

PARADISE RENEGED

[A farm woman wanders on stage and stands near a stone wall that is overgrown and in some spots wholly obscured by Virginia creeper and johnny jump ups. She wears a simple house dress, probably bought from Walmart years ago and her hair is tied back. She seems tired and hot and a bit preoccupied. She notices the audience, almost as though it were another person, some stranger whom she has encountered here on her evening walk. And for some reason she feels constrained to explain herself. In her delivery she is consistently matter of fact, even at her bitterest or her most passionate,]

Evenings like this it's too muggy inside
to sit still watching the six o'clock news.

Supper's done, dishes washed,
the mosquitoes are settled down for the night,
the dog's in, the cat's out,
the old man snoring on the couch...
Evenings like this I take a mind to walk to this gate,
catch what's up on the other side.

I never see nothing, of course. But I look.

[She falls into a reverie.]

Seems scarce yesterday we built the house and the farm.
We put in the little garden out back
so as not to forget where we came from.
Those times were tough, that late spring frost
that killed the peaches barely blooming,
that came from nowhere just to kill.
Our first gentle cow what got her womb
tore inside out on her first calf.
The poor creature moaning, me screaming
both of us in labor.
I stuffed my ears with cotton when my man got the gun
and I cried.
I cried a lot back then.

[Almost against her will she remembers her saddest memory.]

I used to wander out to the apple
clearing at night, where the boy lies dead.

[Overly brightly, stoically covering her emotions.]

Now the youngest is in school,
two of the girls are married, the third just started dating,
four boys farming with their father,
the rest still kids.

[Almost against her will.]

Then there's Abel lying in the orchard...
And Cain God knows where.

[She recovers her matter-of-factness.]

Adam's been a good man, don't mistake me..
He made this farm from dirt.
And men was hard to find in my hey-day.

But sometimes in the middle of dinner
or driving into town for an order
or at night when we're husband and wife
his eyes get a look all misty like he's about to bust tears,
then it clears to something wilder,
hard like the hawk caught in the snare,
or the cornered wolf.

He scares me then, clean to my belly,
cause it ain't him there at the table or truck.

[Pointing to the other side of the wall.]

He's back *there* again, on the other side of this garden wall.

No farm, no kids, no bills,
nothing to do but lie around naked
soaking up sun and munching fresh fruit.

Me, now I'm a realist.

We left --

I got the hint, the game was up.

What's done is done, no use pretending
it's ever going to be done again.

With Adam a bit of him slipped through the gate
before they boarded it up for good.

And time to time it calls to the rest of the man to join,
come talk to the deer...and get answers,

play poker with God every night over cold foamy beers.
And he dreams on and on
about the way it never was.

[Not melodramatically, very matter-of-factly.]

It's hell, let me tell you. Worse for the wife
though she don't make a fuss.
Most times Adam clean forgets
that I was tossed out on my tail same as him.
Not to complain, but don't let anyone tell you
the fall divvied up the punishment
in equal halves to him and me.

A woman bears her pan as best she can
then takes on the pain of the rest: her children, her man.

What hurts me most ain't the work or the pain:
up at four to have his breakfast hot at five,
chase the kids out of bed, off to school,
feed the chicken, keep the house something halfway close to clean,
lie awake warm arm on warm chest
holding him when he confesses
the work all but does him in,
twist my back picking sweet corn,
itch on every inch of skin harvesting peach fuzz,
trade in another nail for a new gray hair...

it's hard, but it ain't unbearable.

What hurts is the thought he never says
when we lie man and wife,
when he looks at his blisters, the chipped paint,
crops that need watered, kids that need fed,
and thinks to himself --
I know he thinks to himself

[She has never admitted this before, even to herself.]
all of this because of me...

[Once again matter-of-fact, and yet with more than a twinge of rationalization.]

Life is for the most part just getting through.

Then comes the day like a thug in the bushes.
You never guess until the blackjack smacks you a good one across the skull.
Then you know,
then it's too late.
Then you look back to what you were
and know you'll never be again.

I swear that if I'd known that day
that I was playing more than a game
of apples and oranges with a gossip snake
I would have stayed in bed.

In my day I was known for a pretty good tease.
Catch a man's eye and that's the first step;
give him a wink, there's the next.
On and on, up a ladder of come ons.
Like walking halfway to a tree
then half again, always closer
never nearer than before.

No-one said this game of brimstone and fruit would be any different.
Half way to disobeying, then half again,
still again.
Each time more daring, never doing.

Then I did.

No step to follow, none to return.
Bitter juice dripped off my chin,
a laugh from what never was a snake.

I died.

Oh, I ain't buried yet.
The casket and bought flowers come later.
Adam's more a romantic than me -- he ate.
Like dying himself could make up my death.

Yes, it was good he stuck up for me.
I appreciate the gesture but it ain't the same.
Like I said, there's still that piece of him
that keeps on dreaming what's over here.

Women know that they are dead.
They give back life.
Men think they're living somewhere else
and waste half their lives to prove it,
then they waste the other half
explaining how they proved it.

I remember the garden Adam keeps dreaming about.
I remember thorns that hid on mossy paths,
I remember bees that went diving
in and out of the trees.
I remember fruit so tart
your tongue swelled tight to your mouth.
I remember cold nights, drifting stars,
wolves that howled in a desert they could not cross.
All of that was in the garden -- never in the dream.

Sorry been talking you to death,
You shouldn't hang on so to what I'm saying.
It encourages me.

I tend to get carried away when I think
how things was up on over this wall.
It ain't too often I find someone
walking near the garden like this.
The path is pretty overgrown,
no-one seems to mind.

Yes, I heard some talk of the garden
opening summers for tourists.
Myself, I don't think much of the plan.
Like I said, folks got their hearts set on another sort of garden.
It wouldn't do to go busting up
the only Eden they ever knew.

Good Lord! Look what time!
I really stayed much too long this time.
The kids'll be wanting desert and Adam'll
be wondering why coffee ain't perking.

Enjoy yourself, but take a word of advice from one what's been there.
Don't take away their dream.
Anyone asks you the way to this place,
point in the other direction.