

Jean Pearson

LEARNINGS

When I was a curious child,
playing alone and not quite used to words,
I took up so much world.
No stone in my alley was left unturned.
I studied them all, holding them in my hand
to feel their uneven shapes.
Twigs and roots and cracks in the sidewalk
were my familiars, every odd line.
I sat and followed those branching designs
as though they reflected something in myself,
some secret I should know.
In autumn the brown leaves troubled me.
Neighbors swept them into the gutter,
but I gathered them in my wagon and wheeled
them home. On the front porch I laid them
in piles and wondered what they were good for now
and if there was a way to make them grow again.
All that material in the world
fed my need to grasp it
in relationship to me.
I was five and hadn't started school.

The first school day found me
under the kitchen table,
silently resisting
that forced fall into orthodoxy.
To Gary, who was seven and came to get me,
I swore I'd never go. But civil disobedience
is hardly noticed in six-year-olds.
In the end I gave in
and my seat was assigned by the 8:30 bell.
Then I was taught to listen to one voice.
Then I learned to form my name and other names.

But finally summer came and I was free
to disappear into flowers again

and long, unmarked days.
Afternoon slipped into evening
through the grass where I lay.
A black cat stretched near me
on warm bricks bordering the lily bed.
When the sun began to spill itself
over Turnauer's field,
I went in to a quiet living room
filled with velvet air
and then upstairs to bed.
My parents held with a doctrine of non-interference
but they were always there.
The world was near
and richer than its names,
real enough for a child to feel and know.

