

H A R R Y C L I F T O N

September

Sometimes, I look over the garden wall
And see her in there, working.
Far gone, in the good sense, she stoops
Among blind plants, and the vegetables
That give of themselves, this late in the year.
Weeding, hoeing, in an old coat,
October round the corner, bracing herself
On great legs, dragging at something invisible
From this distance, anyway.
The yellow snake of an ancient hose-pipe
Curls on the dirt-path. Buckets of old rainwater,
August leftovers, brim and grow rusty
Among windfalls. But the air is still,
And the dimension she inhabits
Inaccessible. To get to here there
I would have to gatecrash time as well as space,
So far ahead of me is she now
In years, in knowledge. Not old though,
Not just yet. Still in her full strength.
I see no children, ever.
Sometimes a man. Onions, radishes, carrots,
Anything with a root, and the gnarled old fruit-trees,
The carnations, the blue cornflowers—
Not for the market though, or the flower-stalls
Of Lily of the Valley, unimaginable
Firsts of May, the feast-days of human labour.
No, she is doing it only for herself,
In her realm of sackcloth and ashes. I would join her there,
If time and world allowed,

Burning the old grasses, threading the new tendrils,
Binding the shoots, and bringing bread
To the altar of a bird-table lodged in the new bareness,
The clarified air. And leaf-smell, herb-smell,
Imperceptible earth. Again, she stoops
Inside the mystery, reaches for something,
Finds it. Blind to me,
Mindful, a soul feeding itself
On green minutiae, secretly in league
With the excluded, her spectacles catch the light
Unseeingly, as I lean there
Deep in September, fleetingly present,
Not asked in, though something is always given.