

## Cherry Stones

I wanted to impress  
the gentleman-farmer  
that spring day

I drove up to his house  
in my cornflower-blue frock  
with my hair loose

to find him kicking  
stray gravel  
off the careful asphalt patio.

After he looked me over,  
offered snacks and conversation,  
freshly slaughtered meat

hot and rare from the barbecue,  
he brought out a box  
of early black cherries

and off we drove in his tractor:  
one round of the tidy fields  
before we bumped into the woods,

his weight pinning me down  
each time we turned  
a queasy corner,

me thinking of a test  
I once read about:  
a big house, a dessert of cherries,

how they judged  
your breeding based on  
where you put the pips.

I didn't want to fail that test,  
not for my gentleman farmer,  
his white sleeves rolled

above the elbow,  
forearm kissing mine  
in the wild and wasted pasture

behind the boundary fence  
knee-high with forget-me-nots  
and bluebells, replete after rain;

but I could not resist  
handfuls of the sweet black fruit  
as he drove me on

to meet his perfect herd  
who would not look at him  
although he called them

by such pretty names:  
Ruby, Lavender, Clarabel,  
Dipsy, Tallulah, Rose.

See that lazy heifer with the limp,  
he said, that's Roxy: slipped  
on ice last winter.

She'll have the calf  
before she dies; let's hope  
it's stronger than its mother.

Roxy looked me in the eye  
a long, long moment, didn't blink,  
then turned and swayed away,

dragging her wounded leg  
deeper into the woods,  
hammock of a belly

heavy underneath her;  
and then a silence so complete  
I almost drifted into sleep,

but the farmer wouldn't rest  
and off we jolted down the track  
as we've been jolting ever since,

dark juice staining my dress,  
me softening slowly  
under the weight of him,

nights rapt with bellyfuls of flesh,  
a clench of cherry stones  
tight inside my red fist.