

Spring 2015

Insomniac of the Soil: A collection of poetry and essays

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Insomniac of the Soil
a collection of poetry and essays

A Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

by Sarah Elizabeth Golibart

May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of English, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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Dedication Page

What peaches and what penumbras!
-Allen Ginsberg

Dedicated to Pickett's Harbor Farms
and to every first poem

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Preface: Definition of a Farmer

My parents are not farmers. They never were. So, naturally, I sometimes question why they bought a farm in the first place. At the ripe age of twenty in the year 1987, my mother flew in from California and collided with my father's Maryland life. Thirteen years later they bought a farm, an event I am sure was unimagined when they met. I wish I could better convey the ridiculousness of this small, yet incredibly important detail. These two events— first the initial convergence of blonde be-skirted Suzanne and smirking M.J. getting sizing up for his first business suit, and second the serendipitous farm purchase— have made me. But this essay is not about the random events of life. It is not about my parents. It is about farming and the people who make it happen.

When my college group travelled to Nicaragua in the spring of 2014, Customs required us to fill out forms before our plane landed and we entered the country. I paused when I came to the occupation line and grinned while scrawling the title of my most consistent job. "Sarah, you're not a farmer," said my seatmate when I showed her. But I am. After all, what is a farmer? No, I am not a sun-dried old man in softened overalls driving a John Deere. I have never actually driven a tractor (is that a requirement?), but I have returned home to farm on the Eastern Shore of Virginia every summer for four years. And I occasionally wear overalls as a fashion statement. But clothes do not always make the man, or the woman, or the farmer.

I know four types of farmers: one, a class of young couples attempting to grow a new planet through topsoil rehab and permaculture; two, a class of older men who literally wear straw hats, suspenders, or overalls; three, the equally capable, yet behind-the-scenes wives of these old men; and then four, me, a woman hoarding dormant seeds in her fridge, home-canned goods in

her pantry, and nursing various plants in her college apartment. My first-hand knowledge of farmers is largely restricted to the 70-mile long peninsula I call home.

The Chesapeake Bay separates the Eastern Shore from mainland Virginia, isolating the aqua- and agriculturally rich region. There are two ways to get on or off the Shore. Either travel through Maryland, or ride along the marvelous 23-mile bridge and tunnel system, the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel. The Eastern Shore's relative remoteness either provides people with a haven of nature and community, or has them fleeing once they are old enough to escape, a seedpod to the wind. Regardless, the population that remains is, to me, incredibly eclectic.

Does dreaming of tomato season during spring semester make me a farmer? Do I deserve the same title as my friend Jay Ford, who, when not protecting and enhancing over 1,300 miles of Virginia's coastlines as the Virginia Eastern Shorekeeper, can be found with his wife, Tatum, chasing their daughter through their underground green house? Definitions aside, a farmer is an owner, manager, cultivator, operator, sustainer, but also much more. One thing these definitions do not specify is *when* one exactly qualifies to be a farmer. In order to be a farmer does one need to fall asleep and wake up on a farm? Is farming a day job? Can one be a farmer just on Tuesdays and Thursdays?

Do I deserve the same title as my boss W.T. who loses sleep at night wondering about the mounting debt that swaying green fields of conventional corn and siren red tomatoes are not alleviating? Or his wife, Tammie, who for years, single-handedly harvested seven to eight acres of peach trees. I could not honestly say that I'm on par with Jay, W.T., Tammie, or any of my urban or rural farming friends, but if I told you that I have handpicked acres of green beans and

hundreds of thousands of peaches maybe I am getting close. Does experience make me a farmer or do I need my own farm? Does the farmer own the land or does the land own her?

My job at college as an Adventure Trip Leader has a program called “farmer for a day.” The title implies that your experience working on a farm for a day earns you the title of farmer. But once you get back in the van when the day is done, you are a student again. As soon as I cross over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and enter Virginia Beach I do not want to zap back into student mode. I want to stay a farmer. One day I want to have a garden like Barbara Kingsolver in her memoir *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, where “for one year, they’d only buy food raised in their own neighborhood, grow it themselves, or learn to live without it.” Like Kingsolver’s bursting garden, I want to grow rows and rows of tangled vines of heirloom tomato varieties. I want to fill my kitchen and pantry with the food I grow in my yard. I would like to have cows and goats to milk, chickens to lay eggs, and dogs and cats to watch it all happen. I want to fertilize my garden with chicken waste, purchase animal feed locally, throw hormones and chemicals out the window, nurture my topsoil, and plant my life in the living ground.

Someday soon, I want to be a farmer, I am just not sure I have earned it yet. So for now, I will call myself a farm hand. Hands are often described as capable. I am handy, useful, connected to a body of beautiful land, plants, and people. I am the hand that does the work of the body, the body being the farm. I am not yet a farmer, but someday I will be.

What you, the reader, should expect going forward in this collection is a chronology of farming experiences. The purpose of this project is to create a collection of poetry and essays inspired from four summers of working at Pickett’s Harbor Farms, a family-owned family-run farm on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. Also, for eight years I have lived on a farm cultivated by

Mattawoman Creek Farms that grows organic produce year round. I have been able to watch the transition of the farm from synthetic cultivation to organic cultivation and the transformative effect this has had on the land.

This collection encompasses my experiences and observations on the farm offering a look at the beauty of the natural world properly wrought by human hands. The collection will begin with the birth of my poetic voice in Pickett's Harbor peach orchard. Some of the poems included here are ones I would compose in my head during the workday and scribble down from memory later. My poetic process has changed, but one thing has stayed constant. Moving to the Eastern Shore from the suburbs of Northern Virginia at age thirteen changed my life and gave me poems. This whole project is making sense of that experience.

The poem are ordered chronologically, beginning with my first poetic moments and my family, two sources from which my voice first emerged. Then come lyrical experiences from different farms and the vegetables that grew there. The chronology also follows the movement of the seasons from planting to harvest to winter preparations. I hope the sensuousness of Mother Earth will emerge along with an exploration at how the female form is entwined with the land. These poems are evidence of my farming, yet they pose the question: what makes me, or anyone, a farmer? Throughout this collection, I wish to attempt to answer this question and along the way introduce you, reader, to my world.

Pick a Peach

Peach fuzz acts on the skin like shards of fiberglass. In high school, my best friend Natalie and I were in charge of carrying up the oars after crew practice. Piled high in our arms, fiberglass oars slid unwieldy and imbalanced as we laughed and trod through spring clover on the way to the boat shed. Later, after practice, we would sip sweet tea from Bojangle's down the road (our colloquial term for south) and scratch our arms, stinging and shredded by hair-thin shards of glass fibers. I have encountered this same feeling for the past four summers, especially in July of 2011 when we had the most bountiful peach season I have ever experienced. With my shirt stretched and stained from carrying loads of peaches, I picked hundreds of baskets of the fruit. Itchy fuzz collected in the creases of my inner elbow like dryer lint. Huge pink-red-yellow globes lined the baskets all season.

I got the job in a parking lot. I was delivering a book to my friend Alexis, *No Impact Man*, by Colin Beavan. At high school graduation, Natalie had received the book as an achievement prize from Randolph-Macon College. After she opened it, my reaction to the back cover's description convinced her to let me read it first. The back cover shouted Marion Nestle's, author of *What to Eat*, review:

A riveting account of the year in which Colin Beavan and his wife attempted to do what most of us would consider impossible. What might seem inconvenient to the point of absurdity instead teaches lessons that all of us need to learn. We as individuals can take action to address important social problems. One person can make a difference.

As a high school graduate of about five minutes, a tale of nearly impossible tasks, life lessons, and taking action towards social change sounded seriously enticing. I underlined and dog-eared pages—much to Natalie's chagrin—about a family going off the electronic grid in,

unbelievably, New York City. The Beavan family aimed to make no net impact on the environment for one year. I had been practically yelling about the book to anyone who would listen, including my friend Alexis. This family did not use toilet paper or cars. They did not produce any trash. They were concerned with only purchasing, growing, or eating local food. I was delivering the book to Alexis in the parking lot of the old Food Lion, a brick building vacantly sighing across from Eastern Shore Custom Carts, a golf cart sales and rental business. In a flat, grid-tile town of four square miles, golf carts will do just fine. Some locals even affix “cart life” stickers to the back windows of their cars. Alexis had just gotten off work. It was a little after noon and the hot July sun was blazing. She told me about the peach orchard at Pickett’s Harbor Farms where she worked, how she picked at sunrise and continued until it got too hot, how her boss gave her Gatorade with shaved ice in plastic cups, and how they needed more help. I called and got the job right there in that parking lot, handing over my book—I mean Natalie’s book—to Alexis.

The first two summers at Pickett’s were sweaty, rash-fuzzy days of cash in envelopes and carts full of peaches. Only women were allowed in the orchard. The men, whose harsher hands and rougher temperaments disqualified them, ploughed and dug and lifted; while we—anywhere from two to five women—sought and selected the ready peaches from the trees. There are over six-hundred peach trees in the orchard, with more than ten varieties that begin ripening in early summer and continue through the first week of September. Tammie recited every variety from memory the other day when I called her to catch up. “They’re all freestone,” she said meaning that the peach flesh separates easily from the stone, or pit. The orchard features: Sentry, John Boy, John Boy II, Paul Friday (PF)-17, PF-007, PF-24-007 (recognized and certified as the

world's largest peach, it is listed in "The Guinness World Book of Records"), Coral Star, Glow Star, Pink Lady, Klondike, Blushing Star, and Saturn peaches. There are nectarines too: Fantasia, Summer Beauty, Red Gold, and Zephyr— “from France,” Tammie added. Peaches are so much more than just the single variety occupying grocery store shelves. They have names, breeders, and unique traits. Hearing about a peach named John Boy or Pink Lady makes them almost human.

When I began, I picked peaches as hard and small as fists, eagerly toting them to the dusty green truck where we would pack them into baskets. My boss, Tammie, gently tossed those peaches aside and taught me how to pick with my eyes closed. Clusters of sunset sky-colored-globes dangled patiently when she told me, “It’s a feeling, a touch,” handing over a perfect peach for reference. I remember rolling it around in my hand, getting a feel for the fruit’s heft, size, and softness. Now, when reaching between branches and long, skinny leaves, I can wrap my fingers around a peach and know which to leave and which to pick. *Pick* is such a perfect word for the action it describes. Pulling the fruit, resistance, bending of branches, small twist, gentle suck, and pick.

I remember when Tammie taught me how to pack a peach basket. We would pick into half bushel baskets that hold twenty-four to twenty-five pounds of fruit. The baskets are stored in the old semi-trailer resting at the periphery of the trees. Tammie told me they come from Lancaster, South Carolina: “There’s an old family down there and all they do is make baskets.” With a large, gleaming peach in each hand, she stood regally in the orchard that she and her husband, W.T., had planted. She taught me how to sculpt baskets of fruit. The harder ones on the

bottom, for support, medium sized and riper ones in the middle, and the biggest ones, as large as softballs, on the top.

That first summer on the farm, I also began writing poems. I would compose lines and rhymes in my head while in the haze of the orchard, air thick with the smell of ripe peaches. Mrs. Whitaker, my high school English teacher, had taught us William Blake and Walt Whitman during my senior year. I go back to school every now and then, thanking her, making eye contact with her eyebrow ring. The jewelry was an unacceptable piece of rebellion in a conservative school founded in 1966 for the purposes of segregation. It still seemed that way when I was in school. My brother graduated in 2013, and with him the first African American student to become a Broadwater alumnus. I am glad Mrs. Whitaker will not take out her eyebrow ring, almost as glad as I am for learning Blake and Whitman. My first poem rhymed. This is something I am still not sure I am proud of.

My first poetry class workshop in college dissected it, indifferently remarking on the sickly-sweet rhyme, the peach metaphors, and I filed it away where many poems go, back into a folder or slid inside the page of a book or binder. It was forgotten. My first poetry professor, Susan, expressed hope about these early poems, these fledglings, these unripe peaches.

Oh how I mourn the fallen peach,
the sullen thud,
the awful sound.
Oh how I mourn the fallen peach,
its death is so profound.

The farm store sits in front of the “little orchard,” the newer trees that were planted more recently than the “big orchard.” Concrete floors and a corrugated metal roof make a simple building, but it’s the bounty inside that provides the color. Tables full of fruits and vegetables lay beneath the whirl of the fan and the hum of the walk-in cooler. Tammie told the history of the farm and her family, the Nottinghams, on the Shore. “We’ve been here since people first came.” She can trace herself back to Martha Custis Washington. Before the building of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel to link the Shore to Virginia Beach, the train and the ferry kept the Shore incredibly wealthy. But the bridge eradicated the railroad and the town was derailed. Back in those days, the farm used to be a horse racing track—and now—well-painted murals of racehorses adorn the walls of the farm store.

During those first two years, a truck would come down from the food bank, picking up baskets of free peaches. There were so many. I would take home bushels of peaches, boiling them on the stove in my parents’ kitchen, and then dipping them in ice water until they slipped out of their fuzzy skin. I would slice them and scoop them by the handful into piecrust I had rolled out according to the red Betty Crocker cookbook that lives in the cabinet by the door. The door to the screened in porch, the door that’s hard to open, the door that split my eyebrow open after I slid into it running giddy and breathless around the house with my brothers when I was small. One of those first summers, I made over a hundred peach pies, carrying them across the bay to Virginia Beach to sell at the farm stand over there. I drove a twelve-seater van, my passengers were peaches, tomatoes, watermelons, blackberries, cantaloupes, corn.

Then, in the past two years, the fruit refused to ripen until late July. I didn’t drive to the farm stand across the bay anymore, it got too expensive, so I stayed on the farm where Tammie

talked and I listened. Tammie told me about leaving home young and marrying soon after. She told me about what it means to be a farmer's wife, what it means to truly work hard. We talked about mental illness in the family, a disease like peach rot that can infect even the healthiest looking trees. We laughed about the time when she was first married and her husband, W.T., ordered enough chicks to fill their entire trailer home—baby chickens spilling into the bathtub and under the kitchen cabinets. We picked every day, sometimes just the two of us, and sometimes with her granddaughter Carlee, the seventh generation on the farm. From around 1990 until about 2008, Tammie picked the entire peach orchard by herself. I asked Tammie how many peaches this would be. "I'll give you my rough guess-timate," she said. "I haven't added up last season's numbers even though I write it all down, but around 900-1,000 bushels." A bushel is forty-eight pounds. I would let you do the math, but I'd like the satisfaction of typing out the gargantuan number. That's about 45,600 pounds of peaches. The average peach is less than a half pound. Pickett's peaches are anything but average, so let's assume the average peach is half a pound. That would be 22,800 peaches. Savor that sweet number in your mouth. Tammie is an amazing woman.

People hear about Pickett's Harbor Farms by word of mouth. This may sound antiquated and ineffective, but it's true. No signs line the highways, no ads occupy the paper, but patrons come rolling in off Route 13, the one long highway that bifurcates the Eastern Shore of Virginia. One woman heard about our peaches while she was down the road for a funeral. She arrived in her Sunday best, rings on every knobby finger and a gaudy, gauzy church hat on her head. We filled her arms with produce, fuel for her mourning. Many of our customers are elderly, and the phone rings off the hook all day with people inquiring, "What we got in the store today?"

This past summer people began calling for peaches in June and I had to hold them off until the end of July. What they did not know is how we prayed for those peaches, begging them to be ready. Tammie would scavenge the orchard, collecting just a tray of peaches for the store, a surprise for any customer not expecting the fruit. W.T. would spray them with sulfur to hold off brown rot and peach scab. When storms came and a freak tornado ripped through the nearby Cherrystone Family Campground this summer, we willed the peaches to hang on tight. They did. And the seniors kept coming with their food vouchers. I'd help them add up their selections, suggesting that another cantaloupe and three ears of corn would round out their five-dollar coupons.

When the peaches finally came in this past summer, people came pouring in—greedily squeezing the peaches for ripeness like this was the grocery section of a big box store, and I was lady Walmart. The peaches were in such high demand, stories surfaced about people's plots for maximum peach acquisition.

Kellam is a very common last name on the Shore. One time, in a lapse of thinking, when a Kellam called to reserve a basket of peaches, I only wrote the surname on the basket. No first name. No phone number. An hour before closing, Polk Kellam, a descendant of the Kellams of the Lucius J. Kellam Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, walked in inquiring about a basket of peaches. Assuming he was the Kellam I had been waiting for, I passed over the basket with no hesitation. Polk happily left with an armful of potential jam and pies. The next customer to walk in the door, Jerry Kellam, was not a happy man. I recognized his voice from the phone as soon as he asked for his basket of peaches. I apologized profusely and cringed as I accepted the rant of a man jaded from generations of Kellam family injustice. He was not related to the bridge tunnel

Kellams. He did not come from old money. And he wanted his peaches. I promised him peaches tomorrow and he left—a fruitless trip to the farm.

In August this year, I canned for the first time. Jars and lids splayed out on my parents' kitchen table, replacing the balls of dough and pie plates of former years. I was preserving Pickett's for myself, my last season on the farm. I also brought home honey W.T. and I harvested during my last week at the farm. When I sliced open honeycomb for the first time with a hot knife, gold dripped out in slow amber tears. I slid the comb into the spinner, spun the honey out—not too fast—and replaced it for the confused bees to refill.

When I look in my pantry at school, I feel a bit like *No Impact Man* with my bulk foods and local goods, but I acknowledge that I haven't neutralized my net impact on my environment. I realize it is impossible to leave a place without leaving your footprint on the soil or bite mark on a particularly delicious peach. Tammie began picking peaches when she was ten years old in South Carolina. I began when I was eighteen on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. And I hope, like her, that I will never stop.

Blank Pages

The blank pages in the backs
of books
are perfect
for writing poems.
Why else would the press
add two or more naked sheets
for me to fill?
I forget about my
additions. Now
flipping through every book
on my shelf
I am looking for that one
poem about
the boughs of peach trees,
how they are pruned
to open
like my hands outstretched
towards the sky.

Brain Language

Brain language
is like green pollen blossom,
yellow bloom powder,
like dirt swirling in the shower.

Root language
is pale when I dig
it up.

My eyes are two trowels
scraping at buried root gems.

My tongue story
is morning glories
wrenched from soil
& replaced with
peppers, long red tongues
& leaves lapping at air.

My thought maker
is an earth shaker
beating dirt from roots
of pulled weeds.

My voice is a seed
saved for generations
in the shirt pocket of
my oldest grandmother.

Green Bean Poem

I grew up fast on a green
bean pole
smiling at the sun, the dirt my home.
Born of the ground
the warm earth.
The aroma of new
whipped air, soil, and sky.
A mixture of me
completed by water rushing in
to finish
the Great Gardener's work.
Three peas in me
like solid serenity
first a small white flower
then little sarah bean
with a girl green shell
and glad sarah leaves.
I have waited to be picked now
for over twenty years.
There just has been no one around
to do the job.

Sandy Soil

sandy loam—
built on soil
slowly sliding into the bay.
we have already lost the tree &
adjacent bench my father said
my Pop Pop would have loved.
we purchased our sandy land
during his death
& I still wonder *why that spot* among
all others:
swings, sand, dunes, barns, banks,
fields, porches, acres of neatly-rowed corn—
why that spot
he would have loved best
had to crumble
into the bay.

Cut the cross section of my toe and see
Twenty-one years spent in shoes.
I am a softly knit boot
made from the hands of my grandmother.
I am pink jelly sandals
forgotten where
bare feet slide beneath the swing.

I am a size six sneaker
dirty and worn with play.
Scuttling under brambles
bitter winded and runny nosed
rubbed antler velvet
flagging our path.

I am a sandal
rubbed Italian leather caught in the rain.
Piazza del Duomo
water flicked from cathedral walls
streets dripping dirty.

I am a hiking boot
scrubbed with dirt and scraped
from happy rock hopping.

I am bare toes
gripping green grass and squelching
pale mud mixed
between rows of freshly planted sweet potatoes
earth swollen from an irrigation leak
a section of drip tape not dripping
but gushing water
from our peaceful family pond.

Grass

My mother lamented our weedy lawn. She'd remind us, *back in the neighborhood we grew well-fed green grass, not this creeping scrap*. Yeah mom I know & I imagined tearing Bermudagrass, Crabgrass, Goosegrass from the earth wildly & rolling out sections of sod for her like blue green carpets. A toupee on the bald head of our beachy farmyard. My mother also wished for a tennis court alongside the house— *just a place for the kids to play*— concrete poured to fill the pores of our patchwork lawn. But that, too, never came. I'm glad of it because who needs Kentucky blue-grass & the country club courts? My brothers & I can thump enough bluegrass for a full length album. My grandmother can use old tennis rackets to swat flies.

Green Salad Worms

When I was ten I found a worm
in my salad.
I studied it
inching across a vinaigrette misted leaf.

*Dad! There's a worm in my salad!
That means it's fresh, honey.*

How far had that little earth dweller
wiggled to me?
What dirt stained hands
judged that head of lettuce,
deemed it fit & wrenched it
out of the ground?
What hands dunked & rinsed
that green bouquet?

Now those hands are mine,
closely cropped fingernails
jammed with dirt. I cradle this
head of Bilko cabbage
sliced out of the field this
morning as the fog lifted off
the Eastville day break.

A small green worm dangles
from a tendril of silk attached
to the veined, spiny leaves
Dad, this is fresh.

Death of a Snake

lithe black body
roiling on the hot
pavement before
his car

ran

it

over.

Displaying itself on the
black top, the winding
country road, serpentine
not unlike the snake,
cradled by fields,
tawny surges of grain.

It looked at me
bared its head and we
thought together
about life, love, and
suffering

before his car

ran

it

over.

The cracking pop
of its smooth black body
signaled the end
and I thought alone
about love, and
suffering,
but mostly suffering.

Bean Picker

Biking home
I saw a bean picker,
not a human bean—
human being—
but a metal monster mouth
stripping bean plants clean,
spitting beans into bins
and breathing out the leaves.

I remember sitting on a bucket,
working on a row of Provider beans,
picking the tender & fat ones,
leaving the rest for the next harvest.
Beans plunking into my bin
and barn swallows diving
and dipping overhead,
catching bugs and avoiding
us like we were trees.
And the sun and the breeze,
light speckling through my straw hat
to my neck and shoulders.
The smell of green beans
thickening with every one stripped
off the plant.

On my bike I frowned at the rows
and waved to the man in the tractor,
his mechanical cage, enclosed amidst
the field now opened,
a stretch of plucked and naked bean plants.

Sing the Farm Organic

All is a procession, the universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.

velveteen seed pushed into sweet loam of earth. first sprout, pale, blindly searching upwards towards bodies. the sun, heat mass, beating hydrogen beaming love heat for the earth.

soil beats a heart's rhythm. seeds dance. breaking surface like a whale breaching, a soft suck out of cool ocean water—salt spray on faces of onlookers resting on whiskers, frosting brows of every man, woman, and child and seed-child.

salty triumphant seed-daughter of the earth—one leaf peels open like a furled fist, out-stretched palm of plant gestures at the sky, a greeting. all births come at death's cost. plants, violent beauties, choke out foes, shooting taller and flowering brightly.

a quick petal smile, blooming and spouting bright orange pollen like breath. a flower deep and spread wide open to the pulsing sun, sky-water and sky-breath filling, late afternoon sun pressing shadows deep in blossoms brimming, a hiding place for sweet honeys and small insects caressing with many delicate hands. stroking, distracting, stealing, deflowering the flower for the cost of the season.

fruit finally protrudes, swelling red delight out of yellow blossom. when cycles complete and fruit globes appear ripe as the receding sun the soul takes of it, into itself absorbs it into its seed-self to save for future growth.

Flood

raining for four days and four nights
a farmer—
insomniac of the soil—
pushes water from fields flooding

a farmer—
drives the flood back with a strong east wind
pushes water from fields flooding
turning mud into dry land

drives the flood back with a strong east wind
insomniac of the soil—
turning mud into dry land
raining for four days and four nights

Thinning Lettuce

she was a lettuce seedling
thinned

skinnied out of the
seed tray

not the biggest
or most central

plucked by indifferent
hands and left

to dry

to die

on the greenhouse floor

life plucked short

buttery soft red leaves
blooming in a bouquet
short-lived

stunted.

Eggplant

The eggplant blossom curves,
fallopian tube.

Ovarian duct blossoms,
purple eggplant blossom.

The eggplant swells,
a deep purple fetus,
curved like the smooth back
of a curled naked girl.

Hanging, swelling, waxy,
waiting.

I saved you, seedling.

I found you behind the greenhouse
amid a pile of dried and gasping
tomato plants.

I watered you
and brought you here.

Now, I must split you,
spoon your bitter seeds,
slow roast and
devour tenderly

your fruit
ingesting you to rest
deep inside

my body's garden,
nestled against the hedge
where seeds have not yet blossomed.

Bell Peppers

a peculiar caterpillar rides
a pepper leaf—
green bell swelling, ringing
out of sandy soil.
those of us weeding
placed the insect on the dirt
road for some daring &
diving bird
to eat.
with one eye on the peppers
and one eye on the road
we watched & waited for
Mother Nature to take the
bait as She did to the
seeds of the Black Prince
pepper now
verdant bells tolling.

Morning Kale

Stopping to
slurp
dew off
morning kale.

Cool blue moment.
Delicate wet
rainbow lacinato,
velvet leaf.

Cauli-fiori

Veronica,
Italian born,
Daughter of Romanesco,
you are geometrically beautiful.
Crafted crowns so perfectly
arranged,
orderly green and red bursts
play out with mathematic
precision.
Cauliflower.
Or as the Italians say, *Cauli-fiori*.
I will eat you with butter &
parmesan cheese.

Barn Haiku Sequence

red crumbling barn
old wood ossature—teaching
poised dust, rests inside

dusk collecting in
corners. evening has settled-
night's dust, morning's task

why are all barns red?
what red paint slapped first red barn?
lamb's blood, berry smear

what paint slapped first barn?
applying lipstick in dark
glaring red cardinal

male cardinals gleam red-
barn scarlet, females- brown earth.
barns, birds undisguised

Farm Store Customer #132

He told me that in Santa Clara Valley you could tell the season by the way the air smelled. He spoke of hundreds of acres of orchards—trees clutching plums, apricots, peaches. He worked for a cannery, dumping ripe peaches on a conveyer belt like rubies on black pavement, later driving forklifts for a strawberry company. His story had a practiced routine to it. I could tell he liked to tell this story and said it often. He needed to tell how he, too, had been young and full of fruit. I was selling him produce, but he was selling me his story, each a luxury and necessity. He knew just when to tell about the orchards at dawn, busy with harvesters, so when he left me standing behind the register, all I could do was wait for the musk of peaches to drift in on warm, salt air.

Marilyn's Melons

Marilyn's bent over the bed of her truck, in supplication, a prayer.
She's hefting melons, must have been two hundred, huffing, *this is a prayer*.

I've been waiting for her at the farm. A cup of shaved ice in hand to offer in dry July.
She'll call from any phone, any number, announcing she's coming, quick as a prayer.

She, an old woman, me, listening hard for words to ensnare in open ears.
Thick dark words, woven like her braids, and cracking laugh like a prayer.

The men and I tossing dusty melons into air—cantaloupe, canary, honeydew.
Six o'clock sun making her shadow, heaving melons, each a prayer.

Her breasts unhinged beneath a shirt torn from wear and dirt.
Those breasts—largest I've ever seen—larger than any I asked for in a prayer.

Shining through her shirt, her skin, dewy and dark as eggplant.
Marilyn, large brown planet, pulling melons into her orbit, round as prayers.

What's your name, girl? Sarah, the wife of no one, the mother of nothing.
Her truck weighted with melons rolls back up the road with my prayer.

To My Dirty Hair

To my hair, swept up in bandana knot
Honey colored threads, thick as fishing line
But soft like feather grass or gathered pine
My unwashed locks tied back with ribbon taut

Rorschach strands flight the head like an inkblot
An earthy smell, the reaching roots of trees
Haloes my head, lifting with every breeze
See my hair, unraveling ball of twine

My sullied mane traces places I've been
Artifacts collected: bay air, farmed earth
To sud away these relics, a sad sin
Swinging tresses, a compass spiking North
West

South

East

This bandana holds the flaxen harp strings
My hair song, unwashed and unfettered, sings

Harvest

Cells of tomato collapse
like heart valves long overworked.
Fruit seeps scarlet,
pushing a dying last pulse to fall
wet onto damp, cold soil.

Harvest sorrow is quelled only by
the promise of seeds,
dry tapioca scattered on a red plate,
small white shells in Moses's Red Sea.
Red absorbed into soil
like baby's teeth in wet, black gums.

Avalon Farm 1

mass burial of seed garlic
teardrop cloves white as kneecaps
buried two inches apart
& two inches deep
in soil.

like a genocide,
a stolen population swiftly planted
by careless hands of those born
to rip roots, withhold lifewater,
hate seeping like pesticide.

white bones dissolved &
absorbed & transformed.
patella to novella,
socket to sonnet,
hip joint to exclamation point
to every femur
we all pray for rebirth
into something more
than we were.

garlic will sprout
beneath a coverlet of earth,
like a hundred pungent stories,
shared at every meal
at every table.

we will all taste.
and all see.

Avalon Farm 2

with Vulcan hands outstretched
we, farmhands,
bless the earth

live
freshly shaped garden beds
long
after fall dissolves and skies
of winter splinter
prosper
rye, barley, clover

now I remember
the farmer's improvised blessing.
wide stance, holding hands, eyes closed
he spoke something about
the crop growing in chorus and
dancing before us.

when warmth absorbs into hearths and hearts
& cover crops carpet dormant soil
Live long and prosper.

Seasons

*ruby grape of Proserpine [...]
whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine*

Persephone, golden flower, green
turnip shoot, stolen
by a father's glance, fed
of the pomegranate, fruit broken
& shared, trapped below for partaking
in the harvest's feast. Green
grass mourns, roots swell with grief,
snow blankets like your sadness, until
you emerge blooming.

Sweet Potatoes 1

rain falls
home calls
earth swells
potatoes

shirt sticks
pants cling
hat drips
potatoes

hands trawl
in thrall
mud spells
potatoes

air thick
dirt sings
we pick
potatoes

Sweet Potatoes 2

it's raining and i wish
i was home.
squelching through
fields, digging
up Hayman
sweet potatoes
like gold.
shirt sticking wet,
pants clinging damp,
hat dripping a
clear beaded necklace,
soaking sprouts
born in dank rooms
full of potatoes blooming.
reaching pale fingers up
through air thick as dirt,
clipped and plunged into
soil in summer.

i left in late August
without seeing swollen copper
roots.

it's raining.
i'm sighing.

Too Much

her tongue searches the inside
of her cheek
prodding, stroking, tasting
a raw spot
metallic and tender

she can't help but tongue that spot
she earned from
tea too hot
or
teeth too close
or
a lover's bite

or the season's last tomatoes
savored like the last
ripe, red summer evenings
seedy juices bursting
acid
burning a patch in her cheek
because she wanted
too much.

A Practice in Secrecy

Women,
take a hen's egg
& slide it inside
your body.

Keep
it there
all day-
a practice in secrecy.

Come
evening, extract
& crack the egg, cook
& serve to someone you love.

What
is the difference, really?
between a chicken
& you? Both birds
bred flightless

White Girl Farming Blues

I've worked the deep brown dirt from dawn to night
I've worked the deep brown dirt from dawn to night
Singin' this sweet farm's sorrow song ain't right

I once picked a field of downy cotton
I once picked a field of downy cotton
But tight curls on my head I ain't got none

I seeded, sowed and weeded plants of many kinds
I seeded, sowed and weeded plants of many kinds
But my voice will ne'er amount to all their blues combined

I've held a seed in hand, thought it was the world
I've held a seed in hand, thought it was the world
When everything's your oyster, of course your eyes are pearls

Got me praisin' fields soaked with eb'ny tears
Got me praisin' fields soaked with eb'ny tears
White girl ne'er pay'd for twice as many fears

Wallops Island: NASA Flight Facility

Hopeful thousands tuned in,
showed up for the lift off.
From Mother Earth to Mother Ship,
full of experiments,
perhaps seedlings for space
to sprout in the station
for future generations.
But instead, the whole shebang went
ka-bam blooming into a mushroom cloud
a shadow of fungi never to fruit.

I am a seed sent off,
tripping towards
blackness,
searching for space to root.

Am I a Farmer When I Sleep

Am I a farmer when I sleep?
A soft beat,
my leaky heart,
entangled parsnip.

A soft beat
wakes me, gripping sheets like roots,
entangled. Parsnip
held like a dagger.

Wake me. Gripping sheet-like roots
of weeds with a trowel
held like a dagger.
Morning sheds light to see and seed.

Of weeds we are born, with a trowel in hand.
My leek, a heart in early
morning, sheds light to see and seed.
Am I a farmer when I sleep?

Conclusion: Saving Seeds

When one envisions a farmer and his wife, the painting “American Gothic” may come to mind. You know, the old man in overalls holding a pitchfork next to his wife in her strict white collar and brooch? Both wearing matching scowls with a farmhouse in the background? Well, that is not the kind of farmer I want to be. What does a farmer look like? There is no easy answer to this question. Typically, and to the majority of people, a farmer looks like a man. He is strong, probably older, and is wearing a hat with a seed company’s logo stitched across the front. But what about me? What do I look like as a farmer?

To me, a female farmer looks like Tammie Nottingham. And I imagine her in July wearing her denim cut-off shorts, a soft t-shirt, and pink Croc sandals with socks. She is standing at the edge of her peach orchard, skin browned from work-day sun, and brown shoulder-length hair looking the same as it did in the wedding picture I saw hung up in her home. She is smiling, always smiling, despite the hard work, despite her chronic back pain, despite the worry of losing the farm. Tammie is the hardest working person I know. She is the woman I imagine when I envision myself at age sixty, standing in the middle of some great field of some great fruit or vegetable.

I just got off the phone with Tammie. I wanted to touch base with her before I submitted this collection, make sure I had my facts right, and let her know that my labor of love was nearly complete. She told me that when attempting to listen to the voicemail I left today, she happened upon the first voicemail I ever left her, asking about a job at Pickett’s Harbor. “They say the message only saves for forty days, but how many years has it been?” She asked me, her laugh muddled by the phone. “Wow, I guess it’s been four years, Tammie,” I said, suddenly realizing

the gravity of my project, the importance and getting every word right, to tell about Pickett's and the rest of the farms completely and honestly.

As she spoke about cutting the first asparagus out of "family row" in front of the house, I tried to imagine the orchard at that very moment. The way I usually see Pickett's is preserved in mid-August heat. There are still peaches and leaves on the trees. I realized that I have never seen a peach blossom. Unable to truly visualize the orchard in April, I asked her about it, "Klondikes started popping, we had a frost the other night but I think they're ok as long as these cold snaps quit coming." Of course she would speak about the crop in reference to the weather. That is what farmers do. Weather is critically important to the health of a farm, while the beauty of over six-hundred peach trees in full bloom is not. I should have asked her about the blossoms, begged her to describe them to me, or requested a Pound-esque depiction: "petals on a wet black bough." The fact that Tammie did not launch into a romantic description of the orchard in spring is not to say that farmers are not poetic. See the work of Wendell Berry and often Tammie herself some afternoons with me in the heat of the trees. I guess I am still considering what it means to be a farmer, when to be scientific and when to be poetic.

The question of am I a farmer still remains, even after thirty-one poems (not counting the countless other bits that missed the cut). Maybe this will be a question I will still be asking myself as I sink a shovel into the first bit of ground I own as an adult. Maybe I'll still be wondering if I'm a farmer when I make my first harvest on this future soil. For now, there are tomatoes sprouting in an egg carton on my window sill, Cherokee Purples to be exact. Pickett's Harbor is preparing for spring and the seasons are moving forever forward. I plan to make it back to the Shore at the end of August after my summer session of graduate classes have finished. I

will be sure to catch the end of peach season at Pickett's. Maybe I will even bring Tammie one of my tomatoes, making sure to keep at least one to save seeds for next planting.

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