

the caretaker

(i.m. Jacob Dudley, 1891-1963)

gifts from Jake –
 the word *mangelwurzel*
that had lopped a finger
 the taste of green beans with love
arms enfolding, held in heaven
 the surprise of rapport
a cardboard world brought alive
 mending the soles of shoes
a song to keep bombs in the air
 the lack of romance in sacks of coal
damaged back and lungs

how to grow children and cabbages
 read the earth and its seasons
value the modesty of the potato
 the fragrance of sweet peas
the woodlands sunny and wild
 and a wandering pink tea rose –
a revelation –
 like the instantaneous love
of a famished child and a small old man

his eyes, vivid, and hands full of stories
 weathered hands that worked horses
driving haycarts army wagons lorries
 did his duty of course in two wars
trenches and Home Guard
 familiar with the smallness of life
the nadir the void the beast
 but kept intact his elemental core
solid as his oak chair plain as rainwater
 reliable as well-worn working boots

and he gave one of his granddaughters
 sat on his lap, counting silver coins
flecked with coal dust –
 along with the name *winkle*,
an awareness of the value
 of the quiet man, the playful and
the good
 an understanding of how –
in darkness, as in daylight –
 to keep the heart alive
tender glad

 and,
out working in the garden one day –
 a lesson in gravity
the matter of technique the art of *leverage*
 the way to dig deeper –
pressing the boot down
 firmly on the tread of the spade
and then not lifting – but *turning*
 the earth

Sandy Fitts