

Hildegard of Bingen Considers the Migrant Farm Workers

By Susan McCaslin

Walking near the fields and vineyards near Bingen,
I would sometimes pause to chat with the peasants,
offer them poultices for their ailments,
trade herbal remedies – they who toiled the seasonal rotations.

I, born of privileged nobility, though straitened
as a child, kept my visions to myself,
wondering if I might be thought a heretic
or of the devil's school.

If not for Volmar, my confessor,
who thought my visions real,
I might have let them go
not let him scribe the record, authenticate the fire.

Had Bernard of Clairvaux not praised them to the Pope,
these seeds of contemplation might have died.
Yet Pope Eugene blessed the greening persistence,
suggesting I write down all I'd seen and heard.

And so, unlike most women of my time,
I became un-silenced,
influential, unanchored,
free to speak my truth to power.

Yet now along a Fraser Valley dike,
crosswise in time, little has changed –
elites still thrive on labour of the poor.
Systems, whether feudal or capitalist,

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other others, caged-in theologies
 create new cages
 where hierarchy is the order of things
 and few ask, “Who benefits from this way of seeing?”

Temporary foreign workers flown in for seasonal work
 leave homes in the Punjab, Mexico,
 desperate to feed their families –
 harvest cranberries, blueberries, sprayed with herbicides.

Underpaid, squeezed into cramped quarters –
 undistanced during the pandemic,
 some fall ill, unable to switch jobs if abused,
 denied immigrant status, unionization,

while above them on the dike,
 glancing at the workers as if through Plexiglas,
 women, coiffed and buff, stroll with
 well-groomed dogs fresh from doggie spas.

Tattooed teens in sports bras
 count off calories on their apps,
 men in camo gear flaunt shirtless six packs,
 elders comment dreamily on sunset over Mount Baker

while down in the fields, white trucks
 pick up exhausted workers
 conveying them to temporary quarters,
 unsettled dreams of an uncertain future.

I with the heron, *stabat mater*,
 watch feel it's time to strike
 to ask again: What does mysticism
 have to do with justice? Contemplation with action?