

Berry Eater

The young arborist wears a belt around each leg crotch-high, a red hardhat, a hand saw dangling from his hip, black aviator glasses as he leaps from branch to branch, lightly alighting from time to time to adjust his ropes, when he'll grab a handful of those berries. Mulberries—I've spent too many summers slogging through the purple paste that coats the stone stairs and iron railings of our Villa Charlotte Bronte, a confection of buildings linked by walkways and arched bridges along the Bronx bank of the Hudson. I didn't know the berries came from trees but they do, large trees that grow like weeds, raining sidewalks in the park uphill with fruit from June until September, but even so I've never tasted so much as one berry. "Are they all that good?" my neighbor hollers up to the man as his agitated husband, who'd just as soon have the tree cut down, pokes his head out then disappears, as usual. The man pops another berry into his mouth while he scans the tree for more ripe limbs to hack off and send crashing to the ground. He wipes berry juice from his mouth with the back of his hand and yells down, "They're sweetest when you're on top, man," then pins another victim in his thighs, and saws.

Dog Day

My bed a raft. She's on it with me and her lamb,
black ears, dead squeaker. I'm resting my
fatigue. Damaged joints, inflammatory.
Used to be, I'd hang off to the floor, her lair
when she was underneath, anchor myself
with one hand, scratch her belly with the other.
Now I grab the lamb, launch it
across the room, out the door,
though she'll return it. Gentle jaws.

The bed's head is elevated, two bricks
prone, a plank across, head
over heels: For my hiatal hernia, when too much
food is stuck inside. Today I'm full
of words, my friend's words, her folk voice.
"Feelings, bind," she writes. A wish,
a prayer, an invocation. Her words draw my thoughts
to the floor, the tilt of bed, the smell of stain
and wood down there, the cool, the cheerful shine.

It's been hot. Close, we used to say,
my room a stale, unventilated
sigh. Even the living room, double-height,
banks of windows on the Hudson.
Down there I saw a dog, my neighbor's
red and white Brittany, focused, focused
on his ball, panting, pacing, tongue lolling off his teeth
to the ground. She rose and limped to him,
lofted the ball again toward the river.

Mine's female. (Ah, these females.)
Once she crawled into my lap when I was filled with
I don't know what. Satan? She there
on my lap with this fury inside. We sat still,
the two of us, a kind of draining. Now her chin rests
on the lamb's white chest. Only the squeaker's
dead: The lamb's alive. Five summers in her jaws,
the quiet chewing, peaceful
and delicate, a song.

Bitch

His ear is pressed to Muse's
breast, but she coughs up nothing—
a few yelps of love from a dog
(his dog, female, a bitch they'd say,
yet gentle), love based on scraps
from the table, a dry place
to sleep, someone to untangle
burrs from her coat, to sit still
as she tongues toes, nose, any limb
unclothed—all just dog data, no
heart. To Muse he says "Leave,"
then glances down: The dog sits
at his feet, marmoreal, front legs
stiff, back legs askew, belly bare
and hot, just as he remembers.
A full hour he stares. Not one
muscle moves. No, he won't write.

Opera Night

They're all like that. Ruse, mystery
morals. I came to, pieces of it still
in mind, *Così* something or other,
but the rest—the front, the exterior,
the unflappable—they're all here.

I'd say, *Il faut renoncer chaque syllabe*
if I spoke French. Why not Prussian?
Why not sub-American? Whatever,
evasion is essence. Nothing matters.
Everything's inconsequential, but ...

All in its place. Your underwear's
in the laundry room. The ensembles
are breezy and serene. An affectation?
Mediterranean deceit? Turn rightside
out before dying. Lower the boom.

After the War

1. Lignite

A muddy blue truck dumps it
In the cellar. First a clamor,
Then dark grit on the snow.
His dad says the coal's no good
As he pitches it into the furnace.

The heat comes up through
Grates in the floor. A big one
In the living room, small ones or
None in the rest. He sleeps
On a rollaway down the hall.

He'll win a new bed from *Heart's
Desire*, on the radio. His aunt
Sends his story to the show. It's all
Lies, his dad will say. She should
Keep her big nose home.

2. Cake

She shoves the cake under
The garage. From the smoky
Kitchen window he watches.
A black squirrel skirts by
On a patch of dirty snow
And in the cold air he can see
The cake's last hot breaths.

No one else is home,
Just he and his sister, and
The Gilbertson girls aren't
Peeking out their curtains.
They've been gone since
His mother's canned fruit
Floated up the cellar stairs.

The water comes down from
Canada. Too much too
Soon, everything gets ruined.
His mother says it's a sin
When good food goes bad.
Drowned fruit. The bread
He burnt in the toaster. Cake.