

*CORN GROWS
IN ROWS*

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Corn grows in my father's backyard garden
in ten green files, each row a week taller,
the tallest now past two months, nearly ripe.
The years he's planted gardens range beyond
the year that I was born in early spring,
but memory recalls three different plots
to me, and in the different three backyards,
corn grew beside the radishes and beans.
Onions, raspberries, strawberries, stringbeans,
podpeas and melons — several separate kinds —
carrots, squash, tomatoes, potatoes
spent summers in the yard and watched the corn.
Corn grows in tall rows assymetrically
and yields ears as often as it can,
and yields for months before September frost:
we've had fresh corn to spare all of my life,
and sparing hasn't hurt the stalks' supplies.

Dad took us out to plant the corn in spring;
after the cultivator turned the dirt
he furrowed with his handplow, turning back
a cover for the seeds he had us plant
in groups of three or so two feet apart,
two feet we marked off with a twig he broke
to measure so each stalk had room enough.
He plowed a water row next, turning back
the dirt into each furrow; as he walked
he trod the soil down to pack it hard
so birds would let the pink, parched kernels be
to draw the minerals and moisture in
from sheep dung and tap water Dad supplied
till root and shoot grew big enough to hold,
to break the dirt and push into the air
and light, and then we weeded everything.
We always watched the corn to see it grow
two feet apart; we always planted more —
until it wouldn't ripen if we did.
We watched and watered, weeded when he came
to show us weed from parsnip or rhubarb
and watch us work. I didn't like to work,
and always swore I'd never plant a thing
as I sucked some weed's sting or grass's cut,
and never make my kids watch after things
while I went off to school and hid away.

My Dad's a teacher, doctors people's words;
came from a farm and liked to smile and say
"I've hoed more weeds from corn rows in a day
than you'll set eyes on in our whole back yard,
so go and weed the corn, son." And I did,
sometimes; especially when he meant to say
"Get to those weeds before I get to you."
We used to pick the corn together, when
he wasn't tired from his school work,
brushing together sideways down the rows,
fingering husks aside around the silk
to thrust in eyesight at the growing corn,
picking the yellow-kerneled ears, leaving
the cobs with small white pointed knobs
to grow and fill out, row on yellow row.

But that's all several years back: I'm in school
making myself a spreader of the words;
married a girl who likes to see things green.
Despite the vows I took in weedy youth
I have a backyard and a plot to match:
I'm going to sow some seeds and see if Dad
was lucky or if it will work for me.