

Throw Your Shears Away

Poems by David Haskell

The Sanchez Brothers

The younger brother had come for his paycheck.
Saturday was payday at the Sanchez Ranch.
That 80 acres of leased gravel and weeds.
It was this farming family's last chance.

The ranch was a hillside homestead,
with a slope that would tire a goat.
The old well was slow on the recharge,
and could barely keep the rain-birds afloat.

The older brother found an FHA loan,
To grow bell peppers for the fresh market.
But without the support of a growers co-op,
it was a decision he would come to regret.

He had to sort and pack his daily pick,
without cooling or chlorination.
And load the truck trailer with the hope,
it would survive a one-day destination.

But last week's pick had turned to mush,
Four hundred cartons of green stained glue.
And the LA market just dumped the load.
There was nothing else they could do.

To the younger brother, it was just an excuse,
another week without any pay.
Another breach of their kitchen contract.
Another season asking him why does he stay.

He anger flashed and he jumped his brother.
A rematch of many childhood fights.
Now fueled with an adult's frustration.
He was going to "kick his ass" all right.

Their bodies slammed the side of my pickup.
It rocked from their vengeance and rage.
And their father and I sat trapped inside,
by the despair that hung like a cage.

Still equally matched, they finally stopped,
To hurl threats and allegations.
And the youngest brother finally broke the ties.
To win the fight to become someone.

Throw Your Shears Away

A pruner needs a pair of sharp shears,
to make the cuts to shape a new life.
And a tall ladder made with seasoned wood,
and sturdy steps to bear the stretching and strife.

The family orchard needs pruning every season,
after the foliage have dropped from the trees.
And the branches and limbs show their true character,
that may be hidden by the beauty of the leaves.

Now the rains have started and the ground is soft,
so set your ladder with a firm hand.
And push those legs through the deceptive mud,
to the plow pan to make the best stand.

Cut out those shiny green suckers,
they'll only rub the other limbs wrong.
Like all parasitic relationships.
They only take and they don't belong.

Cut out the blight and the deadwood.
Keep your trees free from beetles and disease.
Cut out the deadwood hanging in your life.
Those prejudices will only block the breeze.

When you're pruned as high as the third step.
Give the ladder a shake with your weight.
It's good to test the strength of your values,
when a fall would not be a serious mistake.

Cut the new growth back to one leader,
to keep the limbs focused and strong.
Thin out the branches and fruit wood,
to awaken new buds when spring comes along.

When you finally see the tops of the other trees,
its time to stop and enjoy the view.
The climb up this ladder is a long one.
And the moments at the top are few.

Sometimes, the ladder can start to slip,
when you're ten feet off the ground.
And your heart climbs up into your throat.
You've got a second to look around.

Then, the old farmers words come to you,
"Throw your shears away", if you're going down.
"Throw away your ego and that pride.
They will only cut you when you hit the ground".

Reach out for a limb that could save you.
That extended arm now can bear the weight.
And lower yourself safety to the ground.
Its time to let the family decide your fate.

Bearings, Belts and Chains

"Bearings, belts and chains, that's all this combine is".
When I asked what he would do, if the machine was his.
"The wood is still good and she looks complete.
But she's still just an antique".
And the mechanic left us at the Agronomy lot,
where she sat parked, marked "out of stock".

She had a simple technology, born of necessity,
To feed a nation at war.
To harvest the crops and save the seed.
To build a new world, the US would lead.
And her partner in this noble endeavor,
was the farm advisor, to pull all the levelers.
To translate the University's R and D,
into plots and trials that the farmer could see.

Now today's ag economy is a global spinning wheel.
And information is the currency that drives these business deals.
But this wealth failed to reach the deficits ringing in the U.C. halls.
So the Regents decided the Internet could make those annoying farm calls.
They offered the advisors a "Golden Handshake" to mark them "out of stock".
Now many of them sit parked at the back of the Agronomy lot.

But Mother Nature is a fickle partner to do business with, indeed.
And years of experience are now lost when they retired this special breed.

The Lakay*

Maximo was a simple man.
He made a living working with the land.
But he had lived a full life.
You could see it in the lines in his hands.

He left his island nation with nothing.
The steam freighters came and carried them away.
And dropped the survivors in Hawaii,
to cut sugar cane for a dollar a day.

When he finally reached the Golden State.
The Depression was grinding men's souls.
He followed the pickers and "help wanted" signs,
and lined up behind the Okies from the Dust Bowl.

The brothers finally settled in Fremont,
leasing ground to start their own farm.
Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.
And war hysteria sounded the racial alarm.

When their neighbors were shipped off to "camp",
the brothers saved their farm from looters in town.
And they made enough money during the war years,
to buy their own piece of fertile valley ground.

Maximo was a quite man.
But when he spoke he had something to say.
"Too much water make the plants lazy.
They will just throw their blossoms away".

He was not an educated man,
but he understood nature's ways.
And the natural cycles of life and death,
and the seasons that can't be changed.

Water was his silent partner.
Together they brought the seeds to life.
And he raised generations of vegetable crops.
Along with five children and a wife.
Now its time for him to join the water,
to rest in the same earthen bed.
Let us lay him down in this furrow,
to find the peace that is reserved for the dead.

* Lakay is a Tagalog word for "old man" said in respect.

Watsonville

Watsonville is the best fishin hole,
I know.

At Hansen's, the Amigos give Ruben a beer,
to tell them the story, they always love to hear.
How he caught a "Chevy" with the big John Deere.
Aye, I was discing the home ranch on 129.
When I saw this kabron, coming in his "low" ride.
So I made my next turn a little wide,
and I buried that disc deep in his side.
He fought hard, spun us both around.
He must have weighted at least three thousand pounds.

Bobby's bragging again down at the Trucker's Café.
About his last fishing trip to the Monterey Bay.
Well, I saw that bobbing orange antenna ball.
So I set the diesel engine stall.
I set the hook with a hard right swerve,
and my trailer drove the car up over the curb.
And the sound of folding metal was all I heard.
Now I was a little worried, to tell you the truth.
Until that driver popped up, out of the sunroof.

Down at the Junction, the engineers have always thought,
that Casey's fifty-footer was the largest ever caught.
They still talk about the trophy that he got.
He hooked that tired trucker one morning at five,
when the gates were stuck at Riverside Drive.
Gaffed with the coupler, behind the driving wheel.
Gutted him on the spot, peeling back the steel.
And the berries and cherries spilled out of that van,
like fruit cocktail from a forty-foot can.

I told you about the best fishin hole,
I know.
Beware, they might catch you there.