

Boy in the Tobacco Barn

by Jim R. Hinsdale

Dark, sweet concords sag vines
and the locust poles they entwine;
dark, juicy clusters that shine
in dapples of sun.

In the long, high barn
beads of sweat from tobacco crew
drop, pop, exploding
on broken leaves
littering the wagon bed.

Men bend, puff, grunt
as they drape the tiers,
fluff yellowed burley,
bend to reach the next stick.

“Boy,” the wagon-man
shucks his soaked shirt,
shakes brown chaff from it,
“Take this to the arbor;
pick it full;
fetch it back.”
He reaches for the next stick.

Wrapping damp, khaki
sleeves about his neck,
the boy’s bare feet
spiral up a dust trail
which slowly settles
as he flies, arms outstretched,
like Superman
toward Grandma’s yard.

To pluck the biggest bunches,
he drags a picnic table bench,
upends the rain barrel’s bucket
in its center and balances
atop like a bareback rider
in Ringlings’ circus.

Ruffling the leaves
a breeze wobbles him,
as he snaps stems midst
honeyed, and yellow-jacketed threats.
Grapes plop into sweat-stained shirt
spread on arbor grass.

With forward lean, head bowed,
stained shirt 'cross his shoulder
like a sack of hog corn,
he trudges back,
his shadow hunchbacked
in the broiling sun.

Passed hand over hand,
bruised bunches rise
to the ridge pole.
For a blessed short while,
hulls not brown shatters
litter the wagon bed.

"Little feller done good," one fellow says.
"Better'n water," allows another.
"Sweeter'n Sunday sin,"
drawls the guy on the bottom rail,
"Wisht he'd brought more."

The compliment that spurs
the boy arbor-ward again
comes from his grandfather.
"Fine work, boy."