

**String Reporter**

I had punched the final paragraph for the last edition,  
called the story in, typewriter clucking stilled,  
platen gripping the paper as if in editorial argument,

day wound up at night, flushed with adrenaline  
like a miler sprinting the last two-twenty,  
breaking the tape with no lungs left to spare.

I ached in my shoulders from the hunch over sticky keys  
caused by the left hand's hesitance at the right phrase  
and right hand's insistence at uncommon diction.

I covered the Smith-Corona with a black cloth  
like the cross at Good Friday knowing it would rise from the dead,  
renascent limbs of letters revived within the soft-inked cloth.

### **Into the Standing Grain**

Numbed, stunned by summer sunrise,  
a school bus with torn brown seats  
and dirt clods on the floor, I rode  
with twenty other sleepless teenagers  
to a corn field to detassel one cob  
to encourage the goose of another,  
juveniles delinquent, punished by work.

Swarms of sweetness flowed over the field,  
dew sliding magnifiers on the curling leaves  
that razor-sliced forearms uncovered.  
By mid-morning, moisture lifted, chaff  
flew and stuck, cuff-wedged,  
crease-hid, jammed into socks,  
eyelets on tennis shoes and boots,  
as if we were walking rods of epoxy.  
We withstood smut, rust and worm  
to eat peanut butter, bologna, spam,  
stale chips washed by Kool-Aid  
or synthetic lemonade.  
Jugs came in one size, large,  
one color, a baked-out blue.

Our foreman identified the silk as beard,  
by August burned black at the end of the ear,  
but to fingers, the silk was a girl's hair,  
a satin dress, legs you were denied,  
but any joke of sex he quickly broke  
with "back to work," a quick jump up.  
He had done time, my mother told me,  
for defending his daughter,  
beat a bull who had deflowered her,  
left a school teacher, returned a con,  
found work only weeding out the rogues  
of corn and driving a discarded bus.

Work ended at two when the bus stopped  
at the old brick creamery held up by mortar  
and the fatigue the town had in tearing it down,  
handles of churns mounted in the windows.  
I walked home with the foreman  
and often the only sound between us  
was the plastic clatter of our jugs  
against each other, he with a little hitch to right

and I a little hitch to left, or of lunch pails  
slapping our thighs, lightened, empty,  
happy as a puppy wagging by our sides.

**In Honor of Big-Bellied Men**

The shotgun flap of the large gray noodle of belt  
running the generator punctuated the loud hum  
of the engine itself, and the conveyor spun

its elongated oval dumping grist at one end,  
conveying shucked pig corn on the other,  
the chaff and the pixie dust dancing above it

in the spotlights the missing knots in the walls allowed.  
Men with bibs yelled greetings,  
muscular bellies broad and protruding,

the right gut for pushing a fence into place  
or containing a cow bent on leaving the barn  
spooked by a rat covered by feed,

bellies that could take the sweaty head of a boy  
or girl at twilight when the bats swooped in  
and give them comfort, secure the world,

bellies that could hold a baby without a lap,  
that pushed hay and milk and bushels of beets  
out into a dangerous and starving world.

**Rivers**

1/

I have had too much grace.  
Common wisdom says  
it cannot be so, but  
I have had too much luck,  
just too much of too much.  
Like a clay side  
to a mountain saturated  
by rain I slip  
then slide, changing  
good boundaries,  
like a river that has leapt  
its banks and gone to ruin  
orchards of friendship,  
pastures of providence.

2/

One heron scissor-cut the sky  
and the last I saw of it  
was a blurred shadow in backwater,  
I followed the river down  
because it was too late  
to go up, because the trestle  
was close and the train would go by  
and the smoke would wrestle white  
and black and seem  
almost cheerful.  
I went down to the river  
looking for the scented word,  
the petals of apology, of praise,  
for the shape of a common dialect  
but a single twig dangled  
in the water and drew me off  
into storms. When I left the river  
I passed the bridge but did not cross.  
I took the train tracks  
in the twilight and stumbled  
toward home and as I passed  
the last house saw my face  
in the dark window of ignorance.

3/

I am like two rivers  
mixing into one,

a clear spring run  
turned to slow  
brown mass  
as a day picks up  
the erosion of life.  
Downstream  
the channels deepen,  
pace quickens,  
the wild and rampant dominates,  
breaks into rapids.

Workmanlike. Barge.  
Lower Mississippi.  
I am river of commerce,  
packmule, wide and polluted,  
flat and ever churning.

**By Moving I Remain**

My thighs make a swath  
through the switches and bramble,  
tugged, yanked, stuck,  
as if this gnarled angry chaos  
wanted to snare, entrap,  
twirl and catch like barbed wire  
curls around a heifer who dares  
to batter the fence and zing  
the staples shoot out and the wire  
recoils and you find the hide  
and stagnant hoof of the cow.

But I am too old to be stagnant.  
I press forward to the yawning light  
ahead, the red truck on the dirt road  
waiting like a falling sun,  
allowing the thorns their cotton twills,  
the snags, pricked flesh,  
worn patches a marker of pleasure.  
By moving I remain.