



# PHOTOSYNTHESIS

BY ASHLEY M. JONES

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, MY FATHER TAUGHT US

how dirt made way for food,

how to turn over soil so it would hold a seed,

an infant bud, how the dark could nurse it

until it broke its green arms out to touch the sun.

In every backyard we've ever had, he made a little garden plot

with room for heirloom tomatoes, corn, carrots,

peppers: jalapeno, bell, and poblano—

okra, eggplant, lemons, collards, broccoli, pole beans,

watermelon, squash, trees filled with fruit and nuts,

brussels sprouts, herbs: basil, mint, parsley, rosemary—

onions, sweet potatoes, cucumber, cantaloupe, cabbage,

Lucy Hewett

oranges, swiss chard and peaches,  
sunflowers tall and straightbacked as soldiers,  
lantana, amaryllis, echinacea,  
pansies and roses and bushes bubbling with hydrangeas.  
Every plant with its purpose—  
flowers to bring worms and wasps. Even their work matters here.

This is the work we have always known—  
pulling food and flowers from a pile of earth.  
The difference, now: my father is not a slave,  
not a sharecropper. This land is his and so is this garden,  
so is this work. The difference is that he owns this labor.  
The work of his own hands for his own belly,  
for his own children's bellies. We eat because he works.

This is the legacy of his grandmother, my great-granny—  
Ollie Mae Harris and her untouchable flower garden.  
Just like her hats, her flowerbeds sprouted something special,  
plants and colors the neighbors could only dream of.  
He was young when he learned that this beauty is built on work—  
the cows and the factories in their stomachs,  
the fertilizer they spewed out—  
the stink that brought such fragrance. What you call waste,  
I call power. What you call work I make beautiful again.

In his garden, even problems become energy, beauty—  
my father has ended many work days in the backyard,  
worries of the firehouse dropping like grain, my father wrist-deep  
in soil. I am convinced the earth speaks back to him  
as he feeds it—it is a conversational labor, gardening.  
The seeds tell him what they will be, the soil tells seeds how to grow,  
my father speaks sun and water into the earth,  
we hear him, each harvest, his heartbeat sweet, like fruit. 🍷

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*Ashley M. Jones is a poet and educator based in Birmingham, Alabama. Her latest collection is dark // thing.*