

My Father's Garden

by Harry Brown

—for Hugo, Murphy, and McKenzie

Yesterday I watched the autumn sun retreat, first bloody
with a quiet gold and violet aftermath.

This morning once again rouge and gold ushered forth
our same star.

I thought that he like Hélios would rise
each morning forever.

After I die look for me under your boot soles.*

What about my sole soul? And what is a soul? There's the rub.

He'll never again come in from the garden dripping sweat, one drop
gathering at the tip of his nose, another about to fall from his chin,
and wearing a threadbare shirt, Bermuda shorts, and brogans, sit
in his platform rocker, drink a glass of tea with sprig of mint
and read *Progressive Farmer* or *Time*. Having found a patch of mint
on Baldwin Creek one Sunday afternoon when I was ten or twelve,
we brought some home to plant in a damp, shaded corner where the new
west bedroom joined the house so that always after in summer months
he added mint leaves in his tea.

No . . . not always after.

I'll never again telephone on Sunday evening
to hear his rich unhurried voice describe the weather there.

*Whitman, *Song of Myself*: "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."

“Tobacco farmers are crying the blues,” he said last June when it was the driest in some two decades.

Come summer he always talked about his garden.

“How are your tomatoes? I set out twenty Better Boys in May and Mother has picked already enough to can. We’re getting limas now and our black-eyed peas are coming on.” He raised cantaloupes as if he lived in the sand hills, but couldn’t bribe peanuts, another sand hills crop, to produce. He could grow okra in asphalt and eat it fried three times a day.

But peanuts were his crop.

Somewhere, probably Stark’s, he bought a fig tree and planted it in the back upper corner of the garden where it multiplied as sprouts appeared but never reached six feet in height and never of course ripened a fig in piedmont North Carolina. Sometimes, thinking back, I feel surprised he didn’t plant an orchid or a mango. But the fig had plenty of company. He never cut dogwood, our state tree, so that three took sanctuary in the center of his garden just below the Yellow Delicious from Harold Latta and the Stayman Winesap we gave him, a favorite from his father’s farm—both set out too late in life for him to pick and enjoy one apple, both set out where they would shade his sweet potatoes and beans, both set out some fifteen feet from Concord vines at the edge of the lawn, vines he often over-pruned in early fall while the sap was up.

After grapes, apples, figs, and peanuts came quartz, ubiquitous
as red clay in Orange County and immanent throughout his garden;
sparse, hyperbolic hail, the stones, white and roughly round,
he gathered spring after spring as they surfaced—sprouted when the earth
was stirred by plow and disc like rye or oats. Over the years he laid
with the heavy harvest low, sigodlin walls around each of the trinity
of white dogwoods—solid but irregular mortared benches
for summer visiting in shade, but in the garden never used.
He also built at the garden's lower side a quartz retaining wall
that looked as if laid by a not quite sober sailor, or a man in love with planting,
growth, and making on this globe whose hope and faith were large as his love.