

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Reaching

Summer wears me out with extremes, too hot, too bright, the days too long. I look for compensations where I can find them. When the sun drops behind the hill my house sits at the foot of, the beach falls into shadow and I can go out without bothering with sunscreen or hat. Geese work over the strips of barnacled rocks the low tide leaves poking out, and the one on guard, head up and chest out, sometimes gives a low grunt to warn me he's armed when I pass by. They know me though, and he doesn't bother to flap his wings to show me how big he is. At high tide, they paddle past me where I sit on the bulkhead with my feet dangling, juice from a peach that's dinner dripping down my fingers and into the water.

A goose speaking in conversational tones makes a noise like a pig raised by cows. It's a deep soft sound, and if you don't provide her with something more interesting she moves on to other things, namely the seaweed floating like slimy green udon noodles on the tops of waves. She slurps these up with little sucking, splashing sounds, shaking her head to wiggle them into her long blunt beak where they disappear with a final spray of salt water. She shakes her head again and tilts up at you, making the cow-pig moo again. A Canadian goose is so loud and resonant when it flies off in a V with its flock, there was no way to anticipate this soft, friendly sound. Her black webbed feet wave under her in a lazy way that don't seem at all connected to locomotion, more like an odd tic, like a girl who twirls her hair around her finger while she's thinking.

I honk back at the guard and move on to where the brambles get the most sun. The berries ripen in a way that I find strange, not all in a cluster going the same shade at a time: green to pink to red to black. Instead, the one on the end gets fat and swollen until it has that sweet purple-black wet shine to it that means when my fingers get hold of it, only the tiniest drop of juice will be spilled and the flesh of it will give just a little. After that, the weeks of summer can be measured in the weight of the fruit on the vines, all of them rushing to be ready before the rain starts again. My sandals are never entirely free of sand for those weeks.

Character reveals itself in the little things, I think. Something so simple as pulling berries from the canes points a finger at things I don't see in any other way. I balance, I reach, I lean; I lean too far and reach too high when I see the perfect berry and have to have it. A dozen are in front of me within reach, but it's the one just beyond my grasp I want, need. When I get my fingers around it and pull it back, it doesn't matter if a thorn buries itself in my finger. I have what I wanted. But I don't, actually. Nearly always the berry has gone past that moment, maybe even just that hour where it's precisely balanced between sweet-tart and overripe and what I hold in my hand is too soft to put in my bucket; it would turn into mush when the next berries dropped in on top of it.

Does it change anything at all to know this, even as I'm going up on tiptoe in my sandals, poised on the slippery silver of driftwood? No, it doesn't. I reach anyway.