Poems by Sarah Hill
from
This Stone House

This stone house, this house of stone
has been carried up, piece by piece
from the field, rock by dead rock
has been set into place on the hill.
And vines and trees, yes, trees are needed
to hold the air of this place in this place
to keep the stone cool, even cold, in the summer,
and the summers are long out here.
This is the house we have raised with out hands,
in our arms we have lifted the walls as they rose,
we walk, we sleep with a solid roof,
these walls let no sliver of light slip in.

Should we leave, it would be
only a short walk, a quick run, we
do not know our neighbor’s faces, we
keep them off by miles in field and fence.
Were we to go, we would carry still
in our coats the darkness of small rooms.

We are the people of the stone house
and where we have leaned for long years
into old walls, our skins may be cold,
we may wear them heavy and gray, but we hang
no mirrors in our halls and bedrooms,
we know who we are.
To walk in dark is to see
the color of the night open up.
Just after sunset, the fruit trees
are sculpted, unfamiliar,
against the far hills,
the blackbird a smudge in the branches,
the red of its wings grown purple.
From across the fields a child’s voice
calls; it is the jays crying,
one to another, I have robbed this nest,
search for another.

What I found here was the flower
of a tree I had seen in the day.
Nameless, I could call it nothing,
it had held out its ripe buds
like tiny fists, pale green.
Now, in the dark, they open,
whiter in the night than day,
lifting up to the sinking sky
five small slivers of dark gold.

Such apples we have never seen,
growing as they are this year.
The flowers fell early in the heat
of an unusual spring, the dry air
kept the insects down. Now the apples come,
swelling the tree, the small bright fruit
grows heavy before us. Our eyes,
accustomed to the cracking growth
of corn, the dusty pods of beans,
the ever facing downwards,
swivel up to catch the look of apples
glowing green against the blue sky,
and we can feel the juice already wetting
our summer throats, the juice of apples
not yet ripened, but coming on,
growing thick. And we will ready
baskets to store in our cellar, we will
bed down the apples in straw for the cold,
to have, in the dark of winter, the scent
of the heat, to keep, in the night, our June
sun burning, to taste.
iv  We thought to gather mushrooms
as an afternoon’s sport, a game
after the morning work. Having no guide,
we went out with the knowledge
of a book telling us which to pick
and which to leave growing wild.
One after another we found under the trees,
our basket flowed over with the caps,
white like flowers that had never known
light. Then we began to look again,
and the varied shapes and the dark colors
of the underside ridges seemed all alike,
seemed to tell us that some had chosen
were the dangerous type. We tumbled them out
onto the overgrown path, held each one
in our hands and did not know the difference.
And looking farther under the trees we saw
more and more still growing, the mushrooms
bubbled up strange in the green light,
the taste of them unfamiliar to us, and we returned,
the basket empty, the afternoon gone, afraid
that in our eagerness to take all of the best
we would bring back poison to our own table.

V  In the year of the cicada
we went down in the dark.
The morning rose a black cloud
in the east, the wind itself trembled
above the trees. We, anxious to gather
what harvest we could, found only
the bare branches of the walnuts dark
with bodies; the insects whined thick
in the air, sang a hungry song, crawled,
fat, in our hair. Our trees hung empty
in the sky, wheat fell down headless,
the windows of the houses blackened.

In the fall of the year
the crisp skins still clung
to the trees, to the grasses,
the blind eye-holes watched
the frost grow over the blasted fields,
creep out onto the limbs of the orchard,
and we, the keepers of the land, were to sweep
the empty shells from sight, were to find
some slender streak of green still growing
in an ashy landscape.
We heard the rain rolling in from the west and we rose up out of our dust at just the sound of it; the low voice of the wind came in with the scent of some thing sweet, and we stood, waiting, our feet fastened in the dust. The first drops were heavy, shattering the gray of our garden with thick pools of red, streaking our faces and arms, taking down the dust; our skin was bright where the water ran. We waited for the heaviest rain, the center of the storm, and when the darkest clouds were above us, the wind heaved the waters at us, the ground rolled in waves with the shower, and we freed our feet from the garden, running not to the shelter of the dry house, but, heedless of lightning, out to the open field, where we could watch the grass lift itself up after the rain, ready to go green.