

WINTER RECIPES FROM THE COLLECTIVE

I.

Each year when winter came, the old men entered
the woods to gather the moss that grew
on the north side of certain junipers.

It was slow work, taking many days, though these
were short days because the light was waning,
and when their packs were full, painfully
they made their way home, moss being heavy to carry.

The wives fermented these mosses, a time-consuming project
especially for people so old
they had been born in another century.

But they had patience, these elderly men and women,
such as you and I can hardly imagine,
and when the moss was cured, it was with wild mustards and sturdy herbs
packed between the halves of ciabattine, and weighted like pan bagnat,
after which the thing was done: an "invigorating winter sandwich"
it was called, but no one said
it was good to eat; it was what you ate
when there was nothing else, like matzoh in the desert, which
our parents called the bread of affliction— Some years
an old man would not return from the woods, and then his wife would need
a new life, as a nurse's helper, or to supervise
the young people who did the heavy work, or to sell

the sandwiches in the open market as the snow fell, wrapped
in wax paper— The book contains
only recipes for winter, when life is hard. In spring,
anyone can make a fine meal.

Of the moss, the prettiest was saved
for bonsai, for which
a small room had been designated,
though few of us had the gift,
and even then a long apprenticeship
was necessary, the rules being complicated.
A bright light shone on the specimen being pruned,
never into animal shapes, which were frowned on,
only into those shapes
natural to the species— Those of us who watched
sometimes chose the container, in my case
a porcelain bowl, given me by my grandmother.
The wind grew harsher around us.
Under the bright light, my friend
who was shaping the tree set down her shears.
The tree seemed beautiful to me,
not finished perhaps, still it was beautiful, the moss
draped around its roots— I was not
permitted to prune it but I held the bowl in my hands,
a pine blowing in high wind
like man in the universe.

3.

As I said, the work was hard—
not simply caring for the little trees
but caring for ourselves as well,
feeding ourselves, cleaning the public rooms—

But the trees were everything.

And how sad we were when one died,
and they do die, despite having been
removed from nature; all things die eventually.

I minded most with the ones that lost their leaves,
which would pile up on the moss and stones—

The trees were miniature, as I have said,
but there is no such thing as death in miniature.

Shadows passing over the snow,
steps approaching and going away.

The dead leaves lay on the stones;
there was no wind to lift them.

It was as dark as it would ever be
but then I knew to expect this,
the month being December, the month of darkness.

It was early morning. I was walking
from my room to the arboretum; for obvious reasons,
we were encouraged never to be alone,
but exceptions were made—I could see
the arboretum glowing across the snow;
the trees had been hung with tiny lights,
I remember thinking how they must be
visible from far away, not that we went, mainly,
far away— Everything was still.

In the kitchen, sandwiches were being wrapped for market.
My friend used to do this work.

Huli songli, our instructor called her,
giver of care. I remember
watching her: inside the door,
procedures written on a card in Chinese characters
translated as *the same things in the same order*,
and underneath: *We have deprived them of their origins,*
they have come to need us now.