

THE KNUCKLEBONE FLOOR

20

Linda France

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57/75

Susan Davidson (1796-1877) landscaped her estate at Ridley Hall in Northumberland with 'wilderness walks', introducing stairways, bridges, summerhouses, trees and a tarn onto the site of a dramatic erosion gorge and ancient woodland at Allen Banks. This book is dedicated to her and the other women who worked and walked there during her lifetime, as well as all those before them and we who follow.

SAPIENTER SI SINCERE

IN A VAULT BENEATH THE CHANCEL OF THIS CHAPEL
REST THE REMAINS OF
SUSAN HUSSEY ELIZABETH JESSUP
DAUGHTER OF LADY ANNA MARIA JESSUP
GRANDDAUGHTER OF THE EARL OF STRATHMORE AND
WIDOW OF JOHN DAVIDSON ESQ
LATE OF RIDLEY HALL AND WEST OTTERBURN IN THIS COUNTY
SHE DIED ON THE 11 JUNE 1877 AGED 83
HAVING OUTLIVED HER LATE HUSBAND FOR MORE THAN YEARS
MUCH ATTACHED TO THE SHE RESTORED
VERY MANY YEARS AT RIDLEY HALL

PROPERTY IT WAS HER CONSTANT PLEASURE
TO ADORN AND BEAUTIFY AND SHE NEVER FAILED TO TAKE THE GREATEST INTEREST
IN THE WELFARE OF HER WITH HER
IN REMEMBRANCE OF HER BENEVOLENTLY SPENT
THIS TABLET AND THE
AND BY HER AFFECTIONATE COUSIN
JOHN BOWES

Botanical Emblem | *Mountain Pansy*

Each little thought is five-petalled,
 voilà, tri-coloured, pricked and whiskered,
nobody's eyes' exact shade.

They will not be divided, resist
 being bedded and gardened; wait
in ambush past the twist in the water

where they bring folk to their knees,
 them and the orange-tip butterfly.
Saying yes or saying zero

hinges on a hidden spur, veined dust
 of purple and green. These are not
their thoughts. They are not their thoughts.

 Prescribe medicinal heartsease,
forked sorcery of love-in-idleness.

IV

THE GREATEST INTEREST IN THE WELFARE

We are stuff, but decorative, extras
in a play, the anonymous populace
telling our storykins – plus sound effects
(cartwheel rattle) or smells (cowshit, soot).

Not much difference between human
and animal, we are anchor and icon,
kermess, capriccio. We punctuate scale,
sprung from the land itself, picturesque.

Nature and Culture align in the mass of us.
We discuss *The Virtuous Life*,
or its shadow, while we animate the scene,
raising the market value of landscape.

Our names, now forgotten, go as Usefulness,
Harmony, Drama. Open to interpretation.

Seedlip Girls

Knowing nothing but what's in our hands –
baskets made of reeds – we weave under and over,
around and around. They and the seeds
inside are kin among kin. And us, walking
up and down, back and forth, we scatter
measured fingerfuls. We scatter ourselves
to the day's weather, our minds on maybe,
perhaps, so the time might pass with no trouble.

Pray we don't sow the seeds of our own
trouble, swinging between hollow and stone
in our bellies, and fields unbroken beyond our ken.
Even asleep, still sowing, dreaming our arms lift
and fall. Flightless wings. Earth at our feet.
Ribbed brown rows that don't belong to us.

The Shieling

Here, where the bellflowers blow

Where winter never comes
Where we go to hide

Where we unharness our river
And breathe each other's air

Where we swathe chapped hands
in sheep's wool

Where kissing's not the half of it

Sweet as watermint
tamped earth

Where we are queen
And the trees all our people

[*quean*, n. a saucy girl: a woman of worthless character: a girl (Scot.)
- In N.E. Scotland *queyn*, *quine*, dim. *queynie*, *quinie*, the ordinary words for a girl. O.E.
cwene, woman (O.E. *cwen*, queen)]

June: Summer Solstice

The north wall faces south, every handmade brick taxed, and mortared to its neighbour. Three fire houses are home to shadows and cobwebs, the crackle of dried leaves. Picnic benches squat at angles among young apple trees clustered with fattening fruit. On a quiet weekday only four cars (two German, two Japanese) are parked in the bays where vegetables were raised and nurtured from seed. While we eat our lunch, we attempt a diagram of the lost rows – lettuce, spring onions, the beginnings of marrows, broad beans.

Much of the crop would have been forced by a careful hierarchy of gardeners; at the bottom, women, weeding, hoeing, picking off caterpillars. Women, always bent, the bones in their backs burning from the inside. The sound of the river behind us might be the spiked tips of their leather gloves scratching at gravel paths, hooking out anything that dared to grow there, upholding God's own order.

Our mouths are full of flies, nameless insects that catch in our throats. Hard to swallow. Too. Hot. No. Air. Under our feet, grass dizzy with buttercups, self-heal. A flight of steps rises into nowhere – the path up to the Hall, erased, nothing left but the idea.

What good will come of us singing the praises of car parks that used to be kitchen gardens and kitchen gardens that used to be car parks, adding our voices to the bees' buzz under the old roof slates – still here, still enjoying warm pollen cupped in the curves of red brickwork, sweet resplendent lime.

We fill a cotton bag with the frothy heads of elderflowers, take them home to soak with lemon and sugar for cordial. Summer stoppered in a bottle. Won't last past August.

Stonepicker

After George Clausen

She's light and wild enough yet to have more in common with meadow flowers.
Stubborn flickers of white and bruised chicory scissor through the grassy slope
while her grandmother, drab in sacking, *nearer my age now*, is stooped, almost
on her knees, apron weighed down with a harvest of scree and muddy limestone.
The girl's face is tender though she already knows too much: a scarlet cloth
flares in the tumbled basket and jug. Thin trees jut against a northern sky –
all I can do is keep on, keep on walking towards them, and pick stones
from the furrowed page to make room for harebell, lady's smock, three-leaf clover.

[Bones, for instance, are mostly sold by the cook or kitchen-maid; but wherever there is a garden, not a bone ought to be allowed to leave the premises. Bone dust, pounded bones, bones in almost any shape, are essential manures for turnips, asparagus and most other culinary plants. Not only are plants grown with their aid finer to the eye but, what is better, they are more nutritious to the human system.]

Under the Eaves

Candle's snuffed when he doesn't
knock on the oak door never locked
so when we wake up he's there
already on top of us – hard
to breathe know what to do
him pressing us and shut tight
our eyes ears throats while he prises
open all our necessary corners –
the bed soaked when he's done
no more our nest our own downie
us crying and crying and the room
listening till we hear it shush us
*You'll live, like your mother
and her mother before you.
Dry those eyes now, get to work.*

*[The time approaches when these soliloquies shall be shared.
We shall not always give out a sound like a beaten gong
as one sensation strikes and then another.]*

Wild Teasel

When you were green
and we were girls

we'd sip the rain
between your lips

Now as old
as you are brown

bones worn sharp
throats blown dry

we call on you
to card the wool

that'll see us through
till we lie back down

in summer ground

Pressed Flowers

Frances
 Jane
 Isabella
Anne Mary Margaret
 Hannah
Catherine May Elizabeth Helen
 Alice Eleanor Ann
 Sarah Louisa
Ursula Jean

Bell
Coulson
Dickinson
Dodd
Ellison
English
Errington
Ferguson
Gibson
Herdman
Hume
Lowe
McDougall
McEwan
Pearson
Prior
Richardson
Ridley
Robson
Teasdale
Wallace
Wilkinson
Wilson
Woodman

Salvage

Balancing history inside us like a bowl brimful
of water, we are beings who mourn, who know

ten times more than we could ever say, truth
thicker than any yarn we could coax through

our wheels and spin. Who'll say our names over
and over and over and over again and again,

again and again so the past will last longer
than a good winter coat? So much of us is water,

on our death bed every drop will give up the ghost,
the mist, O Lord, of our rattled breath.

Mirrors draped in shawls or turned to the walls.

[N.B. *Once we can no longer speak for ourselves,
we are interpreted.
...history is not the past - it is the method
we have evolved of organising our ignorance of the past.*]

Lapidary

We have no centre. We are the centre
from which all earth radiates mica tucked
in our crevices the forgottenness of things.
We break open near, far crowbone
ash carapace of the soul. There
is nowhere to go. How should we ask
permission to enter our own home?
Made from mud lichen, dust
a woman's touch housewifely we wipe
away begin again. From before
history happened our hands reach out.
Here we are a constant recurrence
strata mauve, ochre given to endure.

[Written originally in the *Language of Nature*,
(of later Years but little understood).]

Botanical Emblem | *Throatwort*

Flicked back at the lip, a scattering of bells
that don't ring – cast from such underthings
as womany linen worn thin
and suggestible with their monthly
laundering: if this flower were a maiden, how
she'd be chimed by a gobbet of flies, longhorns
and bees who couldn't get enough,
scouring crown, then waist, then mouth
to soft white silence.

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