Beets

Cate Hennessey

. . . the showy
flowers are over, retreated
into the earth. It simply

means what it is:
Neither beginning
nor *fin de siècle*

regardless of the way it feels.

—Laura Kasischke, "Happy Meal"

Here in the Pennsylvania deep freeze of January, a month with single-digit temperature days and nights, my youngest daughter and I while on a walk through snowy woods talk about the garden we'll have this summer. She wants her own patch for sunflowers and cucumbers and peas, and I know what she sees in her summer future because I see it, too: a self crouched at the edge of the raised beds, examining the yellow trumpet blossoms of cucumbers. A straw basket she's filling with cherry tomatoes and purple beans. The damp morning soil and the clear evening air, all without mosquitoes or slugs or wasps. And not any weeds twining the stems of her plants. As we walk through the snowy woods, my daughter and I, we talk together with the same hope and awe in our voices about the garden at its best, which is us at our best, and here in January, that is what we must hope for.

My gardens are never as ambitious or tidy or fruitful as the gardens in my mind. Something always happens. Once I planted too much in a small space and by June had a welter of lettuce, nasturtiums, peas, and scraggly toma-

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 17.2, Fall 2015, published by Michigan State University Press.

toes. Another time I had too many seedlings and threw most of them to the compost pile. One year a hurricane. And then there is the issue of cost. My garden requires money in addition to sunshine and rain. Some years, the sun and rain are the easy part, and I find myself investing an obscene number of dollars in fish emulsion, tomato cages, stakes, wire fencing for the peas, bird netting for strawberries, not to mention all manner of contraptions to keep out the deer.

I have three seed catalogs on my kitchen table this morning, all of which arrived just after the new year. The furnace is having a hard time—3 degrees at 7 a.m.—and it's trying mightily but not warming the rooms above 60 degrees. So here I sit, wrapped in sweaters and slippers and scarves, listening to the soft hiss of the gas burner as it heats the kettle. Dogs breathe sleep on their blankets. The sky is blue and cloudless outside, crackling bright, stark beautiful. Four months until anything can go in the soil. We gardeners are a hopeful lot. After all, looking at the last harvest does us no good. Some of it has long passed through our bellies, some is still in freezers or canning jars. That past is what we know for sure. Maybe the past, the recent past anyway, with the evidence of its successes or failures still before us, is the only thing we can be certain of. It's the next season and its surprises—the good and the bad—that interest us. And so I look at the seed catalogs.

Only one of them, Jung Seeds and Plants, is in full, glossy color. The cover is tomato red around the edges, the lettering large and sunflower yellow. The center bears photos of the most succulent possibilities: asparagus and strawberries. Peach-colored roses, a riot of zinnias, artisan tomatoes of oblong shapes and strange colors—yellow, burgundy, plum, striped pale gold, and green and pink. My god, how could anyone not look ahead? At the same time, fast-forwarding my attention four months allows no appreciation for winter, the here and now, as my aging gray and white cat settles himself on the Jung catalog. I run my hand over his neck and spine. This cat knows how to get what he wants, even in the season of cold. I should not let him settle like this on the kitchen table. We both know this. But I like his company, the soft dog breathing, the heater blowing and chuffing. In no other season would I have all of these things in hand, in ear, in sight. Still, the seed catalogs call with their bright covers. The Jung is still securely beneath the cat, and since I am loathe to disturb him, I open John Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds. This particular publication has arrived at my house—first the white

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 17.2, Fall 2015, published by Michigan State University Press.

one we painted yellow, and now the sea-green house we painted navy blue—ever since at the white house I ordered from Scheepers 100 Giant Darwin tulip bulbs. But that is a different story and a different catalog, the bulb collection, which arrives in summer, a full-color glossy magazine of voluptuous petals. The Scheepers garden seed catalog, on the other hand, is full color only on the cover—this year a collage of hollyhocks, pumpkins, smiling gardeners, and tomatillos. At bottom center, a large bundle of beets topped with red-veined foliage.

Not long ago I ordered some beets at a local restaurant. It was farm to table, the kind that's become popular in this place, a county of open space and old money. The beet salad—with arugula, chèvre, a balsamic reduction—was to be served warm, according to the menu (it was late November). When the dish arrived, burgundy slices smoldered on white, rectangular china. But in my mouth the beets were cold and slippery, as if they had come from a can. And maybe they had. But I had ordered the beets out of something—nostalgia? memory? the worst of the writer's sins, sentimentality?—and feeling guilty for this (I am always feeling guilty), I ate.

Beets first appeared in my kitchen a few years ago, the last year we lived in the white-and-then-yellow house. I had been buying seasonal produce from local farmers, and in the middle of winter the growers could offer only crates of root vegetables, last summer's harvest kept fresh in cellars. I'd been making my way through a 50-pound bag of potatoes I'd bought partially out of wistfulness, partially out of thrift. When my neighbor first told me about those potatoes, $12 for 50 pounds, available at a farm not far from my house, I was small again and it was a blustering gray day in western New York. The farmers' market in that time and place meant a few tables set up in a weedy lot at the corner of Lake Shore Drive and Main Street—one block from Lake Erie and one block from the government housing. I was standing there next to the tables with my mother, and we were waiting for my father's mother to stop haggling with her favorite farmer, Mr. ____, whose name my parents and I have since forgotten. He was a very fat man whose stomach hung over soiled jeans, and he might have been missing a few teeth. My grandmother, whom my brothers and I called Busia, was missing all of hers except two. To the market she had worn a paisley kerchief over her gray hair and a long, camel-colored wool coat that kept flapping its hem in the wind. She and the farmer were haggling over 50 pounds of potatoes because it would have been

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impolite not to haggle after so many years of doing so. The banter as usual was over a dime or a quarter or a nickel. My mother shook her head a little and murmured, *What is she going to do with 50 pounds of potatoes?* By this time, my father's father had been dead for most of a decade, or maybe half a decade, and my grandmother lived alone. Back then, those 50 pounds of potatoes made her strange, one more odd little thing to add to her list of oddities—the toothless mouth, her fractured English and rapid-fire Polish, the migraines and terrible sadness. I didn't know that something (in fact many things) had happened in Germany. I wouldn't know until I was 16, but that story too is for another time. When I was small, Busia was just a strange old lady.

The strange old lady had her own garden, but it was cheaper for her to buy the potatoes than grow them herself. There was the question of space, too. Her cinder-shingled house on Roberts Road had a short, narrow backyard, not nearly large enough to grow a winter's worth of potatoes in addition to the enormous red tomatoes on heavy vines that she staked and tied with her cast-off hosiery. Then the precise rows of bush beans. An orderly tangle of cucumbers and their yellow trumpet blossoms. Bouquets of parsley, stands of dill. And beets. The earth in her garden was black from manure she asked my father each year to turn into the ground. The earth in my parents' garden was orange clay. And did Busia also grow onions? I can't say for sure. My father remembers no, but we all agree she had a peach tree and a plum tree, and she boiled the fruit down and preserved it into leathery, sugarless jam. In the winter she spread this jam over butter on white toast and brought it on plates to my brother and me as we sat on her couch and watched *Wheel of Fortune* and *Jeopardy*.

Jeść, jeść, she said to us. Eat, eat. Then she shuffled back toward the kitchen and my father where they continued their conversation in Polish. My brother and I, having only English, heard them as a country apart from our blue TV haze.

In those years before I turned 12, before my grandmother's mind began to muddle, each Christmas Eve she made *barszcz,* beet soup from her own beets, and served the soup with half a hard-cooked egg floating in the middle of the bowl. A waste of a good egg, I thought, since I liked eggs and hated beets. Slender, slippery rectangles of the maroon root at the bottom of a bowl of

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maroon broth. And a strange undertaste I know now from reading recipes as sausage, dill, and black peppercorns.

When we are children, we don't have a history, so we cannot understand the holiness of food. Or the holiness of a particular food. And if we don't like a food when we are small, we think adults are crazy for their reverence. All the adults around the *Wigilia* table murmured their appreciation for the *barszcz,* while I stared at the bowl.

The 50 pounds of potatoes in my pantry went slowly down in that winter of seasonal eating at the white-and-then-yellow house. I got bored with the potatoes and started purchasing vegetables I had never tasted: turnips, rutabagas, parsnips. Then, after I'd exhausted everything else from the crates at the farmer's market, came the beets. I bought two large bunches and resolved not to make *barszcz*. The beets roasted in the oven instead, tossed with olive oil, sweet potatoes, carrots, salt, and pepper. My husband and I spooned this over greens, topped the whole thing with blue cheese and walnuts. Once a poached egg instead of cheese and nuts, and the yellow yolk and the magenta beets bled into each other with the vibrancy of a chemical sunrise. As I ate the roasted beets that had melted into the poached egg, I murmured.

The Scheepers catalog is a pleasure gardener's magazine. Its table of contents, rather difficult to find, resides quietly in the middle, which suggests that the reader has the time and interest and curiosity to look carefully through the pages and maybe along the way will discover something new to try in the garden this year. The beet page, for example, page 24 in this year's catalog, features seven types of seeds to choose from: Kestrel Baby Beets, Chioggia Beets, Boro, Detroit Red, Touchstone Gold, Cylindra, and Bull's Blood. No photograph or illustration offered for any of the varieties. Scheepers requires its readers to imagine. This imagining is not difficult, however, since whoever writes the vegetable descriptions does so with vigor and precision: *A graceful, globe-shaped gem, Kestrel produces sweet, tender baby beets. An American hybrid developed to mature early yet hold well in the garden, it has deep ruby-colored flesh that is soft-crisp with a delicate flavor.*

The catalog also offers a general description of beets and guidance for how to store them through the winter (in layers, in a box, with a measure of sand between each layer). That most hobby gardeners need to learn how to store beets, that *I* need to learn how to store beets, kills me. Busia and her sisters in rural Poland would have known this by age eight, maybe earlier.

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 17.2, Fall 2015, published by Michigan State University Press.

Would they have had names for different varieties of beets? Or was only one kind of beet grown in Subcarpathian Poland between the world wars? I don't know; the people I want to ask are all dead.

If Scheepers' luscious descriptions make it impossible for a gardener to settle on just one beet variety, there's the Unbeatable Beet Mixture. Four varieties in one packet of 220 seeds for $3.25. In theory, I could grow 220 beets for just over three dollars. The possibility of seeds—the impossibility of having my daughters, like me at their age, picky and suspicious of adults and their taste buds, eat any beets, let alone 220 of them! Though if I managed to harvest 100 beets, after dumb mistakes, insects, and whatever else, I would count myself lucky. Lucky. Luck and the beets. I think of my friend John, a man like my father whose parents were Catholic and taken from Poland to work in Germany during the Second World War. This displacement happened before the fathers and mothers had met, before the children were born. John is a poet who writes about what happened to his parents in the war and what happened to them afterward: *hope is the cancer no drug can cure*. This line, which rattles my heart, is from a poem about his father dying. His father, by then an old man in America, is calling out for his mother, who died not from the war but from illness when he was a very small boy. And I think John is right, there is no cure for hope. We're born into it—our planet, our home, keeps going, spinning and spinning. The earth turns toward the sun no matter what is going on in each corner of our boulder of rock and water. Hope dies when the earth dies. But hope as a cancer—I think he is right there, too, that hope grows when it is not supposed to.

Luck is one way John tries to understand who lived and who died in the war, in the camps. Luck, which is not gardening, since the nature of seeds—designed to grow—offers hope, that addiction of gardeners. John's mother at Buchenwald pried beets with her fingers out of the nearly frozen soil. How large and endless the fields of beets. What she must have thought about those long days, her life back in what is now Ukraine, the day she watched her mother and sister raped and shot. When the *niewolniki,* the slave laborers like John's mother, were starving, they sometimes smuggled a beet from the field and ate it raw. But John's mother had more luck. A guard from the beet field asked who could milk a cow, and his mother said she could, and that winter, instead of turning to ice in the field, she pressed in the dairy barn against the bodies and udders of cows.

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I don't know what other than *barszcz* my grandmother prepared with beets those years she kept her garden on Roberts Road. Except for *Wigilia,* we rarely ate dinner at her home, and when we did, it was for me as if hope and loveliness had left the room. That sounds much grander and more dramatic than it was. Memory, or at least I find that mine, is like that—it calls up emotions deep and complicated and twined with a childhood I mistook for simplicity—and now I question the validity of events, stories I think I thought I've heard, the knowledge of myself even into the present. That is, Busia cooked peasant country food—rice and beef wrapped in cabbage, or soured cabbage with black peppercorns. I shrank from the stuff, or at least inside myself I shrank. I can feel it now, that old dread, even though these days I eat those same foods without flinching, and I want to go back and hug and shake the childishness from the little girl who stared at her plate.

After my father's mother died, which was six weeks after my first daughter's birth and after I'd moved to the land of old money and open space, there came a story about Busia and beets. What she did with them during the war. The man who was her newborn son's father and would later become her husband threw beets wrapped in a rag over the barbed wire fence that surrounded her barrack. I can't see far enough into the past to know if he threw the beets in daytime or night, if the weather was foggy or clear, if she caught the beets or picked them up. Then she carried them back to the low and narrow wooden structure where she slept with hundreds of other Polish and Russian and Ukrainian women who worked at the munitions factory in a German town called Unterlüß. Certainly her hands mashed the beets, which she cooked on the black iron stove meant to heat the long room, but between the slats in the roof snowflakes came down. Busia was not the same as John's mother, the *niewolnika* in the concentration camp. Forced laborers like Busia were luckier, a different class of slave: they could leave their barracks on weekends and wear a coat with the letter P for Pole or OST for Eastern worker and go into town where they weren't allowed to enter restaurants or attend Mass or walk on the sidewalk at the same time as the Germans, and if this sounds a little like segregation in the American South, you're not wrong.

Mashing the cooked beets into paste, Busia fed them to my father, a few months old in the winter of '44 and '45, because the milk in her left breast had disappeared. He was hungry for more than the right breast; there were no rations for babies, nor rations enough for her. A few months before she

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arrived in Unterlüß in the autumn of 1943, after a boxcar ride from Poland, the women who came before her stood daily in line at the canteen for a few liters of turnip soup and 300 grams of bread. Through the week someone handed them 50 grams of margarine and 25 grams of meat. But luck, luck, luck all the same. After Busia's shift, after her son was born, she could rock and sing to him and the other babies in the factory nursery, even nurse him on her lunch break. In other parts of the country, women like her had to give up their babies, who were taken to other villages and adopted into German families. Or the babies were taken to places with names like Velkpe and Waltrop where the infants, who would have slowed their mothers' work in the factories and fields, weren't fed. They withered in their cribs and died.

Outside the kitchen window, the goldfinches and chickadees are at the thistle feeder, which is largely empty save a few seeds that cling to the mesh. A cardinal in the holly tree. Icicles hang in spikes from the gutters. We are out of thistle and have been for months, one of those things we haven't gotten around to. The birds must be hungry with this deep freeze. Two weeks of snow covering everything. The trees are teeming with birds. I am still thinking about John and hope. That because of hope we have remembered the war in redemptive ways when there was nothing redemptive about it. These birds—they don't, I assume, feel hope. They are driven by instinct. Hunger and reproduction. Fill those two voids. It is a job, a compulsion to assuage the pain in the belly, the longing in the groin. These things bear violence, even in birds. Harassment at the feeder. Later, in spring, the strange position of the female, always beneath and shuddering, and in the case of my hens, crouched still as death to protect themselves. Their eyes bulge. How much can we hope for when we are women in wartime, when we go back to instinct, and civilization is another word for what we have lost. Still women push out new creatures whose hunger must be gentled, and the rest of their lives these women pour themselves into this thing, another beast, and they try to fill its hunger. I fear I am someone who believes in hope and wants to believe in redemption, who dreams of gardens in her winter mind, but underneath, buried not far from the topsoil, history whispers *luck, luck, luck*.

In the last years of her life, Busia wouldn't or couldn't remember to eat. The irony is not lost on me that she forgot about food, or that it didn't seem to matter. She went nearly wild with hunger in Unterlüß, hallucinating the factory's sulfur piles into loaves of bread and once stealing vegetables with

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her fingers from another woman's soup pot. The year between college and graduate school, I was 22 and drove from Pittsburgh to western New York, then went with my father to visit Busia at the St. Francis home. She was living there because, even when she lived at her daughter's house, Busia would wander out the door and forget where she was. She forgot too her small collection of English but remembered German and Polish. My father was frustrated—she was losing weight, her cheekbones poked like tent poles against her skin. We sat in her gray room and took turns coaxing bits of chocolate pudding into her mouth, using a plastic spoon and some Polish, which by then I'd learned a little during my last years in college. Now it was I who was saying *Jeść, jeść*, the toast and jam turned to pudding, the plate to a tray, the old couch to a room that smelled of urine and caustic laundry detergent. The TV up on the wall in the corner was off, and my father and I were talking in Polish, Busia in the cocoon of herself, and the cup of pudding slowly emptying. I didn't want to reach the bottom. Because then there would be nothing left.

The last seed catalog on the kitchen table is a new one to enter the mailbox this year. Territorial Seed Company. Three times as thick as the Scheepers. Full-color photos throughout, and on the cover the ubiquitous wheelbarrow overflowing with produce. There are several sections of garden tools and tricks and trowels. This catalog says that sun, earth, and rain are not enough to grow seeds. There are soil thermometers, clogs, Wonder Gloves, digital pH meters, ladybugs, apple maggot traps, grow-light systems, skin therapy for cracked hands, compost pails, rain gauges, and hose nozzles—all the contraptions to care for seeds and care for ourselves as we care for the seeds, all the while believing because there was today and yesterday that there will be tomorrow. Because we are human and the earth is our home, we hope. We hope, we small things, while around us luck swirls like fog. All white, this fog, and there is only a short distance to see in front of us, we can feel the clouds on our skin, but we can't tell for sure if that dampness on our arms, on our faces, is why we're still here.

My aunt says Busia told her the same terrible story about the war, over and over through their years of washing and canning, as if a singular event carried everything Busia could say about what happened in Germany. Her grief over the bodies of women and babies who died when the Allied bombs came down on the barracks and the nursery. *Luck, luck*, she ran through the

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bombs with her son to the forest and survived. An ironic luck, to live until age 92 with the images that threw her back always across an ocean and years to the place where she suffered and then survived when her friends did not. Where she became harnessed to the man who helped her survive but later turned her life into another kind of hell. My grandfather, Dziadzia, didn't talk about the war, but he drank his sorrows each weekend and poured them out onto the horse races, his wife, and four children. The war went on and on, and the children looked on from the attic stairs and wished for it all—the fighting and shouting and pulling their father out of the neighbor's bushes at midnight—to end.

Dziadzia died when I was 2 and he was 69 and his hair still black. Died the age my father is now. Dad's hair is still mostly black too, but Dad is not a yeller or a drunk or a gambler. He has two brothers and a sister, and neither are they drunks or yellers or gamblers at all. If there is redemption from war, it is in them. It's the chickadee at the birdfeeder, the red-capped woodpecker at the suet. That I can consider seeds and sit at the kitchen table with my coffee and slices of apple and watch small creatures. Of course that I am here at all is a direct consequence of the war that threw my grandparents together. But there were millions and millions for whom the family story ends only in death, given not even the strange and eternal gift of trauma. A future woman looking at the birdfeeder becomes impossible. So I am back to lucky. The millions dead quite outweigh this scribbling, this moment at the table in which the snow lies still and the trees flutter with birds.

And yet. I think if Busia saw me fretting over words and facts and hope and luck and getting these pieces of story (seeds and winter and food all wrapped up in the past) just so, she would say, stop looking back, stop pretending you can know what all of that war was, you don't want to know what it was. All your searching through articles and books and archives can't tell you. It is over, and your father is here, and you are here, and you have had children, and that is enough. Make the soil good and black. Tie up the tomatoes. Cook the pierogi and cook the potatoes. But don't cook the *barszcz* if you don't like it. Who cares if you never liked it and never will?

I am not sure I can take her advice, should take her advice, though I want to (even long to). I know I should not try so hard to find meaning in her past, to decipher a war and the people who went through it and never went home again. There is no worth in sentimentality. She learned this. Move on, move

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 17.2, Fall 2015, published by Michigan State University Press.

forward. Here is the garden in spring, even in January, even if come autumn the cache in the cellar isn't as gorgeous as you'd hoped. There is waving a hand in the air at the restaurant and saying, *These beets are cold,* and not feeling bad about saying so because there is a stove in the kitchen, and it is no accident the kitchen is warm.

This work originally appeared in Fourth Genre, 17.2, Fall 2015, published by Michigan State University Press.

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