

Dear Poets,

Today's teaching takeaway examines Ai's "Disregard" from her collection *Cruelty* (Perseus Books Group, 1973), plus a vintage car or four . . .

Disregard

Overhead, the match burns out,
but the chunk of ice in the back seat
keeps melting from imagined heat,
while the old Hudson tiptoes up the slope.
My voile blouse, so wet it is transparent,
like one frightened hand, clutches my chest.
The bag of rock salt sprawled beside me wakes, thirsty
and stretches a shaky tongue toward the ice.

I press the gas pedal hard.
I'll get back to the house, the dirt yard, the cesspool,
to you out back, digging a well
you could fill with your sweat,
though there is not one reason I should want to.
You never notice me until the end of the day,
when your hand is on my knee
and the ice cream, cooked to broth,
is hot enough to burn the skin off my touch.

A closer look at the poem's sonic qualities:

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How It's Put Together

Lines 1-8 Overhead, the match burns out,
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Ai begins in contrast: the extinguished match prelude to ice's response to phantom warmth. Frozen water (saddled with the lower-diction *chunk*) + psychosomatic reaction = the element's mindset. The iambs "Hudson tiptoes" are exquisite opposites, *Hudson* our giant, the pebbly *tiptoes* signaling caution, which gives way to the fear simile "like one frightened hand." With a tongue and two verbs (*wakes*, *stretches*), the bag follows its thirst instincts, "sprawled beside me" evoking a canine quality.

Fashion note: as someone whose wardrobe alternates between flannel and the T-shirt sardonic, I loved the appearance of *voile*. I looked the word up ("lightweight,

semi-sheer fabric of wool, silk, rayon, or cotton constructed in plain weave”¹ after searching for pictures of Hudsons. *Voile* originated in France (1885-1890); the Detroit-based auto manufacturer’s output spanned 1909 to 1957. The car and couture are our transatlantic tethering in a piece governed by hot and cold.

Lines 9-17 I press the gas pedal hard.
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In addition to rhyming with *yard*, *hard* conveys the driver’s urgency to reach the poem’s *you*, toiling away at outdoor plumbing. Like *voile*, *cesspool* is a word we notice, given its sewage implications and scant poem appearances, the doubled *s*’s and *o*’s uniquely easy on the eyes. Takeaway: grotesqueries have their poetic place.

The image of “digging a well / you could fill with your sweat” tantalizes because of the impossibility factor, so much so that I am rooting for its completion. In the space of nine words Ai defies evaporation, not to mention city hall, *you* as a superhuman landscaper completely believable.

With “Disregard” for a title, Ai’s poem bears the responsibility of tension—it can’t all be buckets and mint chocolate chip—which she introduces in lines thirteen and fourteen (“though there is not one reason I should want to. / You never notice me until the end of the day,”). The hand’s location (line fifteen) resolves notions of sundown and neglect. Counting the *tongue* in line eight and *skin* in line seventeen, Ai limits anatomy references to four in a work about urges and tasks, the *you*’s sweat promoted from byproduct to hydro-ditch. Ai closes on intimacy’s ability to scald amid brothy ice cream.

This Is Not Your Poem's Gelatomobile



1952 Hudson



1957 Hornet Series 80 4-Door Sedan



1941 Hudson Coupé



1939 Hudson Country Club Six Series 93
Convertible Coupé

Prompt

Disparate bridging is a hallmark of this poem, paramour revelations occurring when the unrelated coalesce. Write a poem about lovers at an impasse in communication. Include a home renovation project with an impossibility factor akin to “digging a well / you could fill with your sweat;” mention of three body parts; and a food whose sweetness, sourness, saltiness, bitterness, or umami-ness is alluded to at least twice. Give us a grotesquerie.

Happy Poeming,

Jon

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/voile>