CHARLES MANSFIELD

SETASIDE

And I have seen him at the close of day
Hand on grey, stone-coped wall, the wind's breath still.
That hard land has leant upon his back,
Has racked the muscles in his back to knots.
Hard ridges, sharp rocky outcrops, rounded
By rain and freezing sleet, worn hard by wind.
Now still.
Each knotty lump a tally knot tied tight
And taut. His shoulders hug his body round:
Smock, cap, jacket, and hard boots’ steel against
Rounded rock stops. Unyielding contact
Standing up to force and hard-faced rocks:
The hail rocks, the hard water, frozen rocks
That stand in troughs and tracks. The hard-boned sheep
Gnawing thin grass from grey-white outcrops.
Old pastures grazed for thirty summers
And frozen as many times as that.

No wind’s breath takes the stillness from his cheek.
His hand rests without weight upon the stone.
The soils bones have taken every year,
Have taken their toll;
And wrung it from this hand that fed.
This hungry earth ate without growing fat.
And now it crouches bony limbs to fright the far-off trees.
Broken grass blades shiver, too, just a few yards off.

But here beneath the house-trees is quiet.
I’ve seen him gaze from this dark canopy
With a still eye; cold blue to face the wind
And best it. Smarting tears into the East,
Now clear and dry.
No time, now, to shock the land to crop,
To rage until it yields, nor till the shallow bed,
Nor break the stone with steels.

And now I remember how he stands
These last days: in silence, with resting hands,
And leaves the ground to hunch its white-boned back
Naked from the soil.
While all the pain they wrought upon their backs
Still frights the trembling blades of grass,
And scares the smallest fingers of the thorn.

Note: EC plans are to set aside (leave fallow) hill farms.
POETRY NOTTINGHAM

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