

It's Hard to Keep a Clean Shirt Clean  
BY JUNE JORDAN

Poem for Sriram Shamasunder  
And All of Poetry for the People

It's a sunlit morning  
with jasmine blooming  
easily  
and a drove of robin redbreasts  
diving into the ivy covering  
what used to be  
a backyard fence  
or doves shoving aside  
the birch tree leaves  
when  
a young man walks among  
the flowers  
to my doorway  
where he knocks  
then stands still  
brilliant in a clean white shirt

He lifts a soft fist  
to that door  
and knocks again

He's come to say this  
was or that  
was  
not  
and what's  
anyone of us to do  
about what's done  
what's past  
but prickling salt to sting  
our eyes

What's anyone of us to do  
about what's done

And 7-month-old Bingo  
puppy leaps  
and hits  
that clean white shirt  
with muddy paw

prints here  
and here and there

And what's anyone of us to do  
about what's done  
I say I'll wash the shirt  
no problem  
two times through  
the delicate blue cycle  
of an old machine  
the shirt spins in the soapy  
suds and spins in rinse  
and spins  
and spins out dry

not clean

still marked by accidents  
by energy of whatever serious or trifling cause  
the shirt stays dirty  
from that puppy's paws

I take that fine white shirt  
from India  
the threads as soft as baby  
fingers weaving them  
together  
and I wash that shirt  
between  
between the knuckles of my own  
two hands  
I scrub and rub that shirt  
to take the dirty  
markings  
out

At the pocket  
and around the shoulder seam  
and on both sleeves  
the dirt the paw  
prints tantalize my soap  
my water my sweat  
equity  
invested in the restoration  
of a clean white shirt

And on the eleventh try  
I see no more  
no anything unfortunate  
no dirt

I hold the limp fine  
cloth  
between the faucet stream  
of water as transparent  
as a wish the moon stayed out  
all day

How small it has become!  
That clean white shirt!  
How delicate!  
How slight!  
How like a soft fist knocking on my door!  
And now I hang the shirt  
to dry  
as slowly as it needs  
the air  
to work its way  
with everything

It's clean.  
A clean white shirt  
nobody wanted to spoil  
or soil  
that shirt  
much cleaner now but also  
not the same  
as the first before that shirt  
got hit got hurt  
not perfect  
anymore  
just beautiful

a clean white shirt

It's hard to keep a clean shirt clean.

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