

Used to this Kind of Heat

Katherine McCanless

August in our square mile of Tennessee
paralyzed by the sun
we are struck dumb by the humidity
haze and 100 degrees in the shade today
hot enough so that I'm not wearing any underwear
under my white cotton dress

in the cool dark of the kitchen
I take cornbread from the oven
using a towel to keep from burning my hands
feeling the wave of heat rise against my belly
and I lick the sweat from my lip

hair done up messy and sticky on the back of my neck
the dress oppressive hanging limp in the absence of a breeze
easily enough material to be a maternity dress
(everything in the country has at least two uses)
wonder if I'll ever swell with life
if bleeding creeping tendrils will grow inside me
like the kudzu at the back of the house

will I feel in my body the ripeness near bursting
that leads to rotteness
overripe tomatos falling off the vine
blushed peachskins rupturing
the only salvation in the splitting of watermelons
listlessly arranging mismatched garagesale knives and forks
thinking this is Carpenter's Hollow

I chose to come here
to the children dead of smallpox and buried
half-way up the hill under their limestone rocks
and the sprawling limbs of the cedar
the grave inhabited by the snake
that catches rats in the barn

the noises I make in the hayloft
the barnfucking and the low and sad
sounds of heifers and calves separated by gullies
flanks and udders never knowing the bull
just remembering the way he feels from behind
wonder why I chose this love of wifery

alternating cicadas and the creaking of boards
as the smell of flowers and manure meld
in the night air cooing circling sinking
dreaming of what it is like barefoot and dewy
at dawn in the garden harvesting

picking fruit blackberries plucked from brambles
and plunking into a milk jug
tied around my waist with baling twine
mouth and fingers stained indigo
okra scratches on my hands
so deceptive of the slime which slides
down the throat after boiling
the futility of fighting nature
of fighting a chosen isolation

the only cool thing is the boards of the porch
under my callused feet
and I swing in the porchswing
toes skittering a whisper on wood
Jack Daniels and lemonade sweaty in my palms

the only break in the monotony
the mailman's daily emergence from the mirage
a hallucination of pickup truck
coming out of the dust
and his handdelivery of gossip
the toothless report of straying cows

and it is that time the stillest of midafternoon
and I am going to him
the landowner man husband
with a galvanized bucket of icecubes
and a bottle of Wild Turkey
sashaying across the hot blades of grass
damp and cool at the roots and soil

he soaks in the chipped enamel bathtub
under the chestnut tree by the well
and I pour the cubes into the tub
give him the whiskey
begin to wash his hair while
thinking about the straight razor
that waits for lather cooler air and hotter water
and he reaches up and pulls me into the tub.