

Poems

by Sarah Hill

The custom is to bring the fire in
on the first cold day in autumn, this has more
of the late season in it than even the tree
of Christmas. Two adults lug the stove in, fasten
the pipe, the children scramble for the first sticks
to burn. The iron has been freshly blacked, no ash
remains from last year's fire; it is a new stove
to all believing eyes. The loose nest of twigs,
just placed in the belly of the stove, catches easily
with the offering of flame, snaps and spits;
with the closing of the black door, it sucks the air,
and through the window all eyes watch
the flat sky above the chimney go wavy with heat.
The first burst of cold wants little fire
to dry the house, and while all the watchers
are driven out to breathe the damp wind,
the cool their faces, the first fire brings them back
to heat already warm hands, to redden brown faces,
to feel the wet summer air bake dry and be winter.

A full hour before dawn the light begins,
thin and gray in a cold room, words,
that later will hang invisible in warmth,
solidify before our mouths, we can see
what we have spoken, however quietly.
But there is need, this time of day, for heat,
for the slow softening of air with fire;
we turn our faces to the wood we have laid,
listening, silent, for the crack of kindling
that tells us it has caught up the glow
of the fading coals, and as we shed night clothes,
putting on, instead, our layers of day covering,
we speak of coffee and eggs, warm bread, oranges,
neither listening, both content to prattle, backing
away from the fire, our words as unacknowledged,
now, as the yellow air into which they fade.

Here in April, could the sun come up
any more yellow, could she wake to find
any more light flung across a morning room—
finding suddenly the day up before her,
she brings to it, hour by hour, on this first day,
white, unwindings, unfoldings, of linen,
the bed, the windows, hung with sudden white,
the crystal, that had gleamed deep with fire, shatters
the broad blank to a thousand small angles, she smells
the flowers of berries that creep up the brick
of the walls and is out, ready to take the sun
onto her winter skin, to feel the bleaching light
turn dusky on her shoulders; changed on her arms
to deeper and deeper dark, the light will go down,
but for this day of white, she will give over
her skin to the widening white disc, she will take it
for months ahead on her face, on her scorched brow,
she will hold it, she would hold it here.

On the horns of the white bull they measure
the seasons, the ages of young cattle fattening
in the fields of summer, the barns of winter.
Hauled from distant land, prized for a fine head,
a perfect heavy whiteness, he is penned
near the barn for all to see, to speak of, to feed
from silent raised hands. They count other stock
as it stands to his age, the curved horns,
the broad flat forehead speaks a kind of wisdom
to their ears. He is a bull now in prime flesh,
wide with a straight back, tall, but now too
young stock comes ready for fresh blood,
a new bull, nappy with calf's hair, a downy
perfect white. By the horns the old bull
is taken to slaughter, here in the same pen
the hot blood stains the thick coat, bubbles
from the gash in the woolly throat, soaking
the black ground of early winter that will send back
green and greener shoots in spring, tall grass
for the summer calf to feed on, and grow.

The snakes of summer spring up in the house,
in the fields, the snakes avoiding the sun, the green
grass snakes, the black rat swallows, and we
catch them up by the tail, fearless of the flashing
red tongue, laughing when the children squeal and run
from the dangling snake arching its back, stretching
itself out on the air. In the house the line of green
will lie out on the cool tile of the kitchen, the woman
will take it up on the end of a broom, glad to have
one there who feeds on sleek rodents, and set it out.
We are too far North for poison snakes, yet some are here
who shun the thick coils, the brilliant scales, our open
cellar doors; some would have us bring axes,
that we keep for wood, down on the smooth skins,
would smile at the bleeding body, the broken line.
But we like our summer doors open, the green wind
of June we like as well as the good hunter we meet
in the gardens, the snake shedding old coarse skins
like the blankets of a winter we have moved beyond.

The sun at noon has us believing, thinking
this work can go on until we are through,
the midsummer day will shine and clearly shine
until the great cycle of labor is complete.
The rake that rolled through the grass days ago
seems to have stopped only earlier this morning,
though it stands cold and dry in a corner
we can see, if we should lift our eyes to look.
When we feel a breeze, or the still air begins
to cool, we push the work, wanting our harvest
now, wanting still to know we can finish today.
It is not until the dark has come down
so far that our hands disappear from our sight
that we begin to feel our shoulders, our legs,
that we turn our machines off for the night,
take up our small lights, and aching, stumble
back through the still woods, saying it is enough.

It was on the wall one evening,
in the house that had stood silent
all day, hanging on an empty wall.
A small house, standing on a dry farm
now contained an ocean, an ocean she
had never seen in the blue of her mother's
paint. No note, no letter was there,
only the slashes of blue, deep below
and lighter for the sky. Had the strokes
of the painter not been so familiar,
had she not recognized the turn of the light,
it might have been a mystery to her,
the strange splash of water, the warm sky,
but she knew what she saw as though she had
seen it before, and, stooping close, found all
that was needed, a small name, and the bright ocean.

