

Julie Jordan Hanson

NATURE, TOOTH AND CLAW

I might have died without ever having felt
sweat moving down my breastbone like an ant
while the nearby vegetation ticked with bugs
and summer squatted, centered, stalling, stubborn.
I might have gone my whole life long
thinking a body was something to dress, something to stop
in a pose and measure by the question, "How do I look?"
I might have taken my last gasp escalating up
from the fast food court in transit to Saks
to try on a few pairs of high heeled boots
or leaning on a glass case cleared that very morning
of the finger smudges of customers before me
to determine the effect of a little *bronze rose*
applied to my cheek. But it's better this way.
There's no way around how plain I am.
It's better that I found other pastimes, better that I left
the suburbs of Chicago and discovered
how keen the eye can become to cabbage worms
camouflaged in the broccoli, disease on the leaf,
signs in the soil, subterranean invasions.

I once saw a gardener follow a surface tunnel
to its active verb, *digging-right-now-as-we-watch*,
stick a spade in just behind the point of activity,
flip the shovelful into a galvanized bucket,
and kill that mole before it could scramble off.
Maybe you can't admire that from where you stand
—somewhere near the head lettuce and parsley, perhaps,
weighing your newfound loyalty to buying organic
against the exorbitant price per pound
even as the leaves are soaked and weighted down again

in an auto-spray of freshening—and, if you can't,
read on if you like, but be prepared to make more judgments,
because if you take a garden pest for a drive
and drop it off in some idyllic out-of-town place,
you release it to its own or to its cousin's starvation,
even if you release it also and unknowingly
to the tidy nearby gardens of anonymous.

And in those gardens, as in my own, it is today
100° and that's before the formula's applied
to make us all hotter by bringing up the index.
It's so hot, as Jan said on the phone,
it's dangerous, the peak day, most of us hope,
of six days running in the high nineties and greater
at close to end of July. Mention the heat on a day like this
and the other person in line says, *it's not even August*.
Or sometimes, abbreviating, since it's too hot to speak,
they just give you that look. A complete stranger
with complete understanding, not a common thing.

But you're waiting for the encounter in my garden,
you're waiting for that held moment between us,
the two creatures, my enemy and myself.
I'd gone down for what I could salvage, what might still be
upright, green, and alert among the lettuce stubs
and bolting mustard and the going-spongy broccoli,
since between the heat and groundhog raids, the picking
has been slim, so when my eye lit on the reliable chard,
I strode towards it, thinking, *at least there's that*, but halted
at the sight of a hole as big as a wastebasket, a somewhat
horizontal hole running into the side of a bed
of beets, onions and tomatoes. Stooping, I could see in.
That hole was so large, it was partially lit.
There was no mistaking the fur, the slight animation
given it by pulse and breath. I knew what to do.
My husband had killed two of them in June

and I'd seen the fight they had in them, the long incisors and digger claws. I exited and closed the gate. Now I had the fence between us and from there I could see that for whatever reason or error in judgement neither entrance to the hole came outside. Furthermore, neither entrance to the hole was far from where I stood, and I could see her, huddled just inside the farthest one. I grabbed the hay tines and, reaching over the fence, stabbed at her, thinking—even as the tines hit her skin—*I can't, I can't.*

But I pinned her for a moment and I think I may have injured her, although only with the first thrust could I have stuck her a little, and I had to rise up on my toes to attempt this, that's how short I am, but I could just reach her from either side as she ran back and forth, frantic, alarmed. *Eventually she'll try another tack,* I thought, and this brought me back to the gate to secure it, while she of course ran opposite—across the radishes and cress and out through a fault in the fence, and as I watched her scuttle into the blackberry brambles, smart as Brer Rabbit, I sank into myself and damned my very hesitation.