

Feb 28th, 1:15 PM

"black raspberry picking" and "paddington station"

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Davis, Sarah, ""black raspberry picking" and "paddington station" (2019). *Making Literature Conference*. 2.
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/makingliterature/2019conference/cw2/2>

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Paddington Station

Paddington is most beautiful in the morning after the sun is up, when the light shines through the milky glass of its arched ceilings. Just under the curves of these arches, rusty red steel misses the light, creating shadow and contrast that is somehow still cheerful as delicate steel scrollwork and outlines of flower petals crawl up, reaching for the soft light of the sun. The tunnels these arches form, full of light and love, stand ready to birth trains and their passengers into the world.

But this is a place of business, an intermediary to more business. The sounds tell you this. Ready trains roar like huge swamp coolers. Brakes hiss serpentine, releasing air. Luggage carts meep steady warnings as they rumble by. The people tell you too. Businessmen in predictable suits of blue with bland gray ties walk swiftly, heads down, arms swinging. Old women with soft white hair and gently knotted scarves framing papery faces scan the crowds with worried eyes. Visitors from far away in boxy black clothing plant themselves before timetables, anxiously watching the gold neon letters scroll. Experienced tourists in hiking gear march, walking sticks extending and retracting like extra legs, prepared for everything except fitting in. Sleek, fashionable women looking like Harrod's mannequins click-clack tensely across the floor in pointy heels.

These all move purposefully, anxiously, hurriedly, headed toward something. Not a minute or a movement is to be wasted. Efficiency is everything, and there is no time to look around, to be drawn upward by the white industrial arches full of function and beauty.

This is why the light of Paddington reaches down to them. It filters through the cloudy glass of the ceiling, glances off the beams, caresses the scrollwork and spreads until the whole station is filled with a gentle motherly light, like a Madonna radiating heavenly warmth. This kind, pearly glow that the crowds don't have time to see seeps into their bones, lights their

minds with a hope they can't place. And as they ride into the full sunlight of the world, birthed out of the great arches, they feel they are heading for something good.

Black Raspberry Picking

Each year, around the time the summer sun has raised the corn to a sturdy height, the black raspberries ripen. This year, you notice them on July 4th.

They peek out from the silver-white undersides of the leaves, dangling from the delicate arches of purple canes. More navy than a blackberry, smaller and rounder than a red raspberry, they form clusters of beads, like dark drops of blood after skin has been pricked, perhaps by a briar from those purple canes. The berries whose shine has dulled are a day too old for your plastic, quart-size yogurt container. You leave them for the birds. Those that are still more burgundy than purple, you leave for tomorrow.

You are suited up in socks and hiking boots, the jeans and collared shirt from Goodwill that you save for painting, and a baseball cap. Your exposed hands have been painted with deet, as have your clothes, but the tinny hum and small, red welts already sprouting from your wrist tell you your efforts were in vain. As you wade into the brush as though invincible, you pray the ticks and thorns treat you like you are, even as tiny barbs snag at your shirt and knuckles.

Yogurt bucket in hand, you bend under, lean over the canes in search of the ripe ones. You move your feet carefully for fear of smashing low-hanging berries. You lift damp, papery leaves and wince when they tear. Each time you straighten or squat or shift your weight from one foot to the other, you see more berries bearing the perfect soft, navy shine, always slightly out of reach. But color alone cannot decide which berries plunk into the bottom of your bucket. Those that want to go will fall into your gentle, grasping fingers, and you will cradle them in your palm, then straighten your stained hand to ease them into the bucket like you feed sugar cubes to a horse. Others will look ready but stubbornly resist your tugging and fall apart, half mangled on your fingertips, half looking like a dark, berry Pangea plastered on a pale globe. You must only take the ones that, when you stretch and strain your body to reach for them, come to you willingly.

As you feel the sweat slick on your forehead under your baseball cap and the matching stripe down your spine, as you feel the pain of scratches hidden under purple stains, as mosquito bites multiply, and the fear of Lyme's disease crawls in the back of your mind, and perhaps along your waistband, you wonder why you do this. You wonder why you can't content yourself with cultivated fruits that grow in tidy, accessible rows. Your little yogurt tub of berries will not even make half a batch of jam. If your painstaking picking today is to amount to anything, you will have to wade into the brush again tomorrow. And the day after. And by that time, your first bucket might be blanketed in that soft, sickening fuzz that makes all your efforts futile.

But you are stubborn, difficulty is a dare, and the wild contortions of your limbs, the streams of sweat down your temples, the sting and scratch of bites and pricks speaks to something deep within you that your work is worthwhile. You search through the brush, not only for the dark tang of bead clusters breaking across your own tongue and staining your lips or the shadowy sweetness smeared across fresh bread. As you pick, you carry within your body the minds and mouths that will share in your hard-won gift, and you pray that they can taste your toil, that in each black raspberry popped into an open o of a mouth and burst into juice, another may partake of the sweetness and tang mingled with the salt of your blood and sweat, the bitterness of deet.