

Family Heirlooms

Inside hands closed like prayer
are the relics grandfather has unwrapped
from the handkerchief hidden
in the old tin tobacco box
that is dented but wiped clean of dust.
The seeds no bigger than a pinprick,
glossy brown teardrops,
ink dripped from the nib.
They burrow into his wrinkles
searching for soil, yearning to grow.
He holds up his palms like an offering.

These kernels straddle history,
plucked each harvest from the hardiest plants,
those that survived the harshness of seasons,
abundant despite the extremes,
stored away with the good silver,
the quilts growing thin with rot,
yellowing photos and a rusting kettle,
until the need for nostalgia,
for better times, climes, yields,
for survival compels their use.

Plant these to time travel
to grandmother's longest winter
like the one that ended this June,
graduation indoors because of snow,
or the summer the neighbor boy
saw waves in the fields full of wheat,
went crazy from the oppressive heat,
or a famer suffocated in his grain bin
after falling in, drowned by his work,
mouth full of the crop he fought for.

The plant's memory goes further
back still, to when the railroad came,
bisected the land, travelers and strangers
halfway between coming and going,
never intending to stay, what remained
was that here is not easy, not civil,
here is nothing, really, just flyover.

Like burning the prairie to take it back
to richness, growth from the ash,
feeling a storm behind the eyes
days before it announces its arrival,
knowing which woods burn slowest,
that swallows leaves as winter comes,

or that planting a dead perch next to the corn
means flowers feed from what's lost,
the seeds are a prairie lesson for survival,
a gift to those who don't give up,
move on, move West, to easier ground.

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