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Jon Silkin

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Amana Grass

Jon Silkin

The leaf of your hand shall touch but not cover me
New England proverb

Amana grass, its spikes of hair rayed as branches
from long stems, is sucked by three locomotives, their haul
filling space over tracks. Wind wraps its length,
hot and diesel, through spaces of stumpy grass, barely green
over long slight inclines. Air in varying pressures blowing on the train
sounds fiercely between houses, where space, holding
other spaces, of human loneliness, meshes.
The same in that wildness locomotives haven't seen;
beneath earth filaments of root, everything, tangle.
The train links points in which the human crouches,
is found, rejoices. Wind appears to feel out crevice,
and surface. Does not feel, no pain at all in how it contacts.
The sun's light, without visible sun, sinks coldly through frigid wind.
A leaf turns upon asphalt treading through the park.
Wind picks at a face rising and sinking on long legs
stockinged, their tan rushing to compare with the net's colour.
Nearing, she seems to compose her face, the air being frigid.
Slim, as the legs are, almost a woman's; not fleshy yet, or coy now
the thighs swelling behind a skirt now short, the hips
larger than they were, composed, each, into tentative prominence
the mild fury she receives of her intent frail hulk.
Of the mid-west, in bulk, solemn, a flat grandeur under its heights of corn,
she strains little to her. Of what is there,
a train's horn contracting desolating space.
Of what she is, something ribbed; of what she has, nearing,
the rib enlarged. Of who she'll be,
the clasp that broaches two minds, hasn't enjoined them.
The face's sadness, tenacious shadow, melts into resolution.
Speak louder; shout, for I should hear,
the wind asks, each creature begged of it.
Each thing is to its need, not much remaining to implore.
Space the train threads grasps for more; in it, a tree
shakes leaves rustlingly at grasses naming them sharp stump.
Grass tightens fierce roots on fractions of soil.
The soil, from stone, in passivity, grins; is to ingest all.
How, among nature's divine egotisms, to grow
her especial fronds, antennae sensible to another.
To enlarge, amid these natures, whose heraldic egotisms silently conflict,
she must fight. Earth's fulness, though,

may be shared; fleshy needs, feathery demands, requited
“among the stained emblems under which the stiffened flesh
fragments. On the bits, vultures perch that, gleaming
on frozen blood as if armour mirroring the dead enemy’s conquest, rip the
flesh

their image flares on, captive since to what they strip,
flesh, not stubborn or curious.” Brown grass ends are as limp,
and thinned, as crystals of falling snow are intense:
experienced and dense, the aged spirit sheds itself.
Appear in the air, edged; bitter against nostrils and cheekbone.
Wind stirs it onto each creature unremembering of earlier needs
to be requited by what creeps and grins against its knots.
She tightens her coat onto her breasts, scarf lightly to her ears.
She’ll get home. He moves through it, sure he’ll find her;
white powders, some of heaven’s properties, sift over the sidewalk
bonily cramping the foot inside its strict shoe.
Treading he sees in virgin snow someone’s feet printed
towards her house, before him, his, exactly. Snow
lifts into his face, melting flakes caught in clenched eyelashes,
blasted on edge to him it is adrenalin charging
the mind’s eye to dilate over the prints. Calmness
then. He turns, from tracked eddies of feet past
her house, to her, feeling for her ornate small key.
The evening star, in fruitful magnificence, rises with moistening splendour,
towards the sky’s taut, precise limits.
He approaches, the counterpane unpuckered, smooth for the crushing of heedless,
fruitful weight.

No evening meal. Thought of food prepared by each one
broken down, as if by enzyme, into other hunger.
Pancakes; stay-in-bed hash; sauce
biting its butterscotchings sweetly into cream and cake; these, gone.
Her lips parted as if breath, passing between, stirred the loose hair
shaking past the forehead,
she summons the first kiss to her body. He parts her lips, his tongue stiffened
into her.

The spirit dilates; the fleshy circlet starts its flow.
Older, he prepares: on his breast heraldries of self-power
chevalring love

stain him: on her breasts, prints of the stain.
He presses her down, she helping him, parts her, and enters.
She won’t move. Forced to him, and pinned, she can’t.
The spike piercing the belt that holds it as it stiffens
upon the bar; tightened upon each other:
so he in her, so she round him. Malely and femalely
they are clung by self-swellings they can’t slip
of a sexual love ending each other’s

mirroring vauntedness. 'For whom do I brag?'
 Then stricken to tenderness, minted, as if to the doe's hunter,
 he asks of her: 'Did we make this, of our intent hungers?'
 She fears it may be worse. She, feeling pure, the dew might look
 sullied. The purities in her chill, condensing her heat
 to drops that lustre her success, or, if she fails, rebuke her
 that she melted in her their dewy script that
 in unsweatlike nature gleams through the skin of women.
 He gets off her, hot and distanced; she faces up to the ceiling;
 her thighs are separate in distress and coldness.
 Flat Iowa is stretched in snow, through which her Vermont hills rise
 strict as her mother's breast, wrinkling the torn flats they break.
 Her nipples lose their stiffness, her breasts not thickening a milk
 should have milk were a hand, smaller than his, on them.
 A strict, sweet whiteness, purely of her breasts
 is, for her, the milk achingly sucked by her child's lips.
 Unlike her vaginal whitenesses, or a man's sperm, flukelike
 at her itch; her breasts' exclusion, each one.
 He turns from position onto his back. Wind like pricking metal
 over the surface of another exclaims a passion
 length-like as the scoring on him of hair naked.
 Like the pressure of touch, the wind's, her hair scrapes her silence
 through him its length. It is to him as to a beast
 that working four he puts a hundred feet down
 to his mile of hillside's inch.
 Her silence teases her apart, forming distance, cars
 slithering from each other. She separate, he distanced.
 It is England's width, soon, the north part, stone,
 where the silver mine fills, on chipped quartz, chipped limestone, earth, wire,
 lies, at any rate, choked,—the plants at this segment of earth's carefully
 spun rim
 rubbed small, low, wiry, red; car-rush whirring such colour
 rearward of the mind, darkening, with the sun
 melting
 through north England, its heights, flat as Iowa's,
 dark, extinct, which he travels.—As she moves away
 to Vermont's hills, shrunk, folding as they cooled
 into claustal heights, wooded though, familial.
 The New England heart is contracted in virtue
 durably
 to itself; as a mistress to her heart's blood-holding loneliness
 attaches herself. The ancient stems of plants
 dilate to water's ancient tractability,
 averting our care. 'Haven't we, at least,' he asks
 'nurtured each other?' 'Yes' she replies 'and been weaned
 off each other. I have. Although you, I see, still

think of us as creatures, creatures or plants, in symbiosis.
I want nothing. I mean, I want purely
on my own, strengthening my especial substance
to grow itself,—a plant thickens its xylem
from water for more of it.’

Her strength, a boiling fluid,
wells to her vessel’s brim; she spills not a dram
through hatred’s surface.

‘Why bear with me? Haven’t I hurt enough
what once I seemed to value?’ He feels tenderness,
as if excremental, evacuated from her.

She feels herself a mountain creature, exalted to the permanence
of the rock-born species. At the door she backs onto
she asks: ‘Am only I culpable, or are you
some guilty creature also?’ ‘It’s as though,’ he answers
‘your strength laments of itself, or the attent
sinew finds ‘no’ what most charges it.’

‘Isn’t that what you want?’ she asks. ‘I want more,’
he answers her, ‘as you do.’ ‘Then want’s
our portion.’ ‘Need it be?’ he questions.

‘My attention makes small, yes and lucid the plenitude of us,
the water-seeming fall of hair, gathered, then braided to a gleaming length
seamlessly twined, into an image feelings breathe themselves in,
value insists on, until memory fixes, prints and shows as experience.’

‘That’s not like experience,’ she recoils. ‘It may
be how it works, but how it works is theory,
and I want the thing, and want it mine.’

‘We’re not machines,’ he goes on, ‘and how we work
is how we value what works in us.’

‘I don’t have value’; her hair glowers
on her copper skin, anvil and substance, clashed
into hissing and cooled re-formation.

‘Listen,’ he says; the space between them pauses:
‘when your mother had you and you were pressed
through the tract a stranger to her womb had eagerly before approached,
after you left, with a body of wrinkled skin
and no more, except for the initiation of breath,
as if for breath, you turned to your lung-like past.

Of anything gracious, firm there, and mild, didn’t you add
the sinew, flexions and tendernesses, you and I
had from each other; your mind with such light from this
in your skin it gleamed, lustring the undewlike sweat
that from your body’s heat expressed your shape, stilling you.
In that decent stillness we did nothing that day.

As though over the moss, each plant, each flower, we lay between
fitted the intent self to a peaceable kingdom, toxic leaves

and petals, by lively consent, being sucked
of poisons by elements they had with care selected
and compounded into wrathful and frigid bitterness.
It was consent. So it seemed to us
in the vacant wilderness. Your eyes shut
in concentration, mine alerted through me
a wakeful quiet . . .'

—'That may be so,' she said
stepping from the door.

■

This, this reduces to the nub
events
through a tumid spring to mid winter;
the thorn,
with sporadic sheen, budding in the mid-west's spaces,
the lustre, against such nature. Wildness
abhors space filled unless more brims it;
physics denies, wrongly, in this case.
This is not a love poem to do with love, not,
what goddesses of love exact, for love, of their gods:
the complex swelling of bud and root, the crossings of branch and leaf, prolix
in nature;
nor in fiery points synoptic verse, distanced, entailed,
with sensibility at the fingers' ends, in men's folly.
It is not, either, verse for someone; though a poem
of love I experienced, whose image is troubled
in America's: brutal, shankered; a magnificence
of Roman cloth umbering an Etruscan shade.
With vital parts, also, touched with self-doubt. And still,
the following lists of attributes, in this disorder:
fearful, isolated: what men cancerously die of.
What more to bite on? What is more than enough,
what is in plenty, in the widths we congregate,
of estate, insurance, its probity; or else
the unassailable defection from honesty,
isolates, or aligns our sly feelings,
at our circuits, pinched into our chosen
antipathy or liking. The intrinsic being perishes.
An animal keeps his passion; we aren't of them.
Perhaps I can tease of this plenty nothing; not of America.
So that of the two, of this single image
in two metaphors, love is rendered, that gracious abstract
passing through the naked upright fork

of hell and heaven, scathed, through that quaint background,
but, now, advancing. And since witchery,
the sapphired and webbed flesh of angels
is now unseen against the sky, elements
of love tinged with fire and pasture offer
annealed unearthly cries
as rigorous spirit for our earthly needs.
Never in our control, absolutely, or any god's;
a quadrant, its application fixed, not its measure.
Unlike that, too, its application hardly in our control,
although in our choosing. Love animates and presses us
to revalue what we have in our obedience,
and think of control, again, its limitations,
its constant limitations, against openness.
I must know that something like you is alive still,
something quick, something tense at its quick, at the quick,
alert, and with that, making the sinew bright and sharp,
the whole tendon and muscle on the bone with no
hint at death, or scent, or thing like that.
I must know that there is no death on you; that of you
more beauty stares than in your image.
Therefore you shall stay alive. I need clarity.
I need the image of you bearable
by control, and within my courage;
or my courage to grow, matching that quick in you
paying out the veined, the thin, lines
of your shape in durable contour.
But that is exacting. So the thing I want
is that you with the passionate elegance of a beast
into the man's love breathe yours; in age, holding
your value to your body, move, as you must,
in some reluctance, to your death.
—A night past I dreamt of the hire purchase man
asleep with his wife; both seemed young and pliant.
They lay naked; his arms clasping her waist,
his head rested between her supple breasts.
I saw that he dreamt, and what it was; and that
not of his wife, or of some other deeply
moulded eager girl. Belshazzar-like
he dreamt that, fanged, he, on hands and knees, crept
with open salivating jaws on the poor
and negroes, lively victims, in his right hand
the papers of his wealth-to-be laced
with the strictures, bonds, enforcements that would ligament
them to him. His wife stood naked
and grinning among us, papering the ink-smear

visible body with signed bonds,
but mostly, about her cunt, she pressed
the papers, wadding and girding her fruitful organs,
shutting her sex from view, and access. This was
her assent, her husband's dream, and my containment.
I was speaking of love, and America; and how
I value it, as I knew you did,
when you wrote: 'I want to be a woman
to a man so badly, I can taste it almost.'
I was speaking of value, I guess. Of what
knits in the spaces, where wind
creases its frigid movements into the face
as it swerves on. I was speaking of you,
and of love once more: warm, intelligenced, exacting;
of more immanent value than Hebrew parallelism
or the Anglo Saxon metre.

On Jon Silkin's "Amana Grass"

Merle E. Brown

From *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954), published when the poet was twenty-four, to his most recent poem, "Amana Grass," now printed here, for the first time, Jon Silkin's poetry has been pre-eminently social. His poems are populated; their creatures, whether plant, animal, or human, are invariably given value and often autonomy. These poems are many tongued, speaking with more than one voice even when containing only one person, and that the poet himself. Each creature and each voice, moreover, reverberates with a representativeness beyond itself; if the society of a poem seems small, intimate, and personal at first, upon repeated reading its range widens and implicates a community, a nation, a world, larger than itself. Finally, Silkin's poems are poems of social action: not at odds with the poet's intentions, the poems fervently demand change; at the least in the form of heightened awareness; at the most as a radical revision, in purpose and manner, of one's way of life.

Thirty years ago it was conventional to say that poetry and politics do not mix. Genuine poetry was thought to be contemplative; the true poet must be imper-