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## The Azalea Eaters

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THE AZALEA EATERS DAEHONGDAN COUNTY, NORTH KOREA, 2008

Mother begs us not to eat the flowers.  
We scrape the pots for blubber. Fat  
scalds our dreams, broils our sweat.

Softly, azaleas kill our hunger.  
Because we believe in pink spadix,  
the fragrance pollinates our tongues.

Before the farmers bulldoze them,  
we smuggle fistfuls into our knapsacks.  
Now we are sick but only as sick

as the river that fed us golden tadpoles.  
The river is a gutted diorama: the dire  
wolf, awakening, spits out teeth and fur.

\* \* \*

In our retching, we summon the aphids.  
We enter the malnutritive night.  
Stag beetles and horntails

swarm the wax leaves, calm  
the poisons in our too-hot  
cotton mouths.

In our fevers, we summon summer.  
Weevils swim the length of lake. Toads  
tease us with their fat slime.

No water makes us believe we have gills.  
Frogs hatch from fuzz. We pity their birth.

\* \* \*

It's the eleventh season of hunger. *Ding dong*,  
belts the frog in the muck. *Ding dong*,  
sings the salamander.

Fetal and feral, we curl  
in our beds.  
Fetal and feral, we drink  
in the dusk,  
hands damp with loam. Old cures  
for sadness  
don't work anymore—

\* \* \*

ailing, we lean against the window,  
mother's ailanthus,  
& mother, panicked,  
wilt on the sill. We grow red welts.  
We ask her *will we grow red whiskers*.  
We ask her *will we grow red feathers*.

She covers our mouths,  
breathes *hush hush*. How will we fall asleep  
now that the skink has grown a new tail?

\* \* \*

We've eaten toad, weevil, roe. We'd eat a houseplant  
or your pet. We've kissed poison flowers and retched  
it all but we're hungry still. In the forest we pantomime  
guns with our hands. *Bang, bang*: let's kill the deer, drag  
it by its hooves to the fire pit. Gather its juices, grease  
the grasses. O, hunger strikes—our teeth, our laughter.  
We eat & eat & eat: it is our rebellion and our disaster.