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Fruit Farm

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FRUIT FARM

By

Harger Boal

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

FRUIT FARM

By

Harger Boal

This collection of poems, written in free verse, manifests itself through the themes of nature, family and the passage of time. More than the logical development of narrative, the “truth” in this collection is derived from the free association of sound, rhythm, image and metaphor.

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“The Moon of Making Fat” originally appeared in *Poets and Artists*, Dec. 2010.

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INTRODUCTION

The poems in this collection, *Fruit Farm*, are rooted in the themes of place, family, and the passage of time. Simultaneously, they exhibit my own evolution as a writer over the past three years.

As I wrote, revised, and selected poems to include here, they began to reveal themselves as a meditation on the family fruit farm where my father grew up and where I spent many years. I did not set out to write poems dealing with this area of my life, but in retrospect it seems entirely appropriate. I first experienced the essential metaphors for my understanding of life on this fruit farm.

Primarily, this collection of poems is concerned with the exploration of a family and a shared plot of land. This setting proved a complex and rich source of inspiration: father-son relationships, the passage of time, the shared history that accumulates between generations, the evolving way of life in our country, our relationship to nature, and the meaning of family and home all became subjects.

This topic also provides a wonderful body of language and natural imagery for this group of poems. Various fruits and berries figure prominently in this collection. They become a symbol for everything from birth to love to human connection to the inexplicable and even to language itself.

The individual poems in this collection often use nature specific to northern Michigan to reveal something about relationships, for instance the free verse poem “Fruit Salad,” in which a solitary figure stays home to prepare a fruit salad as a gift or offering

to their love. The fruit salad is made of local fruit from the farmer's market and each piece is described lovingly. The poem is not only a statement about love, but also about the labor of strangers to bring the fruit to our doorstep. In essence, this poem is about connections. In another poem, "The Moon of Making Fat," I take on the persona of my father and relate a story he told me of being witness as a child to a migrant worker giving birth in an apple orchard. In this poem, the creation of a human and the natural world of the orchard surrounding the event actually begin to mingle and then merge. Another poem, "Currant," depicts a woman, perhaps my sister, mother, wife, or grandmother picking currants at the family farm and contemplating the miniature and the massive in nature. I have included a poem, "Lobb Road," concerning my father's death and the inevitable passage of time that links and divides us. Nearly all the poems in this collection touch upon the central, place specific, theme of the family fruit farm. The few poems that don't adhere to this rule sprung from some other place in my imagination.

My poetry thesis is written in free verse. The flexibility of free verse matches these central themes. Free verse allows these poems to mimic the evolution which takes place within us and our relationships to each other and the land. While I am aware of the benefits and beauty of formal structure, free verse allows me more control over the poem. I believe that every poem, whether closed form or free verse, has a shape which suits what it is trying to accomplish. The shape and pattern of my thinking tend to express themselves with more potency in free verse. While I compose my poems in free verse, I expect them to be highly structured as well. In their insightful essay "The Line/The Form/The Music," in *The Eye of the Poet*, David Baker and Ann Townsend write, "Free verse exploits and heightens the rhythms of prose. That makes the other formalizing

factors of free verse more urgent, especially lines and line endings” (92). Studying with Professor Matherne and Professor Hummell and reading extensively have given me insight into enjambment, end-stops, accents, syllabics, rhythm, rhyme, and a plethora of other techniques to loosely structure my free verse poetry. Instead of an attempt to break free of formal structure, I try to utilize my knowledge of formal structure to inform my free verse. As David Baker and Ann Townsend write in their essay, “The Line / The Form / The Music,” the more forms, and depth, a poem can exhibit, the better (82).

Over the course of the last two and half years, the aesthetics of my poetry has continued to widen, deepen and take on the little nuances that are a mark of burgeoning poetic maturity. I have always paid attention to line breaks as a means of employing enjambment and displaying the poem on the page. Now I think about line breaks in more complex terms; I use them to imply multiplicity, surprise the reader, speed a poem’s progress down the page, or slow it to a crawl depending on the effect I’m after. I learned that “the line argues with the sentence, it disrupts the momentum of the sentence, but it also can heighten the interior meanings of a sentence. The line focuses on and magnifies the phrase, the piece, the fragment” (Baker and Townsend 76). I realize every line break is a meaningful decision.

A good example of my new understanding of the line break can be seen in the final draft of my poem, “Currant.” In the second stanza, I break a line on the auditory word “plink” to force the reader to relish the sound of that word rather than hurrying on to the next word. I wanted the word “plink” to be savored and the line break accomplishes this. Also in the second stanza, I have a line break after the phrase “for a moment” to force the reader to enact what is taking place in the poem. This line break

makes the reader mimic the thoughtful pause of the character in the poem. In the final six lines of the same poem, I end every line with either a period or a comma to slow the poem down and cause the reader to experience the moment just as the character in the poem experiences it. I would not have considered this quality of the end-stopped line before reading Baker and Townsend's essay, "The Line/The Form/The Music."

Poetry is first and foremost music. Without rhythm and sound, the poem cannot exist. This music is what initially drew me to poetry. Edward Hirsch writes in *How to Read a Poem*, "I am inspired by the lyric poem that initiates and instills a state of intoxication in the reader" (115). I tend to agree with him. The first poems I had written were driven by rhythm and sound. The rhythm and sound always led me from one line to the next. The power of this rhythmic music is the transcendent power it embodies. I realize now this is something I knew but never articulated. I try to capture this in the poems in this collection.

A poem's awareness of itself as music has become part of my aesthetic sensibility. Indeed, according to Wallace Stevens, it has to be. Hirsch writes, "Stevens lists the love of the words as the first condition of a capacity to love anything in poetry at all because it is the words that make things happen" (9). It is the words that orchestrate the music.

When I initially set out to write the poem, "Hardboiled Egg," I had a specific idea I wanted to articulate. I was writing about hardboiled eggs in a way that was humorous and light but predictable and commonplace. The poem wasn't working and I knew it. I was stuck. I ended up scraping all but one line of the original draft, "a touch of salt, pinch of pepper." Upon reading Hugo's essay "Nuts and Bolts," a passage reminded me

of my early dilemma. Hugo writes, “The poem cannot be written because the poet reduced the possibilities by sticking with one established subject. He wanted one subject to carry the poem and felt that everything must refer to what prompted the poem” (50). This was the reason my poem was failing. To solve this problem, I wrote as many images of a hardboiled egg masked as something else as I could. This expanded the range of my poem tremendously. It brought in all types of concrete things that otherwise would never have found their way into the poem: a choir, pears, blonde boys, a pocket-watch, and Russian nesting dolls. This brought the poem to life and enabled me to write about hardboiled eggs in new ways. Here we can apply another of Hugo’s suggestions, “Never *want* to say anything so strongly that you give up the option of finding something better. If you *have* to say it, you will” (38). Don’t be afraid to change directions, to cut lines you love, and to abandon perfect iambic pentameter if something better presents itself. Here is a poetic rule to live by: Don’t confine yourself to one idea too early in the poetic process.

There are a few other strategies I’ve learned from reading Hugo. He writes, “When rewriting, write the entire poem again” (Hugo 38). I love this technique. It is one of the first tactics I turn to when I feel an impending blockage in a poem. Hugo suggests that by slowly rewriting a poem in its entirety, if something has “gone wrong deep in the poem,” you may decide on a different route earlier in the poem which will eliminate the problems and dissatisfaction further down the page. This method is another example of something I knew instinctively but never quite grasped why I did what I did. Now I have a coherent understanding of this process. This brings me to another insight, “A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a

process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them” (Hall, ed. and Stafford 450). Once again, this is something I sensed but never articulated. It is not necessary to have ideas for poems in order to write good poems. In fact, it can be a hindrance.

My reading and study have given me a fuller understanding of the value of formal poetry. I now see this method provides a wonderful doorway into analyzing poems. I look for a recognizable form even before I begin reading. Upon the second reading, I count the number of lines in each stanza, check for subtle rhyme or syllable patterns, and try to account for the poet’s choice in these matters. It is also crucial to my development as a poet; as Edward Hirsch writes, “form takes us not away from, but toward, authenticity in lyric” (Hirsch 124). Formal poetry can spur inventive writing. “The advantage of conventional forms is obvious: they insist that there be an interaction of the formal properties of the words used . . . they push the poem away from talk or prose cut into lines, and try to influence some slight jarring into new meaning” (Hall, ed. and Ryan 368). Formal structure does not have to be viewed as confinement. It is far more helpful to see form as a mold to shape poems in ways the poet otherwise would not have found.

I still primarily write in free verse and often prefer to read free verse. However, I have gained a substantial appreciation for the various forms poetry can inhabit: the villanelle, the sonnet, terza rima, the dramatic monologue and the prose poem. Inspired, I even attempted a Shakespearean sonnet for the first time. I clung too rigorously to the format of iambic pentameter and this stifled the poem’s flow. The latest revision allows for some variation of iambic pentameter and the poem has more room to breathe.

Like Baker and Townsend, I believe “all poetry is always, in fundamental ways, *about* its own form and tactic” (Baker and Townsend 63). In other words, technical skill matters deeply. Every poem is highly aware of its form. This form, this shape, is an indicator of the poem’s understanding of itself and the world. A truly powerful poem weds form and function, tone and technique in an inextricable bond. Let it suffice to say, “the more a poet (and reader) knows about technique and the variety of effects of poetic style and technique, the more flexibility and command the poet will exercise” (Baker and Townsend 63). This is a powerful and fulfilling new aspect of my understanding of poetry.

I did not want to write a set of poems that are largely nostalgic or trapped by the past. Part of my aim was to break free of the past, to praise painful and liberating change while retaining, in fact strengthening, memories of what came before. I wrote poems primarily of praise because I believe poetry to be innately designed for worship and exultation.

I try not to assign any one meaning to my poems. The goal of poetry isn’t necessarily to provide answers or meaning. As Denise Levertov writes in her essay, “Origins of a Poem,” “what the poet is called on to clarify is not answers but the existence and nature of questions” (256). So I’ll leave the interpretation of these poems to each individual reader. I hope they raise as many questions as they answer.

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FRUIT FARM

The Moon of Making Fat

From my porch tonight, the orchard glows
a bright apple blossom white,
and two, no three, spring deer tip-toe out
and out into the rows of apple trees
to root for the last of last year's fruit,
coaxed into view by the moon of making fat.

I breathe night in like sugar
and then I'm out in the back forty again,
a boy standing on a cistern.
Stretching on tip-toes I see a woman,
migrant pickers spread around her,
her skirt hiked-up higher than my sister's
when she pees outside. She's sick?
I don't breathe so the winds do.
She shakes like the branches above.
Blossoms twirl down and around her knees and throat,
dressing her in sun and soil, in shade and pollen,
landing on her hair like ash against the night sky.
How slowly petals fall to her legs and stick.
I imagine picking them softly off,
white moths on wet brown bark
drying their wings in the breeze.
The woman is quiet as apple petals
shine against the blood
on the baby's new skin.

Fruit Salad

It's fine — stay home when you're still young,
let moonlight sit on the countertop
while you slice fruit from the farmers' market.
Fold bright cantaloupe open,
divide the flesh with your favorite knife,
let the smart-tip sort seeds, dive through rind
and peel, swim the wild pink of watermelon.

And it's o.k. to let the cat watch from her patch of moon
the apple core perched on the cutting board,
the sweep of stems to the compost, water rinsing red cherries.
You and the cat, either peach or calico,
are content with these moments in your kitchen.
A grape rolls across the table. You think of the wheels
that carried them close, the hands
that worked the fruit, felt the heft of pear and plum.

You imagine their faces, their voices,
the distance between their lives and yours,
how the fruit brings them close.
Out the open window,
you hear the tires of your love's bike,
and it seems just right— to offer yourself
and a bowl of fresh fruit.

Currant

In that quiet hour,
between day and dark,
a young woman walks
the farmhouse lawn,
her white skirt ghostly
in the light, across the gravel drive
to the garden.

She picks currants for tomorrow's breakfast.
From the thin vines, five or six at a time plink
into the stainless steel bowl pressed
against her stomach. For a moment,
she notes her stretched reflection
around the lip and smiles.

She lifts one red currant
to the light, as if studying
a drop of blood on her fingertip.
Inside she sees the whole starry sky.
Small things in small things, she thinks.
She puts the currant into her mouth,
pushes it to the ceiling with her tongue,
and tastes twice the sharp tart of twilight.

Fruit Tree

My words

often fall

like fruit

from the limb.

Flesh splitting,

seeping into soil.

Better to let speak

sit still,

pick only

the ripe words.

Place them

cleanly upon

my tongue.

Hungry Man

Summer was so hot I cooled my underwear in the freezer.

I spent whole days kicking the shit out of myself,

sweating cinder blocks in a leatherjacket,

something about rock 'n roll and the gristle

left on grandma's ham hock. That June,

she used newspaper as tablecloth,

obits smothered in gravy.

A girl I loved broke up with me in a parking lot

while pushing back her cuticles,

her words scraping frost from the windshield.

In the frozen dinner aisles of K-Mart,

I think of her. Entire weeks countdown

on the microwave timer. My heart? Hell,

there's wide, marble slabs of it out back.

In Owl Light

I'm alone in the onion row,
a blink on the eyelash of night.

Sudden breath of wind, of wing,
a swoop, my perch on post,

frozen field mice,
my winter ration,

swaddled like still-born
in the warmth of downy feather

to thaw before I eat.

My gold eyes,

medallions on a dead man's face,
button night's black curtain.

A Pillar of Ghosts and Gravity

On Ash Wednesday, my lungs, like birds
who open wide and walk the river,

study the proud architecture of water.

Their wings wrap the bend,

reach for summer. With cupped hand,

I rinse my forehead, dip into rhythm of river,

I hear spring's thrumming voice,

a crisp reminder to come back

in trout season.

Backboard Logic

It was just a rectangle really,
a space between
bright disciplined lines,
but, at the age of twelve,
we became a chorus
of chirping gym shoes,
obsessed with the twine
leaping back through the rim
like a splash of water.

We neighborhood boys reasoned
in backboard logic and backyard dust.
We got high on trash talk,
the chest pass,
the ball twirling a tragic arc.

Spring nights, dark driveways doused in headlights,
full length of our shadows before us, we changed,
became seven-foot all-stars, heroes of the hardwood.
We were stunning in our bodies, sweaty hair
matted to our fleeting faces.

Hardboiled Egg

The eggs become a chattering nest
when the water begins to boil.

Then, as they rinse,
a bushel of flawless
yellow pears
coated in October's early ice.

When I put them in my coat,
a bronze pocket-watch
in the milky fog,
a shivering choir of blonde boys
as I walk in the snow.

At lunch, I peel the oval shells—
a delicate cranial surgery.
I bless the eggs,
like Neolithic people,
who made graves in their shape.
A touch of salt, pinch of pepper,
the first bite,
a cool kiss from a Russian nesting doll
beneath a frosted streetlight.

The Devil's Logslide

We drive out past the logslide,
a stretch of chewed shoreline,
where old-growth timbers slid
to Lake Superior a century ago.
Tied-together and floated out
and out to be railroad ties, boats,
and beams behind whitewashed walls.

On the back roads, I feel safe enough
to crack a beer and you talk about how your life
used to be, why it's a shame they're paving H-58,
and how rocks are windows into the ground.

When I stop the car to piss, we make shadows
where the sunlight used to be. Pine and birch
lean over the road like green whitecaps.

The beer isn't warm yet
and the sandwich we split is so soft.

An Apple Seed Remembers Sun

The moon would chase
my mother's truck. I,
head against the window,
watched it rush after us.

Magic for a kid,
like the apple on the dash
baked by the sun,
softened some, but the skin still whole.

How the apple captured heat,
brought warmth to my cheek,
and, in my mouth, stirred wane light
like camp coals in the morning.

Glacial Till

Well before my father and I walked the windbreak
of Norwegian pine that lines this farm,
before horse and plow unearthed these fieldstones,
untouched by light since glaciers
scattered them like seeds from far as Cincinnati,
before someone practical and industrious
piled them here, worked each into farmhouse walls,
before all this, pine cones lay on the forest floor
waiting for fire to bloom.

In summer, when my father and I walk the tree line,
we stop, sit beneath sumac and white pine
on a pile of bluestone and river rock left unused.
We talk, both of us breaking open like pinecones.

Lobb Road

Late in summer,
as road signs turned
sugar maple orange,
construction crews filled cracks and potholes,
traffic lines slowed, then stopped.
Warm asphalt, you said, father, was like cookies
fresh out the oven.

In four months, it will be six years
since I rubbed your feet,
you thin as a stripe on the road.

The September you drove down
to visit me in college,
I was embarrassed.
We drank coffee and talked
about the fourth-place Cubs.
You said to me, over seven years,
our skin cells die and grow
whole again.
We shed ourselves,
like late leaves in fall.

Forgive me, father,
for not understanding.

Phys. Ed.

The hallway closes on two boys,
one thin as phyllo dough,
all marrow and loose jeans,
his body scattered like bird seed.

The bigger boy with the corkscrew left
wants one more kick, the red bead
of his face stretching like silly-putty.

Other kids curl like pencil shavings
around what's left of the fight —
all they see is one Chuck Taylor
coming down like wet snow.

My Spring Move

Driving the Seney Stretch, I note marsh marigolds
among bluebead lilies and milkweed, an outcrop of granite
in soft stem bulrush, two sandhill cranes together
in wool grass near railroad tracks, and row upon row
of jack pine and mountain ash full with flower.

When I park the car to breath the coming dusk,
I watch a swarm of mayflies mating above the Fox River.

My first night, a simple blessing for what's inside the cabin:
woodstove warm with cedar kindling,
colander of fresh steamed cauliflower,
water jug sprouting roadside thistle.
An unopened box labeled *Living Room*
in your absent, felt-tip hand.