

MELANIE TAFEJIAN

Blockade

When the road was open,
wine swelled. Platters of sliced fruit.

Little chocolates in foil pressed into hands
of strangers. Now, Christmas gifts
turned back at the border.

Potatoes dwindle in the market.
There are no more bananas.

Ten years ago, Anoush and I
shared a slice of chocolate cake
at the hotel restaurant in Stepanakert.
The truth is it was so sweet we could barely finish.

The truth—the soldiers call themselves
peacekeepers. They sit through the night
in the cold. Their bodies a fence

with no hinge. No medicine in.
No food in. No sick out. Somewhere
there are two divots in the carpet,

where a worried man dug in
as he leaned back for years.

Volunteers Visit the Artsakh Border

There is still war.
When boys are dying, what else
can we call it? We bring them
cases of cigarettes. No word
from home. The weary ones read.
In the barracks they scratch nudes
into the walls with dull knives. They show us
the tough bread they eat, peach fuzz
glinting in light, where to look and duck. How to spot
movement on the other side. On the drive back,
the truckbed stuffed twenty-deep. Elbows
jabbing thighs, we stop on the road—
pomegranates, skins glossy
as fresh livers, Christmas
ornaments. We jump the truck bed.
Joke about landmines.
The fruit larger than our palms, we snap
them from branches.
Our shirt-hammocks heavy, we labor
back to the truck.
Sandals cracking in dry weeds.
The engine rumbles. We hack them open.

Water

On the radio: a bombing. Again,
America's mistake. Ten people died.
Seven of them children. I listen as I rinse
the whole raw chicken under the faucet.
Then pat it dry with paper towels.
My computer bright with the recipe — oregano,
rosemary plucked from my small herb garden.
The reporter entered the house, recorded
the women howling in grief. I question
the necessity of things. There are no lemons
in the fridge, though I swear I bought lemons.
Instead, I stuff the chicken with more garlic.
With bare hands, I massage butter under the wings,
over the legs and breasts. When confronted
with the facts, some government official apologized —
the bombing was an accident. The children
were running to greet their uncle,
as they did every afternoon when he arrived home.
The children weren't meant to die. The uncle
wasn't meant to die. While the chicken bakes,
over the sound of the radio, I listen
for the hiss of fat to know it's done.
Water. The man had been filling water
at a warehouse to bring to those who had none.
Who had none as a result of another bombing.
His car the wrong make, the wrong bright white.
The jugs he lifted to the trunk sloshed
and bumped up against each other
as he wound the road for delivery.
I switch from the podcast to music.
I eat the chicken, the oily fat wetting
my hands, dripping to my elbows.

Phantom Babies

We were watching a nature program
about the bowerbird when you told me
you didn't want children. It wasn't the fact
that surprised me. It's just,
all the men who came before you knelt
at my soft feet, pressed their ears
to my stomach, gave the future child
(always a boy) a name. When I left him
and him and him, so did all those phantom babies.
Bowerbirds make elaborate dwellings
to attract mates. Some can take years to complete.
They decorate with trinkets and baubles.
A sprinkle of moss, berries for color. Some imitate
the sound of children playing or dogs barking
to ward off wild pigs. Once, I visited a psychic
who said if you don't want children,
be very careful, the baby you would make
would be unimaginably intelligent,
and you can't abort a genius baby.
I don't imagine we would have made genius babies.
I am no genius, that I know for sure.
But I went out back today and there were tomatoes
growing, ones I hadn't planted. Volunteers
they call them, stretching the length
of the garden's black soil. All this life
had come into being and I hadn't even noticed.

Walnut Jam

A whole jar, glossy and black,
the walnuts big and dark as cow eyes.
Svetlana spooned three on a white plate.
Outside rain clicked at the apartment windows.
Inside there was a lemon tree, a single lemon growing.
How can something so green turn so black?
Thick syrup melting into hot tea.
Unbearably sweet. On our way to the river
we stopped at your great-uncle's house.
His face wrinkled as a dried apricot.
He told me to sleep with you only
when I wanted it, told me to slap
your hand away. You climbed
the mulberry tree, fed us the dark
in summer. Everything hot,
sticky—an omen, how the young
green walnut can turn into a black orb,
orb we see our futures in,
bobbing in a steaming cup of tea.