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A Rutabaga

Robert Bly

The rutabaga is such a squat, fearsome thing, a sort of German observation balloon that observes below the ground. It notices the worms pass on their thundery errands and during the night watches weird beetles passing outside the cottage.

It is about the size of the testicle of a two-thousand-pound bull. The lower half (in its double color, it resembles a bobber) is pale cream, a gorgeous deep cream, the undoubtful high forehead of a man of inherited wealth. And the upper half is wine-red, something urgent, a reckless furtiveness that calls attention to itself, the burglar that wears red clothes, or a hermit sitting high on a pile of rutabagas. The burgundy color is altered here and there by whitish streaks.

In the hand, it rocks in its own cool ocean world. The hand feels complimented by it, as if it had been given a gift: the solid drift of snow that keeps the henhouse warm or the waves the storm throws against the cliff.

A knife has cut off both taproot and foliage. The cut at the bottom shows the raw flesh, as a severed head shows the neck. Faint rutabaga rings reverberate up into the skull.

When we bite into it, we taste an embittered story out of the Depression that ends with the whole family scattered, the furniture dispersed, the old pump no longer working, sour old men camped in the living room, and crusted cans of Carnation condensed milk everywhere.

Last night I dreamed that Christmas was coming, and you were in the house practicing music upstairs with a young, dark-haired man, a drummer. Each time you hit the sheet music with your wooden stick end, notes came out. The tune was "When the Saints Go Marching In."