

PAUL BENNETT

Bicentennial Piece

(1776-1976)

Living close to orchard and garden
I follow the best practices I know:

After Thoreau, I fertilize with birdsong.

After Jefferson, I am a small farmer
Attempting to grow large in spirit,
To become one who can identify
Tyrants by sound, sight and smell.

After my gardening friend Ransom,
Who labored long to raise rhubarb, I say:
May God bless you and yours, dear sir.

But I kissed nobody's ass when I came,
I will kiss nobody's ass while here,
And when I go I shall trust the hands that take me.

An Amish Sketch

I

It could be a Saturday late in April,
You could be one hour past seven years old,
Your name would be Jonathan Yoder,
Your father's horse Frisk would be hitched
To the rail east of the sandstone courthouse.
You climb on the rail at Frisk's nose and look:
There are no paints or palominos,
But solids—blacks, whites, sorrels, grays—
Horse flies, and a covey of sparrows
Scrounging for grain in the steaming manure.
Frisk nudges your shoe and picks at the strings;
Balancing, you bend over and finger his velvet lip
And that of Yaggi's mare who is stretching too,
Then you spring at the sparrows: "Meow!"
And run to catch up with your father.

II

You could have come into town
With your father, mother, and three sisters:
Rebecca and the twins—Mary and Maria—

You would have brought flats of sweet and hot peppers,
Tomatoes, eggplants, and Brussels sprouts
Already delivered, two trips, all in file carrying,
You at the end as always, the twins
Not walking as fast as you can walk.
Rebecca even doubting you can carry your flat,
But you did, and now your father and you head
Through the ground level west door of the courthouse.
You laugh because each stall has a spittoon,
And neither your father nor you chews tobacco,
When you're done you work up a spit anyway,
Then go to the wash basin and mirror,
With both hands you wet down your hair, sides and back,
Then use the cake of pine soap, and towel,
And read aloud the janitor's handwritten note:
"The man who finds a moment's ease in this room
Should know his neighbor has his needs too
And leave it cleaner than he found it."

III

Your father and you do.

IV

At the restroom door your father's hand
That makes Frisk and the household go,
Touches yours and leaves seven presents.
You walk with him past Muhlenberg's window
And eyebuy a barlow pocketknife, a kite,
A pair of ice skates cut to half price, and meet
Your sisters emerging with three flats
Labeled "Pacific Giant Delphiniums."
Your father says, "She's buying flowers again."
Your mother says, "They're for the front yard—
Marigolds and shastas will brighten the side."
"You have used annuals all around, Hilda,"
Your father says, and his teeth shine in his beard
And you know he wants you to remember your mother's gift
When you are with him tending the delphiniums
Evening after evening among blue and purple heavens,
Chasing bees, butterflies, and humming birds.

V

Flats high, their faces flowering on green,

Rebecca and the twins walk off to the buggy
While your father and mother and you enter
The store to get on with the Saturday buying.
Your father ends up carrying the box of groceries,
You carry the bundle of light blue sateen
For Rebecca's graduation dress,
And you all three stop before the radio
Where a newscaster is saying: "Again he condemned
Bearded men who use filthy four-letter words,"
And you ask your father what he means.
Your father raises his hand to his beard, smiles,
Shakes his head, and stops before the pocket knives.
"Jonathan, you can take your pick here."
You point to the row of barlows, second from left,
He pays for it and hands it to you.
"Thanks, but you already gave me seven dimes..."

VI

Then you finger-test the bigger blade and ask:
"What about the other—filthy four-letter words?"
Your father says: "For filthy four-letter words,
Try *help* and *love*." "I know they're not," you protest.
Your father motions your mother toward the door.
"They are when they're not made real." She says:
"Jonathan, use your head and figure them, try
Bomb, *burn*, and *kill*." You put the knife away,
And test the words—she's right. But your father
Is chuckling in his beard. "Hilda,
It would take an angel to keep that politician
From getting messed up in his body's functions."
He turns to you. "As Uncle Josh used to say:
People who stew over *piss*, *shit* and *fuck*
But encourage *hate* are all fouled up."
"Uncle Josh had been to sea," your mother says,
"And he could be particular,
He even asked: 'Have gentle people gone competitive?'
When you installed running lights on the buggy."
"Did Uncle Josh say that?" Your father laughs.
"I'd have told him I do what the law requires—
When it's reasonable." He holds the door
And your mother goes out, but stops to say:
"Happy birthday all year long, Jonathan."