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**Looking for My Voice in the Rutabaga Patch:
Confessions of an Organic Writer**

By Anna Petersons

June 15, 2001

Western Washington University Honors Department

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HONORS THESIS

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Homes

*Each Pharaoh thought that half his soul
would walk again, as long as it could find his body whole,
as long as it could find its home.*

*I left my first home years ago, when I was five,
I left more than childhood memories:
My golden baby hair is in the floorboard cracks of that place;
my blood and scabs and tears have mixed with dust and mud
and fragments of my bitten fingernails still linger in my fort beneath the porch.
My memories are few and hazy;
maybe my baby-soul still lives there.*

*Then, last year, I left home again;
I left the brown hair buried under the blueberry bushes,
still bound in the braids I cut off.
I left marbles under the heater,
and toys, and blood, and skin scraped off
in the blackberry bushes.*

*That's two halves now,
two bodies, two lives preserved, two homes.
And now I'm feeling homesick again in this town that still feels new
even though I've been here long enough to leave tiny bristles of hair behind the sink,
bits of blood and skin stuck to stones and tools in the garden,
a pile of fine hair left beneath the pines as an offering for birds to carry off this spring.*

How can I call my soul back to me?

Rain

This is the first dawn: when I wake, the bedroom is cold and rain is still falling. It's Sunday. It's a day of rest. It's supposed to be my day for rototilling, but I can't run the tiller when it's wet out. In the kitchen, National Public Radio is playing while my parents make breakfast. We squabble over who gets to read the paper first and how much sugar to put in whipped cream. After breakfast, I sit at this computer watching the last drips slide down the weeping cherry and the broken gutter, trying to think of something profound to write. The grey clouds are turning lighter while I type. The screen door slams as my father heads for the tractor shed. The house is quiet until the first sunbeams escape from between the clouds. This is my new dawn; this is my new day. When the cold is lifting, when mud dries, then I have to remember the strawberries in the field that will mold if they aren't picked today, and the seedpods of weeds that have ripened to a hair trigger, waiting for a walker to brush by carelessly and let loose a shower of next year's trouble. When the morning sun steams the rest of the rain from the bent grass, then I'll remember the ninety feet of irrigation line waiting, and the leaky outlet spilling into the far pasture. Tonight, when the chickens are shut in and the cat is curled sleeping in the midnight fur of our farm dog, and the dishwasher is running and the kitchen light is turned off, I'll be sitting on the edge of my bed, pulling off jeans stiffened by a week of dew and mud, trying to think deep literary thoughts but instead thinking that I really should put away the clean laundry piled by my pillow. Then I'll shove it over to the empty side of the bed and turn out the light, and pray for another grey morning.

Rural Economics

My family and I grow organic vegetables on South Whidbey Island; with around three acres under cultivation, we're the largest organic grower, although I can think of around twenty smaller farmers. The county government has just started to notice this, and so my mother and I have wrangled ourselves an invitation to the Agricultural Policy Remand Committee, where our commissioners talk to "real farmers" to find out how to abide by the Growth Management act without putting farmers out of business. At Western Washington University, I've learned not to call myself a farmer; here, anything else is a slur. Here's the glossary:

Hobby Farmer: Yuppie who buys acreage in the country, keeps a riding horse, hires a real farmer to cut hay from his pastures, and commutes to work in Seattle every day in a suit and tie.

Backyard Gardener: Again, someone with a day job who manages to grow cauliflower in the flower beds and suddenly thinks they know what agriculture's all about. (Note: the "flower beds" may be up to 20 acres in size and a person may still be classified as either a Backyard Gardener or Hobby Farmer.)

Organic Farmer: Hippy Backyard Gardener. After all, one couldn't really grow a commercial crop of (fill in the blank) organically, could they?

Dairy Farmer: A farmer looking to sell their herd. Usually bankrupt, unless they have a day job.

Wheat Farmer: A farmer looking to sell their land. Usually bankrupt, unless they have a day job.

Mixed-Crop Farmer: see above. In special circumstances, may only be in light debt as opposed to complete bankruptcy.

Real Farmer: Someone with the last name "Gabelein," "Sherman," "Fakkema," "Petrie" or any other family that has at least two roads named after it.

After two months of debating, we've gotten nowhere. No one in the room except my mother and I believes that farms can stay afloat without periodically subdividing land for development.

Rural Character

However, this great new non-profit group has put out a press release saying they want to preserve rural character. It's not quite the same as economically viable farming. Rural character is something different. It's like strawberry-flavored-fruit-cocktail that's really a long marketing word for 3% juice. Rural character means hayrides and purebred horses and lots of rusty stuff. Rural character means Sunset Magazine's special section on finding old milk cans at farm auctions to use as planters. Rural character doesn't bother to mention that the farm auction usually means that the pastoral lands are about to be subdivided and the black and white splotched dairy cows left yesterday for the dog-food plant. Rural character doesn't have much interest in combines or wheelhoes or milk cans that aren't rusted over, but are quite new and functioning. It certainly wants nothing to do with the liquid manure shooting out of sprinklerheads in great big brown arcs, sending waves of rich rotting nitrogen smell towards subdivisions and swank downtown antique shops.

Not an Ag School

By the time I go back to college for another year, nothing on Whidbey has changed. Back at school, the Outdoor Experiential Learning Site (OELS) is gearing up for yet another round against the administration, trying to convince the Institutional Master Planners that our program is more useful than another parking lot. I'm doing my part, trying to revise a history of the OELS so that it's institutionally acceptable, and I've just been told that I shouldn't use the "f" word. Farming.

I love how humans think that a name has the power to shape reality. Like if we rewrite the criteria and call a species "threatened" instead of "endangered", then somehow we've spontaneously generated more owls flapping around out there. But somehow I don't think that the earnest bureaucrat in front of me would see the humor here. So I just nod and repeat his words, "Western is not an Agricultural school." I head back to the valley to think about this. Sometimes useful work (even if it's officially un-agricultural) helps me see more clearly.

I work today in the greenhouse, transferring tiny seedlings to larger pots. The same motions over and over leave my mind free to wander. So if the Outback Farm is not a "farm" because farms practice agriculture, then what am I doing here? For that bureaucrat, it's enough to change the words. This is the Outdoor Experiential Learning Site, and it practices gardening. Or edible plant cultivation. Or small-scale food production. Perhaps organic growing practices? And how about some Permaculture landscaping techniques, too. I whisper these words to the tomato plants. I murmur "culinary self-sufficiency" as I snap off basil leaves.

At least now I understand one thing, and that's how this class I teach became entitled "Applied Human Ecology: Sustainable Systems." It keeps the administration off our backs, but we still have to explain to new students each quarter that the experiential learning involves a lot of cold mud.

The more time I spend in meetings (and the less time I spend listening to

tomatoes), the more I realize the words "each state university has a different role to play" mean: money. WSU will receive funding for agriculture and we won't because they are an Ag school. Evergreen will have funding for alternative agriculture because they are an alternative school. Western is the teaching school, so we become an outdoor education site. Now we teach college kids to teach younger kids to... um... experientiate.

Letter Home

Lindsey,

I want to write to you about the nights in my new house here, how I huddle under three blankets and two wool throws, listening to my roommates' footsteps creaking up and down the stairs and traffic going by on Chestnut street. It's so different from those summers we spent in my sister's schoolbus, where even my parents' call from the house down the hill was muffled by the old orchard and the cracked safety glass of the back window. I wish my window here looked out over the alley, instead of the road; then I'd leave it open all night and watch the stars. I only see them in the morning now, while Megan's making coffee and I'm sitting at the kitchen table pretending to do Chemistry problems. I'll look up and see the last points of the big dipper dimming over the apartment building next door. But it's nothing like we saw Orion those nights when the full moon pulled us out of our sleeping bags, out of the old schoolbus, its flaking silver paint almost white in the moonlight, the nights when our pajamas got soaked in the dew on the uncut grass and we tripped on the vines that opened white flowers to the moon. Remember those mornings, when we'd wake up early because it was too cold to sleep? I'd wait until sunrise to poke my head out of my sleeping bag, and there you'd be, glaring into the first rays that even the spraypaint on the windows never really softened. I'd do most anything now to wake up and see your scowl lit up by golden light. Do you remember the night of the new moon, when clouds covered the stars, and neither of us could sleep until we heard the first rain falling on the skylight? These days, I feel like the morning after, when we found out the roof leaked by waking up on wet pillows. These days, I feel like the morning after the first frost when our feet went numb stepping through the rows of blackened and limp basil and squash. These days, I wake up and wonder when the traffic will ever stop and if I'll ever see more stars than fragments of Cassiopeia dim against the floodlights and steamclouds of the paper-processing plant.

Special-- 10 lbs potatoes only 99¢!

When I come out of the rainy gloom of February weather to the fluorescent lit aisles of Haggan, I'm months away from the endless late summer work of washing, weighing, and bagging potatoes, so I have to do some quick math to see what price per pound these hard-skinned tubers are selling for: 10¢ a pound. Unfortunately, I can't stop the math there; there are more numbers involved: I grow organic specialty varieties. For some varieties, each pound of seed yields only about ten pounds crop. So for a ten pound bag, I need to buy 1 pound seed. Seed for these varieties costs a minimum of \$1.00/pound. A grocery store like Haggan will pay the actual grower about half of the retail price.

So that means that I could get back 50¢ for every dollar I spend on seed if I want to price my potatoes competitively. I'm not even going to bother figuring out the time spent planting, weeding, harvesting, or the inputs of lime, rock phosphate, horse manure, stone meal, green manures, straw, fish fertilizer, etc., or the cost of the equipment needed to till soil, mound the potatoes, weed the walkways, turn the hills at the end of the season, or the time of my work-trade members who spend hot afternoons filling baskets and sacks, hauling them up the sloping hill to where I can pick them up with the tractor, breathing in dusty soil, picking thistle spikes out of their gloves, sliding on their knees in the sandy soil, running for cover when summer rainstorms turn the hillside to mud, listening for the rain to let up on the tin roof of the packing shed, laughing as the water washes the dust from the potatoes for us... yes, it's worth it. Just don't ask me why organic food costs more. But since I can't explain all that to everyone who asks me that at Farmer's Market, instead I say that the question is phrased wrong: instead, ask why conventionally grown American food is so cheap? Americans spend a much smaller percentage of their income on food than do Europeans, and American farmers are steadily going bankrupt. Not that I'm implying that there's any kind of connection between those two facts, of course.

My college friends are beginning to refuse to go grocery shopping with me.

I dream one night...

*First, the blackberries crept across the fields, down valleys,
leaned over pavement until their runners fell to the bare ground on the other side.
Then horsetail follows, a greasy tan paintbrush protruding from asphalt one day-- what does it
paint?*

*A scene of small brown birds that eat the berries
and white flower-vines that creep around railings;
they don't seem to mind that wood and metal take longer to smother than plants--
or maybe they know differently.*

*Well, I can push past a wayward vine to get out the door,
but when they cover the windows, no light gets in
this is how it happens out there-- I should have seen
the way their leaves lock out the sun until everything else yellows and dies*

Globalism and the Individual

Some people say we're in an unprecedented age of individualism. But I think that's just what it looks like on the surface. You remember the story of the little red hen? She's the one who baked bread alone, the true rugged individualist. She grew the wheat, threshed it, ground it, mixed up the dough, kneaded it, built up the fire in the oven, and baked it. It's been a generation or two since my family grew grains; I get lost trying to count the people I depend on for daily bread. I start at the beginning: the checker who charged me at the supermarket for my bread. The stocker who put the bread on the shelf. The person who unloaded the delivery truck that morning. The baker who poured together flour, water, and sodium citrate to make my bread. The employees of the mill that ground the flour for my bread. The company that buys the wheat from the farmer and sells it to the mill. The farmer who tilled the land, spread fertilizers, planted the wheat, harvested the wheat, threshed the wheat-- and where did the thresher come from? The assembly-line worker who put together the harvester/thresher that shredded the plant that grew the wheat that made the bread. And where did the fertilizer come from? Someone working in a Florida pit mine digging phosphorus deposits out of the earth with a backhoe for the company that sold the fertilizer to the wheat farmer. And the wheat seed? The researcher who bred a type of wheat that doesn't get late rust, that doesn't blacken when the crop dusters' mists fall on the field, who works for the seed company that charges so much that the farmer took out a loan from a bank agent to buy seed and to buy fertilizer and to buy the thresher/harvester. That's just the people involved. What about the intricate interspecies web that makes my bread?

How about the yeast that sacrificed their lives in the sudden heat of the oven, after working the dough's sugars to make the gasses that puff up my bread? How about the wheat plant itself, its roots stretching deep into Eastern Washington black topsoil, its fine green blades waving in spring breezes? How about the microrizobial

bacteria, working beneath the soil's surface, clinging to the wheat's roots for sustenance, feeding to my wheat all that it could not reach, the water, the nitrogen, the phosphorus. How about all the plants and animals and bacteria and fungi that have all died and been decayed by another crew of critters until they are so intertwined that we just call them "organic matter"-- from these, my wheat draws in the carbon it turns into the spines of glucose monomers, strung in turn into starch and cellulose, stored in each wheat berry in hopes of beginning another generation. Go back to the pit mine in Florida, but go further back in time than the scraping edge of the backhoe that pulls lime from the earth. Go back to the salty warm oceans, where a thousand small sea creatures grew, died, and settled to the ocean floor, and crushed into each other until their small bodies became indistinguishable in the small grain of powdered lime that fell to the soil close enough to my wheat plant for a root to reach out and transform it again. When a wind sweeps through a field in Eastern Washington and a fine shimmer of dust rises with it, settling down in the next field or finally falling miles away, over oceans, over suburbs in Mississippi, mixing with the dust of a marketplace in downtown Peking, falling slowly as dust on a shelf in a cruise ship in port in Jamaica... then I believe in the global world.

Chicken

For shock value, I tell my roommates that I want to kill chickens. It doesn't work; they have radical politics, so they'll accept any of my lifestyle choices. But they don't really want to join me.

I want to kill chickens because I want to eat chicken, not because I want to shock my roommates. If I want to eat chickens, then I want to be the one to feed them, raise them, love them, use them, and kill them and cook them. If I tell my sustainable agriculture friends this, they understand because they don't want Monsanto-chicken, caged-chicken, genetically-modified-chicken, hormone-enhanced-chicken, beak-cut-off-and-feet-scarred-and-rotting-chicken for dinner.

But food politics isn't my roommates' thing. They're queer activists. They don't have the time and they don't have the money to care about chicken oppression. Time is money, right? Anyway, they don't have either; I know; I see them stumbling out of bed at 8:30 to go to class and then staying out until midnight networking and planning actions and doing actions and building communities and having fun in spite of whoever damns them. I admire them most of the time. But I think that there are details they never want to see. Even in an ideal world where they have all the time and all the money, I don't think they would want to hold a warm, still body in their hands and wonder at the softness of the underfeathers of the breast, the rough bark of scaled legs, the thick rich yellow fat that spills from between skin and muscle when the feathered skin is torn away, the intricacies of each organ that slides from between hard red ribs, the neon brightness of two crumbling lungs, the smooth clarity of uncooked muscle, the bright suns of unlaid eggs glistening like tomorrow.

Cultural Theory Down on the Farm

In Bellingham, white farmers like me are on uncertain ground. Are we the oppressors of migrant farm-workers? Are we blue-collar revolutionary proletarians? Are we killing mother earth? Or are we the only ones besides Native Americans who really know the earth? Are we rednecks? Should we be ridiculed or put on the “threatened species” list of oppressed groups? And how does organic fit into it all?

Well, as far as I can tell, if you’re organic, you’re supposed to be a working-class revolutionary earth-defender oppressed worker for social justice. That’s the way it’s supposed to be, because that’s who the white college kids who want to farm are. The kids who are studying queer theory dress the same as the kids who want to go back to the land, and they go to each other’s parties. The kids who want to be radical environmental lawyers can talk dioxins with the Environmental Science majors who wanna join a commune. But the ones who grew up helping Dad load up the Roundup sprayers? They’re all over in the business department, or the Chem building, or maybe doing premed or prelaw. They’re not going back to the land. They’ve lived on “the land.” They’ve watched the “sacred guardians of our mother earth’s soil” sell off property lot after lot trying to pay the bills. Most people who love open spaces get kind of depressed living like that. And the ones who still have enough hope left to keep farming? They’ve realized that it’s not that great of a plan to go into farming with a school loan debt, seeing as most farmers go out of business because they can’t pay their debts. Unless, of course, these kids are capitalist pigs, and have realized that you’ve gotta spend money to make money. Those are the kids at WSU, who are learning how to use the new expensive toys that will let them farm an area twice as big. Let them farm their neighbors lands. Let them farm their classmates’ lands. Bigger farms, fewer farmers, more farmland paved over each day.

Why do I waste time writing when I should be changing the world?

Making Money

Yesterday, at the doughnut shop, as my roommate and I handed over two dollars for four balls of sugar and grease, my roommate said, "Imagine making your living in 50 cent increments," and held my tongue, as I do when women at Farmer's Market complain that \$1.50 is really too much to pay for such a scrawny lettuce, and then ask if I have change as they hand over a \$20 bill. I think about the price of potatoes, the price of a head of lettuce, the price I pay to live in this college town-- it's approximately two hundred heads of lettuce a month, or around two hundred and thirty pounds of organic potatoes, or eighteen pounds of basil. I'd rather dump that lot at my landlord's door than stand for hours at Farmer's Market watching people pick through my produce and finally pay me barely enough that I can stand here and spend five minutes deciding which donuts I want to buy.

January Work

*No snow this week--
only swirled chunks of ice where puddles were yesterday.
The buckets of water in the greenhouse froze again.*

*Unloading manure and straw beside my father,
the gold piles steaming,
I see the frosts retreat.*

*By noon, the land is green again
unless you look under boards or in shadows--
there the white ice is static.*

*Plowed soil crunches like grapenuts when I walk
to the gooseyard to pour another steaming bucket
into a pool of ice.*

**We all know that Poets aren't supposed to get their hands dirty,
but what happens when they do?**

I show up in class with my knees dirty. I write poetry about blackberries and kohlrabi, then change their names to "Sarah" and Eugene." Most of the time I just pretend that the two worlds never meet. That whatever I learn about characterization doesn't apply to broccoli. Or that a plot climax is never troubled by spider mites. In literature classes, we learn to analyze everything in the framework of theories. In chemistry, they teach us something more revolutionary: reject all theories that do not fit the data at hand. Trust first in lettuce.

Poem for falling asleep on summer nights

*Love, let this night begin with your eyes closed.
Hide your sun-red skin from the full moon.
Turn down the radio, step from the heat of the kitchen,
listen: the owls are calling in the cherry trees.
When wind snaps the laundry on the line,
When swallows huddle under the eaves,
I will promise you a cold rain tomorrow.*

Bake Sales

I'm trying to be honest about why I roll my eyes when people suggest another bake sale fundraiser for the OELS. I know the program needs money. I'm just angry and jealous that it's always easier to sell cookies and turn a profit than it is to sell rutabagas. I'm jealous of the people I work with who aren't disappointed that there's no money in what they're teaching in our "learning site," not even enough, with the free work of thirty students, to pay a speaker's fee for our class or go on a field trip or buy books for our library or maybe get some more expensive hand tools that won't break every quarter and aren't made by political prisoners in China. I'm jealous of the students who can take one class in "Sustainable Systems", feel good about making cookies to support the cause, and then go on with their lives. I'm sick of being stuck loving land, loving living on my land, loving the work that brings energy straight from the sun into plants into food in my hand (how's that for solar power?), but knowing that this work isn't cost-effective: I could make a better hourly wage selling eyeliner to thirteen-year-olds at the mall. Or better yet, I could be selling stocks. I could be selling something so abstract that it only exists on paper or in computers, and I could be making a killing. Or I could disrupt another meeting of likeminded people by complaining that a bake sale doesn't fit with our mission, which I won't do, because I know it's the only way to get the money that I really want to spend next quarter to get a digging fork whose tines won't bend each time they hit a rock.

Optimism

In poetry class, I write about the good times. It feels trite. I try writing the truth, too.

Summer Morning

*The sunlight soaks glass painted grey,
You stir, shiver in thin nightclothes.
The birds of morning hail the day;
A jaybird's joy cuts short your doze.*

*Outside, our pant cuffs catch the dew;
Our bare feet slide along the path.
The cat appears, looks up at you;
You reach for him; the songbirds laugh,*

*For suddenly he bounds away,
His tail twitching, head held high.
The dew has soaked his golden mane,
But never touches his cat pride.*

*Inside my parent's house, we find
Old pancake batter turned to curds,
One cup of coffee left behind,
A note: Do laundry. Feed the birds.*

Breaking Eggs

There are things I hide from the one I would love to protect, the one who can't kill bugs. One spring, when we are in high school, we are trying to hatch duck eggs in a styrofoam incubator. We carefully calibrate the thermometer, add a pan of water for humidity, gently scrub each blue-green egg with lukewarm tapwater, and lay them on the metal tray. Each day I turn them before I leave for school; each afternoon, when she and I return from the walk home either sunburnt or rainsoaked, we turn them back again. The due date comes and goes; not a single pip mars the surface of the eggs. Three days later, we hatch two scrawny mallards who are too weak to cut away their own shells. When we turn the remaining eggs, we find one more pip, but when the shell is broken away, the duckling is already still and stiff. We wait one more week, but nothing else moves; one morning, I find one of the hatchlings with its head in the water trough, cold. I bury it before I leave for school. That day, I know it's time to empty the incubator. I wait until she's left for the evening, then I pull the plug and lift each warm egg into a basket. In the back field, by the pile of shingles, I break open each shell: one, a warm slurry of yellow stink; two, a slimy floating fetus so small that its feet still stretch out in the half-shell; three, a mix of rotten egg and broken blood vessels; four, a fully-formed duckling, still, its closed eyes barely visible where its head tucks beneath the wing; five, a yellow yolk still veined with the spiderwebs of blood vessels, and six and seven and eight are the same, each yolk perfect for an instant before it tears on the edge of the shell or slides into the thick grass. I sit and break eggs and try to figure out if these little webs are still living; I know she'd be swearing at me and telling me to stop, to either put them back in the incubator or bury them whole. I keep hoping that one egg shell will fall away to show something twitching, but when all the eggs are cracked, all I have are three small bodies and a patch of stinking, yellow-stained ground.

Next year, when I crouch at the same field with a new clutch, I find one alive.

Specialty Varieties

Next time someone asks me how I think I'm going to make our farm viable, I think I'll just lean close to their ear and whisper, "Purple." Purple really is the answer. Just ask Apple computers. The iMac is not popular with the masses because of its efficient USB connections or increased processing speed. It's because it's a different color. Market farmers have known this for a while. It's what started us growing Guatemalan fava beans: they're purple. Or Peruvian purple potatoes. Burgundy bush beans: purple, until you cook them, and end up with green beans and purple water. Purple sprouting broccoli. Purple cauliflower. Purple radishes. Purple corn. Purple tomatoes. Trust me, it doesn't matter what they taste like: you'll still be able to charge more if it's purple. Unless you're talking eggplant, where of course the newly discovered white and pink varieties are key.

I guess that since I'm talking economic theories of survival here, I should give a better explanation than the great superiority of the color purple. I guess it makes more sense to say it's simple supply and demand. Meaning: all the yuppies who shop at my farmer's markets want to be the first and only ones on their blocks to bring home strange vegetables. Now, since these people probably never learned the delicacies of cooking camas root or kohlrabi at their grandmother's knee, they aren't looking for something too strange. Just weird enough. Same cooking instructions, different color. You know, like "skittles: taste the rainbow": there's a whole world out there of different colors! They just all taste the same. It's like green ketchup. It's like Bouncy and Super Bouncy. It's like the devil and the deep blue sea. It's like diversity at WWU, where we have rich people of different colors. It's, like, small farm survival, though. People come to my stand to buy vegetables, not talk cultural theory.

Know Your Vegetables/ Love Your Vegetables!

Spend one day noticing what plants you eat. Perhaps you're having toast and cereal for breakfast? (wheat and wheat, most likely). Or going out to a Thai restaurant for lunch? (how much of your authentic cuisine consists of veggies traditional to Europe, too: cabbage, carrots, celery, onions, and broccoli?) Or maybe an Italian dinner of pasta and garlic bread (more wheat, more wheat). How many of your plant intakes don't fit the following list?

iceberg lettuce romaine lettuce onions cucumber (pickles count)
corn (as in corn syrup, corn oil, corn meal, corn on the cob, popcorn, etc.)
cabbage broccoli cauliflower potatoes bell peppers tomatoes
apples oranges bananas rice shelling peas wheat

How many fit this list?

amaranth quinoa cassava yams winter-hardy kiwis
beets daikon snow peas tomatillos arugula kale
mustard greens romanesco broccoli raab red kuri squash papaya

Summer comes again

and I promise myself I'll write more often. It's harder for me to write when I'm happy.

Today I scrambled over brambles and through nettle patches again.

Today I wandered with a good friend through the ruins of an old garden, and went searching for spigots beneath thistles and buttercups.

Today I climbed the largest cherry tree on the hill, and looked out over the valleys, the hills, the marshes.

Today I picked fruit into a plastic shopping bag and went home sticky.

Tomorrow is Independence Day and tourists will light firecrackers until midnight. The teenagers I went to school with two years ago will blow up mailboxes, and at least one kid will be missing some fingers by morning.

Tomorrow my roommates from college will be drinking and listening to the radio, watching fireworks on TV, flirting with the next cute thing they invited over for the party. I'll be sleeping under this heavy raincloud sky. I'm only just learning the best trees for summer fruit, the places where chanterelles bloom in the forest loam, the fields where pearly everlasting still blooms.

My friends here went grey years ago. They've watched the little kid I was rise into an adult body, fed on sun and summer berries. I suppose that soon I'll watch their bodies slowly close, curling in, thinning, growing old. But today we're together, talking about garlic and strawberries and aphids over handfuls of splitting cherries, all of us feeling young again.