Field of Dreams

Susan Benston

Here in the corn-belt’s umber, rigid fields
that splay to a bleak horizon
drifts a curious, spectral congregation:
a hazy scattering of vacant shapes.

Here was the tallgrass prairie, once,
which the steel teeth of the John Deere plow
rent and extinguished—plains since cleansed
of the ferret, prairie dog, and fox.

Are those the drifting ghosts we glimpse
down the lines of plundered corn? —unlikely,

for we passersby don’t easily perceive
such fleet, furtive dwellers, whether here or gone.

The empty semblances are those of others
who move placidly, on hooves or avian feet: “domesticated” others

whom we would have seen, readily,

had they been granted any portion of this boundless turf—

these are the mild, clichéd, illusive beasts

that blur the scene.
Where have they gone? Into extinction?—

hardly, though so many more of them have died

than even the multi-millions of the tallgrass plain.

When nausea overtakes us

like a gust of storm,

a new memorial will rise

in this dispiriting terrain.

Amid these monocultured acres of denuded stalks

we’ll raise a sleek necropolis,

a granite-hewn, commemorative space.

To mark the resting place of bones?

—No: the bones of these remembered ones are gone apace

into the grinder,

into the ground as fertilizer and the young as feed:

predecessory bones that unprotestingly provide

this double nourishment

for their descendent brood,

enriching the soil for grain

that they will chew

instead of grass,

augmenting the ground-meal mash that they will eat

in lieu of hay.
Such clever husbandry of rib and skull
flings good familial calcium
to hungry babes.

No honored bones, then, to undergird the place…
We’ll make, instead, a reverential spot where absence
reinstates the lost.
A calm, green vacancy and V-shaped stretch of stone,
like those of Maya Lin’s unrivaled masterpiece,
will grant fit rest:
a burnished, infinitely subtle palimpsest...

—But wait: why mark this far-flung spot?
The supermarket freezers everywhere already teem
with tribute—“USDA Prime,” “Grade A”—
and glossy phalanxes of myriad nonperishable goods
meticulously mention the imperishable dead—a glut
we read from high on tiptoe down to bended knee.

Why harken, then,
to the specters’ supplication to commemorate?

It’s just that the fields themselves seem to bleat
under the winter sky,
corn-stalks withered, rustling, all their lost ears

gathered to silos or stripped and poured

into soda-bottles and engine tanks.

This shivering land, bereft in the aftermath of last fall’s stolen birth,
darkly awaits her brutal reinsemination:

Mother Earth,

matron to hordes who never see her leaves alight,

who gobble her shriveled cobs,

snuffling her bounty through the bars of troughs,

and die the faster for their healthy appetite—

Chattel Earth,

where may we rest our thoughts?

—against what pastoral haystack

lean the harrowing rake of penitence,

of shame?

I shut my eyes,

and here they gather round again:

dim, lurking figures in a Rembrandt gloom,

their pensive ox-eyes hinted by the glinting light

from candles—tallow candles!—

always the beasts skulk about us in the flesh,

dead and alive.
I’m moved to drive them off
with a savage Git!,

those wide, tender snouts and somber eyes.

To where? To somewhere beyond my ken,
beyond my consciousness that they are borne tonight
from concentration camp to slaughterhouse
in trailers crossing the snow-bound plains,
their short-haired flanks stuck to the icy steel
of the open frames.

Quick, then, let’s make hay: let’s build
in honor of their passage,
of their whole lives lived in the middle passage:
shackled, sweltering, freezing, dispossessed.

—How best to lay out granite walls
across these tedious, unpopulated fields
in token of their sacrifice—
what names inscribe?

How many Elsies, Porkys, Daffys and the rest
can we engrave, together with their breeders’ patronyms,
or perhaps the surnames of their chefs?
How many permutations?
Shall we use instead the numbers tagged to their ears, burned in their flesh, numbers recycled with each newborn batch? Can we denote them as sets or exponential superscripts?

Maya Lin pressed 58,000 names into 500 feet of stone. Then if we do the same for these domestic casualties, each year’s demise will send the granite zig-zagging 160,000 miles. If shrunk to a tenth the size of human names, ten billion epitaphs will rampage 16,000 still…

Our gentle honorees have sapped our will. Their full remembrance needs to be foresworn. Then let them speak their unseen presence now: let rills of the fiercest toxic sewage run from the slough of their intense detention onto the open land in token of this multitude so soon transformed to excrement in turn.

And let the furrowed fields sigh as they shall at the gaunt, skeletal residue
of their ancient charm,
at the faint, receding memory of unbound bison moving through
the swishing thorn,
while we, the perpetrators of this rigid scene,
our viscera twisting with obscure alarm,
may search for comfort in the stark geometry,
in a winter sunset lending profile to
the withered corn.