

## 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