

Fruit of the Spirit

We do not like them. There are three sisters, Agatha, Catherine, and Lucy, and we dislike them equally. They came last spring almost at the end of the semester. At Friday mass, they each genuflected before the Host. One fluid movement, a piece of dance that didn't seem possible: right knee, left knee, sign of the cross, mouth opens gently, left foot, right foot, back quietly to the pew. They knelt there until the proper moment, after the tabernacle was closed again. We could only see the dove-colored ribbons streaming down their backs in hair that had seen a hundred brushstrokes before bedtime.

They had taken down the hems of their skirts. There was a faint ridge in the wool where they'd used a seam ripper, and neat new series of green stitches against the plaid. Their pleats hit the bottom of the knee. Our waistbands were rolled up until it was almost indecent to use the kneeler. They wore soft silk blouses with pearl buttons, like our mother's, and we had hand-me-downs from our brother's uniform. Our shirts buttoned on the wrong side.

In the summer, we were relieved to t-shirts of concerts never seen and cut-off dungarees. We smoked to distraction, ate little and drank much, listened to records, fought and reconciled. We never saw their mother either. They surely had one. When we looked through the fence slats, they were always there. Though we heard laughter, there were never any boys.

They would sing and tell stories. And, after awhile, we came to know them by their voices. The sisters all dressed in calico sundresses, but with sensible India-rubber Wellingtons, and the flopsy straw hats that old ladies wear. They would ply their bare fingers through the soil, plant, prune, and water.

Toward the end of the summer, they were in the garden less and the kitchen more. At two

or three in the morning, as we crawled back through our windows, we could see into theirs. Catherine and Lucy worked at the table, Agatha stirred a bevy of bubbling pots.

We were sleeping in on a Saturday, just as we did every summer day, when we heard stomping on the porch and a clatter of glass. We dreamed similar dreams of milkman, like in old TV shows, and a mother with a apron and a father with a pipe. But when we opened the door, there were eight bright canning jars. The sisters were already up the block, in their brown Wellies and long skirts, taking turns pulling a red wagon of jars.

We sat on the steps and smoked, watching them go door-to-door to friendlier neighbors, smiling and delivering preserves. We unscrewed the lids to use for ashtrays. There was no intention of eating their gift. And then, the porch was infused with aromas so wonderful and enchanting, so clean, we wondered how we'd ever filled ourselves with anything else. We stamped out our butts and marauded the jars. No time for spoons.

We stuck in our fingers and licked them well. First pluot jelly, translucent as stained glass, turning from scarlet to gold when held to the light. The impossible tang of two fruits in one. Next, dark blueberry jam and the luscious tension of the berries between our teeth. And, hidden in the jar, surprising chunks of peach. This led very nicely to a corn relish in a confetti of colors from the torpedo onion, cilantro, and peppers both sweet and hot. And then, mushroom paté, though we didn't know then what it was. It was thick, exotic, and earthy. You could taste the soil in which they grew.

There were four other jars: red pickles, chutney, marmalade, and jam. We ate them all. We were sticky with sweet and dirty, and we wanted more. We had to know if it was the fruit itself or their talents that made it so delicious. We tried to climb the fence before the sisters headed homeward.

Our bare feet struggled against the slats and, together, we pulled the branches of their tree closer so the fruit hung on our side. Oh, it was beautiful! The globes were large and ripe,

flushed and soft as baby cheeks. But, when we tried to pluck them, three peaches fell. They tumbled into their vegetable bed, rolling among the rapini and trembling pea shoots. Before we had a chance to lament our fruit lost among the young turnips, there was a terrible crash.

As the sisters turned their wagon towards home, the remaining preserves in their wagon exploded. We hung on to the fence and watched the jars burst open sparking glass and spitting fruit. Our neighborhood was filled with salt and sugar and vinegar. Sticky bits of pickle and plum and a rainbow of other fruits splattered the sidewalk. The explosion echoed down the drive as our neighbors' gifts ruptured. The lids and rings tinged down the street.

The jars in their kitchen went off next. The volume and force blew the preserves through the windows. The garden beds were coated in macerated versions of themselves. The sisters were spangled with color. Jar shards shimmered in their hair. Agatha dumped chutney out of one boot. Catherine tied up her hair and shook the glass from her skirt. Lucy sat right down in the middle of the debris. She closed her eyes and prayed. We saw her lips moving; we couldn't hear the words.

Lucy rose and walked to the gate. She put her lips to the knothole and said, "We would have given you more, if only you had asked."

She picked up the three peaches and handed one to each of her sisters. They walked away together, leaving a red wagon of jagged glass and spoilt fruit. And, though we were still hungry, we didn't like them any more than when they'd first come.