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Spiritual

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SPIRITUAL

by Eleanor Stanford

for Jean Toomer

1.
Just wheat and corn out here
in Doylestown, PA. Nothing
as hard or sweet as sugar,
nothing as soft or sharp
as the closed fist of the cotton boll.

2.
In Georgia you learned
the writer's trade: isolation
for insight, words for a bent
back. Learned it always
leaves you at a loss.

3.
The only place to write
is on a train, the rattle
of the tracks drowning out
the clatter in your head.
The only place you can be
still and still be
moving.

4.
Swan song, train song,
city song, dusk song:
*I hate to see
that evening sun
go down. Lord, I
hate to see that evening
sun*

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5.
Go down, Moses,
down in Georgia land,
down in the Mississippi delta
and the dark Harlem night, down
in the tenements of Chicago Philadelphia
Washington, D.C. tell old
Pharoah to let my people go.

6.
My people are pale,
tawny, dusky, dark,
free and also slaves
to words. I wrote
them and still they
let me down.

7.
Your first wife died
in childbirth. (Did you know
in Spanish they call it
giving light?) Chicago
was a rock you couldn't
crack, but it gave you
a daughter and a new way
to look at light.

8.
There was only Marjorie.
She was both
your wife and daughter,
mother and your sick
grandma, the ones
you wanted and couldn't have.

9.
The second Marjorie started
as a photographer in New York City.
Her father gave you the farm
as a wedding gift. You didn't work
but learned to drive the tractor. Passing through
the fields in fall, did you see your poems
lined up like sheaves bound
by someone else's hand?

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10.

When you died, she sold off
the land in pieces, lived alone
in the carriage house with
undeveloped negatives
in the basement.

11.

Did you wear a wide-brimmed hat?
Did you believe in the Inner Light, and was it
a white flash of blindness, or was it purple
like the last licks of clarity before day
flickers out? When Quaker Meeting ended,
when the silence broke
into a rustle of handshakes and how do you
do, was it disappointment or relief
or something else that stirred in you?