

About Half

Shawn P. Bailey

I.

“How much time do you spend gardening?”

I say—

My back fence neighbor’s eyes are placid, patient

Riddled with cataracts, half blind

They count the neat rows again

His backyard is an Eden but with clothing

An open-air produce department:

Tomatoes, peppers, squash, carrots, and sugar peas;

An apricot and two peach trees;

And the grapevine climbing our common fence

Which is a chain link line too porous

To hold back my personal collection

Crabgrass, clover, and a million gaudy dandelions

Stinging nettle

Nightshade

Morning glory

Pigweed, gumweed, stinkgrass.

Natives I suppose—plants

That need no chemical encouragement

No irrigation

No pruning or stakes

Weed is a word for a strategy without flowers or fruit

Without human approval

They just want to grow here and can

My neighbor kills them root and branch

Gathers their flaccid carcasses with a rake

The handle is toil-oiled and smooth and

It’s missing a few rust-eaten teeth

It stops

He unfolds a leather-bound hand

Extracts a white handkerchief from

The bib-pocket of his dark blue overalls

He blows his nose.

“About half,” he finally answers my question.

II.

About half.

I picture the implacable circular sweep
Of clock hands everywhere
And calendars packed with pipe wrenches and pin-ups
And Stonehenge
La Piedra del Sol
Sundials and waterclocks

A baboon fibula scored exactly twenty-nine times
And a dagger of sunlight marking the summer solstice
Passing through a neat line of windows
Formed in ancient stacked-stone walls
Piercing the inner chamber

About half.

I contemplate the influence or entity
—I'm not quite sure what or how—
That synchronizes the time-pieces embedded in our phones
Propelling us forward
Urging us on to the next thing
Pouring on the guilt
For not being there earlier
For not staying longer
For not getting more done
Because my children's childhood is fleeting
And rosebuds won't gather themselves
And the human brain shrinks as it ages
Because I buy books I will never read and record shows
I will never watch
And my elderly neighbor
Has invented a new time-reckoning system
He spends half of his time eating and sleeping
Watching daytime TV; applying sunscreen and
Walking his jet black cocker spaniel
Visiting and being visited
Ingesting a rainbow array of pills from a seven-chambered
Plastic dispenser bearing the names of the days of the week
And how much time does he spend gardening?
About half.

III.

Another harvest and fall
We never saw him after the hard frost
Year after year
He reemerged in the early spring
Tulips and daffodils and him in heavy overalls
A full-body coat, red flannel
Until this year
He fell ill in October; by January he was gone
I knew something was wrong months before we found out
Deer—blundering car-dodgers down from the mountains—
Winter hungry, the original occupants of our block,
Had eaten his arbor vitae
From the ground to as high as they could reach
Nobody wrapped them in his absence
And the snow melted to reveal two great piles of leaves
No sign of his trusty rake
His family didn't invite us to the funeral
They didn't know about us
They didn't know he had fed us bushels of
Tomatoes, peppers, squash, carrots, and sugar peas
Apricots and peaches and grapes
From the vine climbing our common fence
Eden is weed fallen
And the realtors and house-hunters never
Stay long in the backyard
They take pictures with their phones
Their lips move, but I can't make out the words
It's always something about *work*
I see them through my departed neighbor's eyes
I wave and give them a look that means
This garden place is not for you
I can tell they are busy;
Stretched thin; stress harried; time enslaved
Distracted by goals and obligations and things
Too much like us.