

Sixpoint Five · *Charles Casey Martin*

This is a field of upland cotton
Waiting to be picked. And a man
Not hurrying. He wouldn't mistake
Dixie Triumph for Texas Stormproof
Or the blisters on his hands
For Roosevelt dimes. In 1932
He wouldn't take 6½¢ on his cotton.
He planted again, outgrew,
Outlived . . .

Dropping a wad of snuff
Beside a coffeecan near his chair
He turns down his hearing aid
And tells the story again:

A farmboy leans against the city limit
Sign at Robert Lee. He sees the courthouse,
Small against pillowy clouds: three bright flags
Hung like thieves. The boy's workboots
Are caked with red clay; he looks into the dingy sky
And a raindrop stings his cheek.
Behind a blackjack oak, the deputy sheriff
Zips his fly and picks up his shotgun. Chained together,
Thirty men with shovels and picks
Line up on the road like gray soldiers.

It's important to his stories that rivers flow south,
Past people who meet in passing
Like hands on a clock. It's noon. A girl
Walks barefoot in the puddle of her shadow. Her shoes
Are in her hand. Her gloves are in her shoes.

Two people who meet on a bridge
Dance when they can't agree.
They toss a coin:
Not like a wish, off the bridge
(This is 1929)
But in the air, like a choice.
One of them turns around.

Tornado warnings have been issued for the Panhandle.
The girl reads from a thumbworn Testament,
Christ's words printed red.
A slim ribbon marks the page:
The Little Colorado
Turning up its pink belly on the Texas plains,
Flooding rice paddies on the Gulf Coast,
Weaving a lacy delta in Matagorda Bay.

The boy interrupts with a story:
Last night he tried a shortcut
Down a narrow canal serviceroad.
When it dead-ended he had to back up
Eight miles, to Dunn, where he sat
Cross-legged on a park bench
And waited for the fillingstation to open.
In the shade, some oldtimers
Were already playing dominoes.
He didn't stay for their endings
But he remembers they were telling stories.

The girl believes her Bibleverses:
Roses are red, flesh
Is flesh and dust, bone. She believes
This boy's stories! In his pocket
He has a tractor key, a tin of snuff
And a last story:

The girl's roses—
Needlepoint on a cotton
Sleeve, a chill
On bare arms. Embracing,
A man and woman are one
Lonely shadow like the first premonition
Of a west Texas duststorm: a girl

Draping her sheer, pink blouse
Over a landscape.