April 2019

Five Poems (Poet and Critic)

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hearst_documents

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hearst_documents/58

This Document is brought to you for free and open access by the James Hearst Collection at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in James Hearst Documents by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
TAKING THE BULL TO WATER

The herd bull leaves his stall
to do his duty by his wives
(as some men do not) and goes
with me twice a day to the
tank for water. Tight curls
of hair pack the wide space
between his eyes which seem
to regard me with an amiable
but stupid stare. But his
polished horns warn me to
have the beast in him respect
the beast in me. I crowd his neck
behind the horns to untie
his halter rope, then snap
the leading stick to the ring
in his nose. He accepts my gestures
without protest and follows me
with heavy steps. I walk backward
all the way, facing him, the
halter rope over my shoulder
the leading stick in both hands.
If he would hook at me I have him
where it hurts, the ring he wears
in a tender nose. At the tank
I climb up on a post,
unsnap the stick while he
sucks up water. He looks up
drops dripping from his muzzle.
I throw a half hitch around
the gate post until I snap
the stick in his ring. We
return, paired as before, he advances,
I retreat one step at a time.
Our moment comes when I must

lift my foot high enough to
clear the barn door sill and
not trip and fall. I can't read
his shaggy thoughts but he knows
as well as I this movement counts.
I feel his muscles gather and
a push from his bowed neck.
I jerk the stick to let him know
I feel him. (We lost a neighbor
once who missed this step.)
We enter, I stand aside not to be
captured between him and the manger.
I tie the rope, unsnap the stick,
pat his back. He's relaxed now too
and munches hay. I play the game
my way, he gets a drink, I keep my skin,
to date we have not changed the rules,
he waits the day of an exception.
Hat askew, coat open, purse on one arm, car keys in hand, she scans the grocery list and bumps into the door. She backs up, kicks it open, steams into the garage. I hear the car grumble, cough, then roar. The hand of the kitchen clock zip zips from second to second, and the morning grows. I retreat to my study, open and shut drawers, hear the house empty itself of voices and rush and stir. Be careful, I told her, there are bastards abroad witless in cars, mind the cross streets. I did not say goodbye. But what if it was goodbye? The thought so skewered me I did not turn a page until she returned.
NOT REALLY A QUARREL

Granted we slept well and
ate breakfast together,
the sky has not lost color
nor the sun its light,
birds seem busy at their
feeding and indoors the rooms
keep order, no failure
of light or heat, faucets
do not leak and no real quarrel
worked up a storm. But some
insistence on your side
made you scrub the sink
with sudden vigor and I
skimmed the paper without
reading the news. Trapped in
a disagreement we could not
define, we simmered in a
half angry, half apologetic mood.
After all these years together
it is still hard for one of
us to say, I was mistaken.
Earth soaked by a thunderstorm excused us from fieldwork on a hot muggy June morning. Time to cut weeds in the fence rows. "Son of a bitch," I said, weary with sixteen years. Corn taller than my head kept off the breeze, gnats swarmed over my sweaty face. I hung my shirt on a fence post, whetstone in my hip pocket to sharpen the scythe, a jug of drinking water hidden under grass to keep it cool. Large hemp stalks tough as leather I named for people I disliked and whacked away. The neighbor's stupid cows stared at me across the fence where the blade of my scythe caught and nearly tore my arms loose. Who would want to be a farmer and work his ass off on a day like this? Resentment poured into my muscle but a nap in the shadowy cornfield never tempted me. As in a game to win I swung the scythe and conscience heavy with father's orders kept the score.
From my father's family I inherit a long face and a need for facts, on my mother's side a delight in tales where the hero slays the dragon. The mirror repeats my age and shows the wrinkles of my discontent. I am tangled in webs of habit. I eat an apple each day, dress up on Sunday, make love at full moon, share as much as I borrow, brush my teeth before I read the headlines, drink my coffee black with toast. My files bulge with notes from committee meetings, I keep a running account of my expenses. This stencil for living stamps my work but I move with purpose. No one on either side of the family ever made a journey just to see the sights.