

Did One-ness Reign in Spite of Chains?

MARY MOORE EASTER

Our feet stir dust. A black tag at the end of the tour group, I lag behind on Mulberry Row.
A crowd grows up around me, spirits summoned transparent as mist. Sally's shadow
and children scatter, skitter back. The guide drones past the stones of slave dwellings,
foundation and chimney the low and high of shelter.
From here on the lip of their terrace
near gardens astonish from east to west, one thousand feet of food.

He leased extra slaves to flatten a terrace out of the mountain. It took three years . . .

Onions shoot up green knives, lettuces ruffle the dirt, cabbages loll with heavy heads.
Was there a May dawn when the yoke of slaves lifted
at the sight of fog on the high ridges releasing to the sun? Did one-ness reign in spite of
chains? Was Jefferson cruel enough to plan such beauty
or did order blind him to the paradox?

I drift into the guide's tide, her current of statistics; dwellings measured—crammed;
rations listed—a peck made one man a cornmeal loaf a day.

Well, it wasn't a lot of food but slaves had the river nearby, the woods for trapping (no arms, of course) and their own gardens over yonder. Her arm sweeps the five-thousand-acre view. So they could supplement.

My teeth grind their flints to fire. An ember sizzles between my lips: *supplement*.

“Well, Missus, I kin see how them chillun worked for they food. Dey musta used up they Sundays! What mo’ time dey had fo’ the fishin’ and huntin’?”

Slave technique, trickster tongue at the ready. Feigned ignorance.

What a great question! She brightens toward her good student, hardly singed.

Who knows the slave work schedule? she queries, waiting for a raised hand.

A visiting Dane rumbles, “Sun up to sundown.”

He’s never heard can’t-see-in-the-morning to can’t-see-at-night
no sun in it.

My tongue shape-shifts in understanding.

“Well, no wonder he had to lock up the whole place!”

Everyone laughs; the guide reddens.

And then she tells about the fence, Jefferson’s fence: boards tight enough to keep a rabbit out, six feet high enough to keep a man out, six miles around to keep anyone out, crowding cabins to keep the view out. One entrance, padlocked. No May dawn, no fog lift in the distance, no one-ness, no chain-oblivious soul.

Behind my closed lips a furnace, a grindstone, flints enough to spark the world.

