

THE INDIFFERENT BEAK

Daniel J. Langton

I

The corn was all but dead, its fruit dead black.
The season had not turned, the sun stayed high.
The scarecrow drooped on guard, his fragile back
Ground white by daily heat, the caustic cry
Of crows long still. Beneath the tainted sky
The people came each day to shade the corn,
To stand in silence, and in silence mourn.

At first the priests were still, at length they said
The fever laid on earth must surely mean
Their constant scorn of gods had struck the dead
With grave offence, that they at last had seen
The need for flames to heighten and to clean,
The need for sin to pay the deathless price,
The need for sin to pay with sacrifice.

It never had been done before, the cries
Of startled anger made the priests retreat.
They swore they meant no harm, concocted lies
To make their sour words appear as sweet
As lovers' vows. They buried their defeat,
Returned to handing out the meagre bread
And praying to the sick and nearly dead.

The shouts died down, and all was as before.
Or so it seemed, until the children died
Like stalks of corn, and nearly every door
Hung thick with mourning weeds, untied and tied
From time to time with more. And then they cried:
Defend us! and the priests replied: We can't direct
The gods, it's from the gods that you defect.

They still held back, but then the common well
 Began to muddy, buckets to come up dry.
 The oxen died in thirsty rows, the smell
 Of swollen death clogged up the air, the sky
 Was tough with grit, for dirt had learned to fly
 When birds had stopped. One day the word was said,
 The priests were called and told to go ahead.

II

They picked her out by lot that very day
 And probed her with their sticks from neck to knee,
 And then announced they felt it would not pay
 To send such scrawny evidence to plea
 Their fear of gods, the gods would only see
 How poor the gift. They must avoid that slight
 By penning her to feed her day and night.

They shaped a cage and had her lie inside,
 Told all the tribe to glean that she might eat
 The best that could be found. A few defied
 The priests, refused to bend beneath the heat
 And turn the girl from neighbour into meat.
 The others grubbed, and learned an aching hate
 For this thin charge that they must help inflate.

For her, her days of hunger were now done,
 Her body's wrinkles filled with shining fat.
 She lay all day beneath the sunburned sun,
 At times would sing old songs for those who sat
 On evening guard. A tame and puffy cat,
 She ate and slept at will, until the day
 The priests came in a body for their prey.

They freed the girl, and had her shuck her clothes,
 Then brought her to a place among the trees.
 She held her mind apart, she knew that those
 Who loved her most would want to see her please
 The gods by bearing up until the seas

Of blissful sleepy death could wash her heart,
Could drown the sins in which she'd taken part.

They wrapped her in the robe of their first chief
And sprinkled her with corn as though a bride.
The priests, their painted cheeks awash with grief,
Stood in a circle while their leader cried
For heaven to end the dying when she died.
He stroked her hair and sang of human guilt,
Then led her to the altar they had built.

She kept her peace, she must not ruin her name.
But death comes slow in flames, at last she cried,
And felt in crying all the bitter shame
Of all her sins swell up from deep inside
And crush against her pain until she died.
The fire raged to join the sun's mad eye,
And swallowed on its way her last mad cry.

III

Two days later, fat on the northern wind,
The blobs of rain came scarring dusty corn,
And all the disbelievers knew they'd sinned.
The people danced, and all the infants born
In that great week, as fast as they were torn
From mother flesh, were given to the priests,
Who raised them for the training of wild beasts.

And after that, each time the rain would fail,
They'd choose a growing girl and she would die.
But there came days when this had no avail;
Except for blood, the matted ground stayed dry,
The priests would say they had to try and try,
Until at last the girls would wait in turn,
But still the sun would burn and burn and burn.

Beaten, they left to find a softer land,
Where prudent work and hope were not undone
By vengeful gods who ruled with heavy hand.

They took along their priests, who'd sometimes won
 A day or two of peace from constant sun.
 They roamed the earth, and left in every plain
 The secret way they'd found for making rain.

IT WAS THEN

Willis Eberman

When I thought that my song was over,
 why then I rose, lit fires, danced,
 moved across the grass of my unknowing,
 without fear, mindless to remember the past,
 but felt a voice move in my breast, my throat,
 and was born to utterance again.

Splendid are the jewels of the fire I stoke;
 splendid, even in ashes, the lost notes of my singing,
 stirred, breathed upon, relit in the motion
 of this lone dance.

A cock crows, Camellias
 open, an offering to the new white that arises
 like a pale woman from the couched hills.

When I thought that my song slept, or was over
 at last, it was then that fires leaped, a cock
 crowed, and camellias brought forth the sun
 of my unknowing: splendors and songs and jewels,
 fires of an endless mind, and a dance forever.