

Sara Henning

Planting Tomatoes (2024)

When it rains, West Virginia floods. Gushing when the forecast says otherwise. It comes when I'm lifting tomato plants from their pots, so hungry their thimble-shaped root caps suture and knit, hairs threading the soil like my fingers twisting into churches in Kindergarten, nursery rhymes awakening the little I knew of the divine—*Here's the church, and here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people*. Back then, no one told me tomatoes flower into thunderous globes, that vascular tissue unfurls like my aunts would weep hymns. No one told me yellow petals curl around the stamen until a tiny tomato surges into life. I understand this desire to shake into birth exhausted, to know oneself as a secret, delicious thing. Inside the skin of a tomato lives a whole kingdom which holds the secret of life. Once, I wanted to believe that heaven was a mustard seed, whole garden concealed in chalazas and micropyles, but now, try to convince me heaven is anything but a tomato and you'll fail—Cherokee Purple, Black Krim, Brandywine, succulence quivering under skin. The taste when I've sliced, salted, bitten a temple of flesh. Like Isaiah, I plant vineyards every time I let my teeth wound, seeds slipping down my throat to bloom in my stomach, to discover a fever of what can be born. Yes, I'm planting tomatoes where it starts, rain soft before it buckets, rain sluicing down my neck, my camisole, rain on my face as it storms the little islands of seedlings, and I can almost hear their joyful music as they cling to stalks I've tethered them to with butcher's twine. I can almost hear them gratify their thirst. For a long time, I've wanted to write a poem about my barren body, but all I can see and hear and taste are tomatoes, the fantasy of what bewitches my mouth and my brain. Once, I was a tomato plant, my womb chaotic as I lusted through summers vibrated by wind and bees. Every time a man found God in my hips, I refused to believe all things beautiful turn to dust, refused to believe the things we most desire—the fruit of a man harvesting his orchards, fruit full of locusts—can kill. Let my body go, God, if no garden will grow, if my hunger is only meant to shepherd ghosts. Now, I do not run when the rain comes, my clothes heavy with it, rain or my idea of rain, rain inside my head as my seedlings grow heavy with breeding—so ripe, so ready to be touched.