

Judah

Patricia E. Gunter

These bargained years I've been in the fields
With you, tending, in my distraction, ample yields,

Though when the wind pressed down the grain,
There was nothing, or when the sheep would flurry
And part as if a man were walking through,

Joseph, it was never you.

Golden, plaited stalks crowded down

And rose again in gusts,

Or caravans in their moving dreams of dust
Diffused into white plains.

Once,

While in the upward orchard,

On a terrace with the newer fruits,

Driving away wiry goats

Whose wild lips strayed too near the tenderer shoots,

Over yellow crop and sliding greens,

The stripes of soil, pale dust, and the woad sky,

I thought I saw your garment—you bearing it—

Your breast a goat's blood red, and your eyes

Turned from me.

I shouted; the land shifted

In some slight breeze, the goats lifted

Their nobbed heads.

When we merchants

Wandered home, with sons trailing behind

Like snagged threads,

I watched our father become tethered

To the land and to Benjamin by his understanding dreads.

He ever mourned you. Benjamin led

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Him about, as Rachel's scent was still in his hair
And on his smooth skin.
And when Tamar, like a raven, returned
My signet, my bracelets, my staff
And my seed to me, and I mused upon the gold,
Watching it burn in her hand as she thrust it forth,
A hunger stirred within;
I longed to see all I had so lost again.

In the year the bladed heat gouged
From the land its silt-like, golden roe,
We turned, under thin, waterless clouds, to go
To Egypt; to the Egyptian, royal
Over the flameless burning of land from his throne.
I could not know
The treasurer of our bread was the grown
Dreamer we lowered;
Not from the guttering in his face,
Not from the longing, as protective lord,
To view the remains of what bereaved Jacob adored—
Rachel's prince, younger Benjamin.
I moved his son when Jacob sent us up
And watched the old man fearfully die,
His eyes
Exhaustive in their lingering looks.
When I nearly lost to a mad Egyptian,
The taste of silver gorged my mouth.
I remembered throwing Joseph in a pit;
Judah now came rising out of it.
I could not have borne another hunger, or
Lead a riderless donkey back to Jacob's door
And lower both of you once more.

So we are brothers again.
My bones, once brittle stalks, unbend;
My eyes, released upon the moon of your face.
Having moved so deeply against my blood
I envision why we so anxiously tend
Our wild vine for redeemers.
Joseph, who should never frighten me like that again.