



STRAWBERRY HARVEST

The quiet voices of bodies bent
over the rows, some on their knees, some
perching. Hats attached to each of them.

Finding the berries that are not too red,
too soft, too white and hard, the voices
of those picking murmur as if
in prayer both grateful and purposeful.
This church has no walls, but row upon row
of bodies kneeling and intent on harvesting
the sweet red flesh of early July fruit.

Voices of children, mothers, grandmothers,
grandfathers, fathers, all here, in their hats. The wrinkled
thin woman with the tired black hat, saying, “I’d pick more but
I’m all out of money.” Another says, “That row
has only the white-tipped berries left.” There’s the girl
who might be ten, cotton flowers on her headband, a grandmother
resting her knees on the rolled towel. The sign
says no children before 11:00 but does anyone care?

One girl looks about eight, fiddles
with the straps of a baby carrier and her mother holds
the baby out to her, waiting for her to be ready.
Two little boys canter between the rows
past the boy trying to pick up all the blue flags,
then the yellow flags marking rows out and his very
pregnant mother patiently steers him away.

The morning is early. But serious pickers come at six am.
My daughter and I wonder which berries to pick as she finds
a row that tastes sweeter, calls me to come pick with her, says
I can’t wait to make strawberry topsy turvy tonight,
We fill our boxes, counting out eight quarts in thirty minutes,
surrounded by plenitude we have forgotten
all the winter long. Along with the crickets
singing, the birds calling and the night that comes

to bring fireflies and the owls’ hoot
from our back woods. Moths bump the screen,
heat lightening streaks the dark. So much heat
at last. It free floats in the air, mingles with the scent
of strawberries spread before us. Our fingers and palms
redden from the final sorting and bagging, freezing
summer warmth into a sweetness that will, come winter,
startle our tongues into a prayer of gratitude.

—DENISE PENDLETON