

Poems

by Sarah Hill

- i She starts it with just water and a yeast,
milk carried in this evening, swinging
in its bucket from the barn.
She uses no spoon, no cup, her fingers
melt into the thick liquid, working
honey and fat, she has no hands apart
from this.
By handfuls, the flour fattens it,
rolled under and in, it rises round,
color of clay, firm and blistered, her hands
find themselves again, done with kneading,
rough with bits of dough clinging
like shreds of her own skin.
- ii It is coming down rain today-
the white hills we piled up that stood
above our heads along the road
are lying down, washing themselves
into rivers in the ditches,
are hanging like ghost-hills
over the fields-
we have found the garden again
and we want to dig into
the cold mud, already, to break it up-
the woodpeckers have come home, they are knocking
on the dead sycamores-
we unhinge the windows, looking
for flies to curse, we still burn a fire-
we haul up seed from the cellar
in jars and baskets- it is early yet
and cold- we wade to the shed for the plow
and hoes- we stand on the threshold and search
for a patch of blue in the sky.

iii A mouse has crept into my rooms
from under the warping floorboards
a glossy fat rodent—
I have seen his shadow at night
His teeth click at me from behind walls.
He is furious to gnaw through.
In the light of the morning
I find his droppings behind the coffee.
The cupboard has been invaded,
my bread is no longer mine.
I have discovered fresh scrollwork
carved into the bedframe.

Mouse, how do you squirm into such unfriendly quarters?
Poison eater, trap-tripper, you lusty mouse,
what cat could sink a well-trained claw
into your pulsing heart?

iv January was blue all month long,
and when we brought the horses up from the field,
their manes and tails clicked
with the clotted ice,
their hooves crunched through the barn lot.

The time he broke his leg
when the mare fell on the ice,
we had plowed a path back to the old barn,
but it was far too narrow,
and when the wind shook her knees loose,
the mare went over into the drift.
He hung on but I jumped
and the terror that the snow prevented
me from screaming out,
settling onto my face and throat,
was released by the sound of the horse
lurching away through the blowing snow,
unbridled.

- v Five years old, learning
to feed chickens, she needs a small pail
for grain; she has seen the apron
her grandmother wore as a girl
with oversized pockets, in a photograph,
but she has not done this for years
and an apron offers little protection.

These are not wild hens, even the rooster
is too young for spurs,
but they know the rattle of corn,
the smell of grain and, half as tall
as she is herself, a dozen hens
flapping their wings against each other,
push into the pail, tipping it over first,
then out of her hand.

Too frightened to run, she watches them eat,
quiet now, scratching and tapping
at the dirt now she brushes a wing
with a finger, she snatches a tail feather.
Retrieving her bucket from under the white feathers,
she begins to wonder how heavy the hen is
that is pulling at her shoestring,
if, without this bucket in her hand,
she could lift it, maybe,
to stroke the downy underside,
to feed it from her hand, to examine, face to face,
the yellow marble eyes.

- vi Something of the cat lies around every house,
watch for it at night—
though it comes only as
a string of tail uncurled over the eaves
a round mound of fur at the corner of the porch
a glint of green from the bottom of the drive;
the sparrows switch off their calling at sunset,
the mouse population trembles silently
behind the walls.