

First Job

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Nine years old.
Hair not combed.
Get up, get the bucket,

The day is already old.

Dew and dust
design your warm brown skin
clinging to last night's sleep
in the new morning air.

Don't forget your ticket.
Don't eat the berries.
Don't come back too soon.

Don't.

The first berry makes a sound
all the rest are
silent like memory.
Don't even think you're thirsty
...the sweeter the juice
drop them all softly
Let go.

Just squat if you have to pee.
Nobody cares
'cause you're just a kid
Mom sent you out there with
no underwear
no shoes
not like the other kids
who get to play while their parents pick
and they spit on you and tease you
and run away.

This is where you learned to love
warm dust
between your toes
the sun
beating your face
beneath too long bangs
the silence of
working
alone

the trudge back to reality
when the bucket is full.

Nobody will knock you down and take your berries.
The money
is not yours.

Sometimes you get to put a few coins
in the piggy bank you glued back together.

Sometimes you get to dream
that the sweetest berry
is in your mouth
and you can taste it.