

## JIM VILLANI

### *The Vegetable Man*

Every Thursday I watch for the vegetable truck,  
Coming quietly to a stop, graciously hugging the curb.  
A cow bell rings out and Mom puts down her mop,  
Gathers up her change purse.

The vegetable truck is big and fire-engine red,  
but all wooden like a train caboose.  
I climb on up front like a schoolbus,  
And when I walk down the aisle both sides are  
Bins and shelves full of fresh fruits and vegetables—  
Onions, cabbage, celery, lettuce, apples—  
Everything Mom needs and delicacies unknown to me.  
At the end of the long aisle a clock-like scale  
Hangs by a hook with three thin chains wired  
To an aluminum basket. The vegetable man leans  
Against a raw counter, not tall and a little puffed out,  
Putting Mrs. Umbert's potatoes in the bin.  
I watch the dial flip around, settling at 4 1/2.  
The vegetable man carefully selects two Idahos,  
And the dial slips firmly to five.  
He tips the tray into a brown bag,  
And the needle whips back faster than my eyes.

Once, I remember, he offered me a peach.

The vegetable men have all died away;  
They have given up their skins and their seeds.  
All across America the vegetable trucks lie abandoned,  
Splintering in junkyards and country fields,  
Dismantled and rotting, grown-over with weeds  
And the spores of vegetable ghosts.  
From time to time an old seed sprouts  
And a wild garden springs up to cleanse  
The faded 2x4's and enameled sheeting,  
The crumpled vines of a stubborn zucchini  
Or a wild watermelon with its pump fruit—  
ghostly ripe and delicious.

Even now, in the summer I go and look for them.