

Farming Shelby County: A Dream

Rick Shelton

This dream is a dayfull
or more. I see myself standing
then walking a length of leather
behind the great red flanks
of a draught horse. Scottish.
It would be Scottish — Clydesdale.
The land I walk turns gray and gold
as the Highlands and a stream
of speaking pebbles glistens with salmon
at the bottom of my field.

The plow I guide is platinum,
aluminum, some such, I ordered from Colorado,
where they save a horse's effort
with the physics of gears. This plow turns up nothing,
no instant treasure, leaves the living soil where it is,
cracks the hard pan instead. Appropriate
technology runs in my veins; I am doing it up right
with cover crops: alfalfa, rye and clover;
rotation — one year sweet potatoes, Kentucky Wonders the next.

Row after row I go, the horse's hoofprints
sprouting limas and cantaloupe, sweating
and singing, back and forth across my farm,
across the fertile bed of an empty lake
my grandfather dammed to make a buck.
This is not easy, not easy, I sing,
and the horse looks back at the lush acre
plowed since sunrise. My eyes burn
with sweat and again I know the disaster

of weather: too much of one or the other,
sun or water. I don't care. I sit
under the big sweetgum, the horse unbuckled
in the shade, and watch the farm spin
through my thoughtful plans,
the gentle tracings of a morning's work.

This is hard, this is hard, my catching breath
sings from the shadows. I know
this humid, river-wrapped Alabama kicks
at my heart, but my sons step the furrows
like blown dandelion. They hand me
pitchers of iced water laced with mint
my wife has plucked from the garden.
Their names are a chant I sing
in the face of drought or flood.

The afternoon slides away under
the heavy horse. We are up again,
bound to the last row with the quiet
cords of yearning. It is harder to keep
my eyes ahead, the furrows running straight.
I glance at the last swath of green rye
hugging the fence line. The smallest
clods punch my boot soles. *Don't get ahead
of yourself, dream or not; pace is everything
a good farmer needs.* Darkness is falling, and
the sweat drifts from my skin; the weight
of the day's work rises in a cool mist.
Off the horse's bowled back steam rises.
All the animals sing out at the sun's going
and then go silent.

Over two mountains, Oak and Penitentiary,
Birmingham roils in a frenzy of rush-hour light,
casting sharp shadows my way. They call
to me with the voices of fast food drive-through
speakers, ordering chicken nuggets, cheeseburgers,
salad in plastic. I answer, the crystal taste
of mint at the back of my throat, *Tomorrow
the bean rows and strawberries will be dappled
with sun. I have what you need.*