

Lightning Barbs

Marden J. Clark

I'd ridden this way a hundred times,
Up Monday Town along the fence
Dividing wheat from perennial sage
Herding cattle to summer grazing
In Bear Hollow beyond our fences,
Never liked it much, this shouting
At bawling cows and shambling steers,
Breathing their dust and smelling their hides,
Never learned to enjoy a horse
Or sit one easily, feeling mostly
The thump and jolt — horse against me —
Legs chafing and burning from salty sweat.
I was riding my brother's iron gray.
Young and heady, she loved to run.
I rode her bare, almost enjoyed
Her patient walk or gentle trot,
Her quick response to rein or spur.

We rode together toward darkening clouds
Crowning the Wasatch, hiding the sun,
Up Monday Town into deeper dusk,
To rumble and echo, then roar of thunder,
To deep gray of rain running down range
And over foot hills to reach the gate
Where I could loose the cattle to graze.

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We turned back in rain, the gray and I,
 Galloped ungentle to get out of range.
 Behind at first, then all around
 The hills echoed thunderclaps
 Following hard on brilliant flashes
 That fractured the dark. Intent on travel
 Neither mare nor I expected
 The crack and spit of fire on fence
 Five feet away, much less the spit
 And chase of flame along barbed wire,
 Flame just pacing us along the top wire,
 Lagging behind on bottom wire
 But dancing the lead on middle wires
 Far ahead, dancing barbs of fire.
 She stiffened, jerked, turned her head,
 Eyes and nostrils torn with terror,
 Lighted with fire still dancing on wire,
 Then lunged for home.

Close by or against the fence she ran.
 I felt the rip on pants and leg
 But lost the pain in a passion of speed
 Grafting my skin to skin of the gray,
 My body playing to rhythms of her run,
 All terror absorbed in a strange ecstasy —
 Sweet Jesus, the vital ecstasy! —
 Of her panic at frolic with electric reins,
 With song of thunder, spit and crack
 And dance of lightning, even with barbs
 Along the fence, ecstasy of riding
 This way the first time.

We passed the corral
 And floated over the lower gate
 Before she fell into a gallop
 Then settled to trot then walk. I felt
 No urgency though rain still washed my face,
 Poured rivulets down my iron mare.

I'm told the fence saved mare and me:
 Open rod to ground the lightning.
 But when I dream of lightning and horses
 And barbs of fire, nothing of terror
 Clings to that moment of crackle and spit
 Lighted with fire singing down wire,
 Renewing ecstasy, renewing union
 With more than mare or rain or barbs:
 With source of lightening.