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Basket

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Autumn 2001

J.P. Reese

We always believed that spring would come;
Believed that summer would flower again,
Ill-prepared for this season of drought.

The Angel-Wing mounds in finished growth.
Petals drop over the berm.
Red cherries ripen under an Indian sun.

Apples firm for picking, their juice runs tart, cool
Over our tongues. Seed rests in fallen fruit to spread
The possible beneath this always uncertain earth.

We crate the remains of this final harvest;
Wrap roots pulled from furrows in yesterday's news;
Avert our eyes from its pictures of death.

We shoulder the leavings of all that is past.
The end of the season begins.



BASKET Justin Houston

(from page 5)

"Whatcha doin', Leora?"
Leora let go the rake. "That's Mrs. Harper to you,"
she said and pushed herself stiffly to her hands and
knees. "You shouldn't be up there." She steadied herself
by leaning against the shed wall as she got on her feet.
"You get on down, you hear."
"Why?"
Leora wiped her palms against her pant legs.
"Because it ain't safe."

"Why?"
That just iced Leora's cake, this child questioning
her like that. She picked up the rake and shook it at
the girl. "Because I say so." Leora turned her back and
marched toward the shed door. It was no secret that
my dear, old friend had rued the day the Fletcher clan
moved in next door, "all a hundred and ninety-three of
them," as she liked to put it. Truth is, the Fletchers only
had five kids, but they were home-schooled and fast-
moving little creatures, so Leora got her fill of them after
about a month of neighborliness.

And Winnie? That Winnie . . . Why, she was the
worst of all.
"Precocious" is what the girl's mother called her. She
bragged that Winnie had accepted Jesus when she was
just three, said the child marched right down to the altar
and told that preacher, "I'm saved!"

Leora leaned the rake against Roy's old smoker, just
where they always kept it, and then backed out, closing
up the shed door. She had her own word for
what Winnie Fletcher was, but she was
trying real hard not to say it anymore.

Winnie said, "I know you got a
baby cat under there."
"That so?" Leora turned, looked
up at the child. She told me the sun shone
right in her eyes, but she didn't want the child
to see her blink.

"Uh-hum. I know something else, too."
Leora folded her arms. "Surprise, surprise."
"I know Jesus wouldn't like the way you're treating
that kitten." And with that, Winnie leaped off the fence,
leaving the slats to quiver like plucked guitar strings.

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I can't say Leora is much of a talker, but she called
me next morning, said how all night long, she tossed and
turned. Couldn't sleep what with worrying about how
Winnie was right. "No matter how ornery a creature is,"
Leora said, "if God made it, I suppose it has a right to be
treated respectable." She confessed she'd been awful to
that little cat, even after Winnie skee-daddled. Not only
had she tried to skewer it with a rake and flush it out with
the hose, she'd shot at it with a can of Raid Roach Control.

"And it's too young to even skitter up the fence,"
she said.

Now I could hardly believe my ears. It just didn't
seem like Leora to fret so about a stray, but darn if
she didn't get up out of bed and drive to the all-night
Wal-Mart there in Mesquite, bought a big ol' bag of
soft-chew Cats D'Light. Said she wore her robe and
slippers right into the store. Then — she said it was after
midnight — she poured cat food in the grass by the
shed and went back to bed.

In the morning, the food was gone.
Leora's bosom swelled with pride over her
generosity. We could all see it, the way she walked into
Bible study, walked around the block, walked through
the grocery store with her chest all puffed out like she
was a teenage girl who'd just discovered underwire
braziers. Of course, it was Liddie Sykes who made the
first wisecrack out loud. Something about how those
Hollywood starlets wouldn't need boob jobs if they'd
only find themselves a stray cat to cuddle. If it hadn't
been so funny a thing to say, I might've shot back and
defended Leora, but as it was, I just laughed. And I kept
on laughing — we all did — and she kept on feeding
that darn cat.

It was no surprise to any of us, except Leora, how
fast that cat grew. Doubled its size in a week. Problem
was, though, it never got any friendlier, at least not so's I
could tell. Leora and me, we have this arrangement. I get
fresh vegetables from her and she gets fresh, homemade
bread from me. Not that bread machine junk with a crust
as stiff as bark, but good, hand-kneaded honey wheat
that let rise in my kitchen and cook on a stone. So I'm at
her place fairly regular. I saw her try, really try, to make

nice to that cat. She fed it everyday, like I said, but she
also stopped chasing it, swinging at it and hollering at it.
Still, every time I was over there, no matter how
Leora tried to share her space with that cat, it'd arch its
back. Shoot every hair straight up like a porcupine. And
hiss? Why, that little fur-ball hissed something fierce at
poor Leora. It was bad enough when the thing was tiny,
but what with it growing so fast, I figured it just might
someday sink its claws into Leora's throat. Draw fatal blood
like its relatives the she-lion over there in Africa. But I didn't
say nothing. Just watched, day by day, as the kitten grew.

Not 'til mid-August anyway, when we had that
cold snap. Temperatures fell to, oh, I'd say about ninety
degrees, so Leora and me, we fixed up some iced sweet
tea and enjoyed the afternoon on Leora's front porch,
fanning ourselves with folded newspaper and eating from
a platter of sliced and salted tomatoes. All she wanted to
talk about was that kitten. The way its eyes turned to dark
slits and how its tongue turned white if it hissed a good
long time. It was clear Leora's pleasure in doing right was
curdling, even if she didn't let on to anybody else.

She poured me a second glass, and I commended
her for taking on responsibility for one of God's creatures.
She huffed, said nothing good had come of it, then
added, "Isn't love supposed to win all?"

The words popped out without me thinking.
"Do you love the cat?"

She gazed at me a while. The horse across the
road whinnied. The Johnson boy drove by in his new
Chevy truck. "Well, I might love it," she said, "with a little
barbeque sauce."

I darn near fell over laughing, but the point was
made. Leora decided to name the cat. Hissy. I said it fit.
But even named, that cat was a devil, spitting and
hissing and gulping its Cats D'Light. Leora might have
been able to endure if it weren't for Winnie's blue eyes
constantly watching over that fence. A home-schooled
child can have too much time on its hands, and Winnie
was obsessing on Hissy. Leora complained that each
morning, that child climbed her fence and stayed there
nearly all day, singing and talking and cooing, trying to
coax Hissy out from under that shed.