

With the Light of Apricots



Poems by Larry D. Thomas

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For Dodie



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I. As if a God Had Ripped the Sundown



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Remember

that morning
in the desert
when the sun
was a slice
of tangerine?
When we chewed
honeycombs,
our sunburned chins
dimpled and red
as cherries?
When, tipsy
on mimosas,
we wove
through the rosy
yellows of dawn
like mice
in a basket
of apricots?
When even
our teeth
were sweet?





Apricots

A few blocks off the plaza,
in the Santa Fe evening light
the color of brandy,
on the street below the branches
of the tree, they glowed in rosy,
yellow hues as if a god
had ripped the sundown, rolled it
into fuzzy, dimpled balls,
and flung them to the ground.
Fast as we could, deep
into the fabric of our shorts,
we crammed them till our pockets
sagged, and lumbered down
the darkening street
like lumpy angels, holy
with the light of apricots.





Five Houses Down

In a panic, the woman
at the day-care center
begged me to help her find them,
the two rowdy toddlers
who just moments before
squeezed through a rut beneath the fence
and toddled off. Their playmate
had seen them, and run to tell
the woman they had gone.
I found them five houses down,
standing beneath a tree of fruit,
some pieces of which were strewn
upon the ground. Each held his prized,
ripe apricot with both hands
as a man would a cantaloupe,
fumbling it in his palms
like a young god in training
sphering clay into a sun.





Fried Pies

To make the filling, the mothers
cut the ripened apricots from their stones,
slice them into strips, soak them in pots of water,
cook them, add sugar, cinnamon, and cook them
again till they reach just the right consistency.
As the filling cools, they roll out the dough
for the crust, cut it into round pieces
they spoon the filling into the middle of,
fold them neatly in half, seal the curved
edges, pressing them with the tines of a fork,
and deep-fry them in bubbling lard
to a perfect medium brown.
As the pies cool on the table,
the children close their eyes and salivate,
picturing a thousand ripe apricots
dangling from the branches of the trees,
each a fuzzy, rosy, yellow sun
setting in the maw of the night.





II. Their Skins of Rosy Yellow



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Interlude Late in an Afternoon

For several days in a row, when I was home alone
in the waning hours of the afternoon, basking
in the shadows of the porch, she walked by
sans speaking, clad in a loose, cotton sundress
and barefoot. Her hair was straight, long and dark,
falling to her bare shoulders and back. One afternoon,
out of the blue, she stopped and queried whether
she could use my phone, only for a minute.
After her call, during which I never heard her speak,
she thanked me and left. The next afternoon,
a flush of embarrassment on her face and neck
ending at the shadow of her cleavage, she approached me
holding in her hand something wrapped in a paper towel.
Extending her offering and pressing firmly into my hand
whatever she had wrapped in the towel, she smiled. I felt,
oozing through the paper, the wetness of two apricots,
overripe, their skins of rosy yellow splitting, bleeding
onto my palm the sweet and sticky substance of a pass.





At the One of Solid Silk

Her unexpected death
two weeks ago
left him a widower
at twenty-five.

As night falls, as he has
at every dusk since she died,
he ghost-walks to her clothes
in the closet. He fingers
each of her blouses, lingering
at the one of solid silk,
a print of vivid, ripened apricots
lifelike as a detailed photograph
fit for framing, each apricot
crowned with drops of dew,
laden with her scent,
the blouse she wore
the moment his interest in her,
passing like a film fast-forwarded,
stopped, cropped to the frozen,
single frame of love.





The Picker

In the blur of a single motion,
she thrusts her hand into the branches,
clutches a cluster of ripened fruit,
snaps it from its stems, and lays it
bruiseless in the basket dangling
from her arm like a cheap straw purse.
She'll work like this till dusk, filling baskets
brimming with the promise of a better life.
At last, lumbering to her shanty
in the darkness, with bronze, aching hands
spared not even a moment for washing,
she'll ease her infant from the arms
of her grandmother, squeeze her to her breasts
for nursing, place her in a makeshift cradle,
cradle the weary head of her husband,
and collapse quickly asleep, her calloused
palm curled around the corner of her pillow,
redolent with the scent of apricots.





The Dream

For two years now, when he's slept in his cell at the state pen,
he's had the same, recurring dream. The apricots have ripened
on his front yard trees, bowing the branches so the lower ones
touch the ground. Frozen in his chair inside the window
like a quadriplegic, all he can do is watch as the crows descend
like a black, cawing cloud and devour the ripened fruit,
their beaks slashing like black knives. His trees bereft of fruit
and even leaves, he wakes, remembering how for miles around
the locals came to gaze upon the glory of his trees,
the largest and most productive in the county, bestowing
his dilapidated shanty with dignity, hiding it from the street
with a dense veil of fruit and leaves. He remembers how
he only meant to graze the big teenager who awoke him
late one night, stealing his apricots, but, firing an errant shot,
dropped him dead as a cold, pulpless apricot stone.





III. Fecund with the Promise



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The Apricot Tree

Though it was established
with a grand root system
which drew its needed moisture
from deep within the earth,
he tended it daily
as a gardener would a rosebush.
He tracked the seasons with its foliage,
and took great pride in the imperceptible
widening of its trunk. Even in mid-
January, when its leafless branches
clacked in the howling wind
like the antlers of rutting stags,
he'd don his heaviest coat,
take his place on his porch,
and watch it through the afternoon
to dusk. *Sans* even moving, it creaked him
through the seasons like a wagon,
tugging him toward the summer
of his ninetieth year, toward dark green branches
bowed with the bounty of apricots, fecund
with the promise of baskets and damsels.





The Centenarians

Their gospel
is the obvious.
They love
their weightless,
rawboned frames,
allowing them
ghostlike movement,
the inconspicuousness
of a mind
whooshing
through the rooms
of memory.
They cherish
their collections
of canes,
new and antique,
perfect for balance
or weaponry.
In the falseness
of their teeth,
they've found
their Truth,
reliable
as their diet
of rice, spring water,
and, canned,
dried, or fresh,
apricots.





Still Life

Of dried, cracked oil on canvas,
it hangs on a white wall, illumed
by the slanted beam of an early
afternoon spotlight-sun of track
lighting: a white table covered
with a white, cotton tablecloth;
a white porcelain plate; a knife
and fork of sterling silver;
and a fresh, ripe apricot
placed off-center on the plate.
Only the sheen of the plate
and its shadow distinguish it
from the tablecloth. The knife
and fork, lying equidistant
from the plate, draw the viewer's eye
to blade and tines, auguring
imminent violence. For the moment
intact, the peel of the apricot,
taut with the pressure of flesh,
pulses with the heat of pinkish yellow,
braced for the inevitable ravage
just beyond the canvas edge
of manicured, human hands.





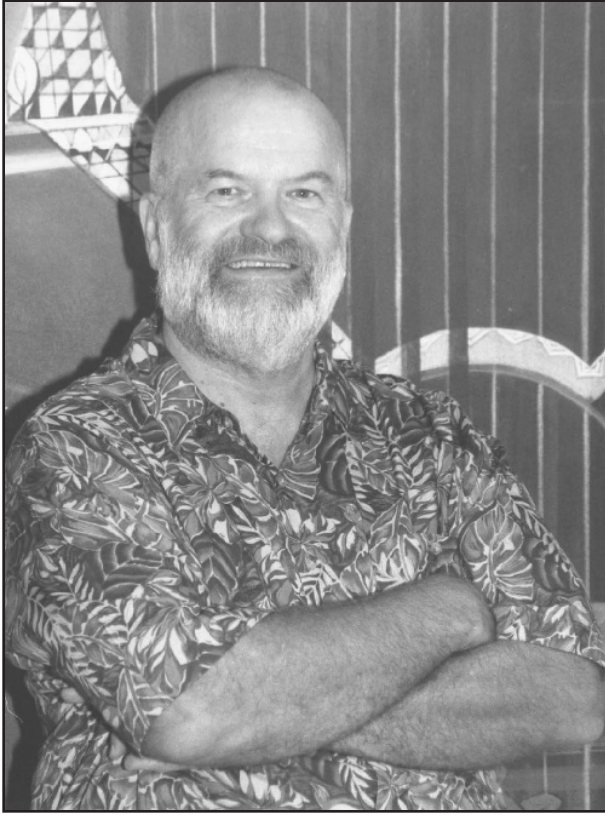
Artificial Fruit

I saw them in a basket
on the table, in a slant
of late afternoon, winter
sunlight, a scrumptious cluster
of apricots so fresh their stems
were still attached, bearing, trembling
in a current of air from a vent,
browning leaves curling in the act
of dying. I stood there bothered
by their symmetry, too perfect
for actual fruit, so I bent
toward them, checking for redolence
or a bruise. Their plastic smell
gave them away, the telltale
sign of fraud. I felt a sadness
in their unbridgeable distance
from the real, imagining
their hollow desire, yea, longing
to trade their everlasting beauty
for even the transitory
dirge of decay, or clank of the knife
bounded against the stone of life.





About the Author



Larry D. Thomas has published five collections of poems: **The Lighthouse Keeper** (Timberline Press, 2001), **Amazing Grace** (Texas Review Press, 2001), **The Woodlanders** (Pecan Grove Press, 2002), **Where Skulls Speak Wind** (Texas Review Press, 2004), and **Stark Beauty** (Timberline Press, 2005). His sixth poetry collection, **The Fraternity of Oblivion**, is forthcoming from Timberline Press (Fulton, Mo.) in 2007. Among the prizes and awards he has received for his poetry are the 2004 Violet Crown Award (Writers' League of Texas), the 2003 Western Heritage Award (Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma), two Texas Review Poetry Prizes (2001 and 2004), two Pushcart Prize nominations, and three Spur Award Finalist citations (Western Writers of America). His poetry has appeared in numerous national journals, including *Poet Lore*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Southwest Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *The Texas Review*, *Borderlands: Texas*

Poetry Review, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Cottonwood*, *Red Rock Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *The Journal of the American Medical Association*.

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