Mississippi Appendectomy

Heather Lynn Johnson, Artist/Poet

In 1961, without Fannie Lou Hamer’s knowledge or consent, she was given a hysterectomy while in the hospital for minor surgery, a procedure so common it was known as a “Mississippi appendectomy.”

Honey doused anger
what you. took.
draws blood if you not careful

I scream in whispers
and hives of bees pour out my mouth
for what’s missing

The buzzing never done stopped
Across cotton fields of hardened white buds
Where there were once flowers
That toughened up tender hands

In that space
Where there once was
A universe is passing

Me like cotton
When cotton is ready
To be picked

The flowers wilt and fall
Leaving nothing but a hard brown boll
That cracks open its shell to soft white fluff

This. my. Our. body.
Becomes rough like the
roots of hydrangea trees
Filled with gnats and fruit flies
The sign of a devil nearby
Spiny talons protected
dollops of white dewy cotton
A space where love will never grow
Where you. I. Never grow

This. my. Our. body.
swollen from the emptiness

In that space, a universe is passing
1961 becomes now
Like my fingers reaching into the cotton boll
The gnarled knotty fists
Reaching backward into the new

Of Miss...issss...sippp...eee
Pound my. Our. This spirit down

Into the hollow
You took
Pinched like Mississippi cotton
You took the cotton
twisting up inside me

But I wasn’t ready
I was not.

I was
To be picked
Like flowers

Bees pour out my mouth
To suckle at the breasts of
Lilacs and Black-eyed Susans

Nibbling first at one then at another
In this flower garden
I could taste the afterbirth
of the loss
Like a laying on of the hands –
Fannie Lou Hamer hands

Not doctors
That pinched cotton
From black brown yellow

Bodies free from bondage but
Still for profit
Came out missing
What you know about eyes
Flecked with sprinkles of joy?
Teared, missing the small kisses
Falling on my neck like a
breeze heavy with ocean

Instead of babies
I birthed
My anger
Half carried and half dragged

My body.

From barren lands
Tubes tied
Like the roots of oaks and pines

Sisters, Mothers, Wives
Trying to make something
From this wood.

Notes