

Disappearing Dirt

by Lucile Barker

The mulch vendor is a crook but we have no choice, not with the shortage of soil. Have to guard the stuff, put alarm wires around the garden, leave a friend in charge to spot the thieves if you go away overnight. If you phone the police to complain, they delay taking the report unless there's something in it for them. You can see a cubic foot of your earth go into a waiting box in the back of the squad car, "to be tested." Or there will be a suggestive leer that they can give you some "extra protection." I had seen what happened to the women who accepted that, they disappeared. No one keeps track of people, just the dirt and what could be recycled. Most of us have the special filter on the tub to reclaim anything organic that we could grow food in. None of us use soap anymore, we need the water too badly, check charts of tides and try to figure out the bootleg desalination machines that are offered like clandestine drugs on street corners.

The mulch man looks like one of the one-eyed Jacks, the jack of spades, which is fairly appropriate. I have found bits of bone in his sludgy wares, and one week there was the gentle smell of mint. Either he had found a source in the wild, which is a felony that can get you sent to a labor camp, or it was chemical waste, leftover solids from the closed mouthwash factory a mile north.

We have gotten into routine now and there is a rhythm to the weeks. He comes on Wednesdays, we spread it on Thursdays trying to create a flat brown plane to turn green, water on Fridays. Planting is a weekend job, all of us on our plots, Monday we water, Tuesday we weed and realize that nothing has germinated, we have been sold old genetically modified seed and will have to try again.

The mulch vendor used to have a bell on his cart, but that was stolen for scrap metal. Now he sings songs about the goodness of his earth, the food we can grow. My next door neighbor put ear plugs in on Wednesdays, says he can't stand any of the noises the mulch man makes. I understand and wish I could do the same thing,

but I think someone ate mine years ago.

