And oh,
we toil for it outside,
our giant Oxhearts
in cages.

2. Myrtle of the Tomatoes

We see you
in the garden,
no Massey Ferguson,

no almond dust.
You grow enough for all,
you sing to no choir.

O Myrtle,
you transform
even the back alley
into rows and furrows,
furrows and rows.

3. Holy Basil

At the intersection of Texas and Crows Landing
he stands, rosemary in pocket, the man who grows the basil.
All of his life packed—the work of it, the sore knees, the sweat—
into orderly cylinders of regret, fresh with summer's
bursting heart. He muses on the city's blurred stars:
 the songwriter who—
 the baby who—
 the Marine who—
 the baker, who carried a fresh sourdough right to your
 door, the geometry of her face doubled by her straight
 hair—
All of those sacred, incomparable ones,
those who live, die, and live again,
they are here;
they are making mud
out of dry soil.

Survey on Brooms and Broomcorn

A housewife sweeps floors,
dreams arrangements
in scuffs and drags,
articulates the pause
between verse and note.

Her body a neat broom,
whisking the floors of the Riverbank Club House,
her feet keeping continuous contact
with the scuffed boards
of the California Ball Room.

She herself is stitched
with four rows of waxed cotton,
guitar in hand, blunt-cut hair tips
of pure broomcorn. O Rhythm Guitar
O Harmony Duet

you delicate parlor broom:
Her heart has these contours
like beech, birch, other light wood—
turn it with gentle pressure;
Sand it and call it ordinary care.
Stain it; call it a song.

A Mistaken Analogy Concerning Demeter and Persephone

Out of sparkling doxorubicin red,
out of pomegranates in the front yard,

out of tent roofs down in the park,
out of her favorite redtail hunting for prey
 and that other realm to which it returns—
a false sun dogs the real sun.
She falls into the opened earth—a trick—

unceremoniously lands in this bed.
Out of the beep of the infusion machine,

out of meds that both destroy and preserve,
out of the body's interior walls
 that shed their continuous cell harvest,

out of a nightly needle in the thigh made numb with ice,
out of the cornucopia of pain,

she bites the flesh of her lovely mouth
 into a crown of flowers.

Republic of Tenderness and Bread

for Modesto

Each Tuesday afternoon a loaf of bread is placed
on a pillow of towels in the ice chest
outside my front door. The rules:

Bring a meal between 4:30 and 6
and don't ring the bell. The sun's already

going down, the heater cycling on,
the machine hum like Mom's Singer,
whose slow motor chugs, lumbers,

as she pedal-controls the speed,
her foot easing into a new country.

Now my daughter and I live in a new country.
We sit on the sofa, blankets wrapped around our shoulders,
her skin a smooth alabaster goth after weeks of chemo.

The black dog barks; we listen to sounds on the porch
as someone approaches. Now the ice-chest lid—

hinges squeak, items stacked inside. The lid closes, gently;
a car drives off. And for a moment the thought:
This is not my daughter, not her bare head bobbing down the hallway.

This is not her pill organizer on the kitchen counter.
We hear the low churn—the heater cycles on,

and Michele drives from another city
with a Tupperware of vegetable soup,
delivering a balanced meal—

a dinner with wine—Cortney brings coffee beans
so that I never run out of the drug that keeps me afloat.

When people you know well (and some not so well)
feed you every night for months straight,
you want to embrace everyone

for an inappropriate length of time.
You want to reshape all these awkward relations

into a new economy of simple care,
this ancient rhythm you fall into,
with stew and coffee and bread.

Conversation with a Lover About the Louvins

You don't get it: Desire's an underground fruiting body,
this song its presentable iteration. That bodes well,
don't you think? I love you under the front porch

lattice, my Blind Blake. Don't squander it. First,
step down into street; in darkness delight. Next,
rye paired with pear, the pair pared

to leather, bluejean and thigh. Hazel's rules
for songwriting: Dip from the deeper wells. Well, we are.
Let us remember the frayed interior of her

collar, the resoled boots, the space where she
pressed through to us, grew from your spindly tomato
plant into our blind unminding. Reminder: From the banks

of the river Jordan, she's minding our constant unwinding,
creating a hall of fame of our neglect. On this Mother's Day,
my heart's on holiday with that Modesto housewife

who only now, O country gospel boy, wrote about this,
what she wrote, what it's about, what about it, until it
drains from my eye, that vision,

that seismic morning drinking coffee
from a bowl while squinting
in Jesus's light.

I love you in autumn

when the Modesto ash
flames arson. In spring,
San Joaquin snow
petals the orchards
into luminous dusk
moonscape. Almonds,
almonds with the short *a*.
Into these places,
O Lord, bring us taco wagons,
poetry, and love,
not necessarily in that order.
Bring us summertime's
savior, Delta breeze,
without which
our parch goes
murderously
unrelieved. Believe in me
in all seasons;
my body parts know how to make a map
of all the small towns in this valley.