

November 7, 2011

"Autumn Harvest" by Jane Delury

Jacques crouches in his father's garden, coaxing leeks from the hard November ground. Six rows of cabbages away, the old man is digging up bouquets of *mâche* with a grit-encrusted knife. Jacques grabs a shoot of leaves and pulls out a stem, slick with saliva-like bubbles. The leek slaps into the basket and his father looks over, his glasses steamed by plant breath into two opaque circles.

"Getting them all? And the roots?"

"Fine, Father," Jacques says, "I'm doing just fine."

He waits for the slice of the knife to resume, and then clutches another cold jumble of leaves. The earth buckles and splits, belching a sweet, rotten smell. With the leek in one hand, he uses the other to pull up the socks that have bunched around his ankles, exposing his heels to the bite of the air. A hollow eye stares up at him from the plank where his loafers balance, precious and inappropriate against the warped wood. "For your city shoes," his father said when he handed him the plank at the gate. Jacques wonders again what is really being protected—his shoes from the soil or the soil from his shoes.

The old man has finished the last row of *mâche*. His gray gardening coat ripples over the emptied soil as he heads toward the main path. Reaching down for the last two leeks, Jacques notices his father's misbuttoned collar, which rises high on one side and lies flat on the other. The collar is like the napkin the old man could not find the previous morning—sitting under his fork—or the letter he set out to mail twice or the reading glasses he misplaced on the top of his head. Jacques's mistake was to point out the glasses. At the time, his father said nothing, simply lowering them to his eyes and flattening the newspaper against the table. But that afternoon, he called Alexis and Emmanuel to the garden and they came running by Jacques, who was on his knees, mending a hole in the chicken wire.

"Don't yank, son. Pull."

The old man's leather boots halt on the path. Jacques clutches the leaves and listens to his father's lungs, tuned by fifty years of cigarettes and country air. He loosens his grip and stirs the earth. The leeks give.

"See?" The boots move away. "Just as I taught you boys. Patience and precision."

On the road, a white-haired man putters by, hunched over the handlebars of a moped. Jacques's father moves to the fence, with his hand raised, but the man simply shouts out something incomprehensible under the whine of the engine and then disappears down the road toward the village. Jacques's father reaches down and pinches a brown curl from a cauliflower head. He considers it with a frown.

"The frost is moving in," he says.

Jacques tries to look concerned as he walks by with his choked basket. Frost and hail are his father's enemies. Each year he develops a new strategy: wool blankets and plastic sheathes to spread over the beds, space heaters connected by extension cords to the garage. He has learned to master the soil, but the sky will not obey. Soon after his father retired, Jacques helped him harvest cherries in the middle of a hailstorm. Chunks of ice thudded onto the ground and pounded their shoulders through the gaps in the branches. Jacques worked on a ladder next to his father, whose locked jaw and unblinking eyes appeared and disappeared with each flash of lightening. At that moment, Jacques saw that these two acres of land mattered to his father in a new way, not as something to keep up, but as something for which he was responsible.

They sit on a bench by an aluminum tool shed. As his father sorts through a basket of shallots unearthed that morning, Jacques rearranges the leeks in the basket, aligning stem with stem, untangling the leaves. The smell infuses the air like radiation, invisible but everywhere; he squeezes his eyelids to fight off the sting. This harvest signals the onslaught of winter, a cavalcade of pungent, stalwart vegetables invading his apartment in Paris. Three months of rough skins and the lingering taste of dirt. Leek and potato soup; leeks broiled in cream sauce, sautéed with mussels, baked and sprinkled with *gruyère*, chopped into salads, battered and fried, shredded into tarts. Beets, potatoes and cabbage heads packed into the car trunk, lolling about the refrigerator, quartered in plastic bags. Three months of Jacques's sons refusing to eat another bite of sauerkraut or sautéed kale and

his wife calling them all ungrateful and fleeing to the bedroom with a vial of magnesium, while Jacques takes the boys to the McDonald's on the Champs-Élysées. Then, finally, the return of spring, bringing color back to the refrigerator and to Hélène's cheeks as she moves about the kitchen baking cherry tarts and carrot soufflés, setting the dining room table with white china plates and red napkins folded into roses. She will sit once again at the end of a row of dinner guests in a light veil of a dress with her hair swirled on her head as she waves away the compliments of the men and women in silk shirts and blouses, who take a second helping of asparagus in vinaigrette, deplore the state of store-bought vegetables, the limpness of those sold on the market, say how right it is to eat with the seasons, even in Paris which has no seasons.

Aren't you lucky, they'll exclaim, and Hélène will agree that, yes, they are lucky and make vague allusions to a day when they will be luckier. Jacques won't say that with the refrigerator, freezer and cupboards stuffed with turnips, *frisée*, and bags of peas, no room remains for Guadalupean bananas and Israeli avocados. He will not spoil Hélène's season with questions of practicality. Instead, he'll sip his wine and listen to the men and women rejoice over his father's spring and summer vegetables just as people discuss the friendly natives of Martinique with a patronizing, reverential air.

A crow drops from its perch on the roof of the house and slices toward the naked tomato stakes. Jacques grabs one of the shallots from the bench and sends it spinning toward the roof of the shed. It ricochets with a sharp ping that frightens the bird from the garden into the wall of forest on the other side of the road. The crow becomes a black shadow, then a flicker, then nothing. When Jacques turns around, his father is fishing through the blackberry brambles, one corner of the gardening coat held open by a thorn.

"What are you doing?" Jacques asks. "It was bad."

The old man's brow bunches as he lifts the shallot into the air and turns it between his fingers.

"It's perfectly all right. Just needs a little trimming. I hope you didn't bruise it."

"It was bad," Jacques repeats. He can still feel the sticky damp on his fingers. His father wedges the shallot under his thumb and slivers off the dark part, adding it to a small hill of *mâche* roots and shallot skins, which he carries to the compost pile. He tells Jacques about compost. About what you can and can't put in a compost pile. About how long it takes for compost to compost. About how

compost is the secret to the garden because it gives off vitamins and minerals. Slimy leaves, withered roots, apple cores. Rotenone, Pyrethrum, Nicotine Sulfate. Rot and poison, Jacques thinks, have made the garden real.

Back then it was only a roadside mirage –the solid fence, the tight valleys between the rows that seemed cut by tiny glaciers, the white squares of card on forked twigs at the edge of each bed naming hypothetical vegetables. He and his brother Guy, in rubber boots that swallowed their calves, were perfect boy farmers, inching along the seeding line, spades clutched in their fists as their father called out reminders from where he stood by the fence, still dressed in his chalk-covered teaching coat, one hand on the post, the other ready to greet passersby. Master Havre of the perfectly run school displays his perfectly run garden and his perfectly run sons. No one saw the lettuce woven into lace by slugs and snails, the bloodless carrots, the peas that resembled grape seeds. No one knew about the sacks of market vegetables hidden like refugees in the cellar, the covert potatoes their mother used to thicken the soup. She pureed their rotted squash and sliced the worms from their apples, while he stood with folded arms and explained what had gone wrong. They hadn't watered enough or they'd watered too much. They'd cut off too much or they'd cut off too little. They'd have to listen better. It was not enough to do well in school like the bourgeois children of Tours, who never dirtied their hands. What impression did they give to the men and women who lived in the village, who killed themselves to put food on the table, the same food they offered up to the worms? They bowed their heads and swore they'd do better, asking forgiveness from the god of the greens.

Jacques waits for his father at the gate, while the old man scatters pellets between the cauliflower plants. Beyond the fence, the boys crouch in the cherry orchard with sticks in their hands, poking at the base of a tree. They were kicking a football back and forth in front of the house when Jacques's father called them to the garden. They abandoned the ball and ran across the grass, looking as they did when Jacques took them to the races at Auteuil and they sat on the edge of their seats. Jacques's father pointed out a centipede on a lettuce leaf and explained what it could do to the crop. Emmanuel placed the insect on his arm; it moved in a green liquid line to his elbow. Alexis giggled. Jacques went back to fixing the fence. When he looked up again, his sons were standing in front of a bed of beets and his father was pointing at the leaves. Emmanuel said carrots. Alexis said potatoes.

That night, at dinner, Jacques's father replayed the scene, the way he had asked each boy individually about this or that plant and the answers they had given. The only one they got right was *mâche*. "The obvious one," the old man said, stabbing the air with his fork. "They live in Paris," Jacques said, but his father shrugged. "Is that an excuse?" Across the table, Emmanuel chewed on his bottom lip and kept his eyes down as he sawed away at the baguette, flecking the wax tablecloth with crust crumbs, not understanding that his grandfather meant that living in Paris was not an excuse for raising boys who thought beets were carrots.

"We have to get them out of the city more often," H  l  ne said, patting Emmanuel's hand and pointing to the crumbs. "We want them to have their grandfather's green thumbs." And then she smiled at Jacques's father as if they were comrades when, in fact, she's made it clear that the garden will be the first thing to go. Before the orange wallpaper in the upstairs bathroom, the plastic cupboard doors, the gold-flecked Formica table. Before all of the elements that H  l  ne silently inventories on each visit, her gaze stripping walls, changing cotton to silk, hanging paintings. First the fence, then the shed, then she'll send Jacques to the caf   and the digging will start by some of the men who sit evenings in the town square. These men will agree to dig the hole despite Jacques's fancy car and his university degree. They'll dig the hole because the old man, whom they still call Sir, once taught them to count and sit up straight and they are better for it despite their failing farms and lost jobs and children dropping out of school. When they're done, the men will line the hole and lay the grass around it and build the low stone wall on which H  l  ne's guests may sit and drink kir or pastis under the purple country sky and look into the dark water at the Matisse orange fish and talk about how wonderful it is to be out of the city. For that one crazy moment, when H  l  ne said green thumbs and Emmanuel started brushing the crumbs into his palm, Jacques almost told his father all of this. But then he saw the bit of omlette quivering on the end of the old man's fork, and instead he said "Green thumbs don't make you a living today."

They hook the baskets of leeks and shallots and *m  che* in the crooks of their arms and Jacques's father shuts the garden gate, cracking a snail on the post with the toe of his shoe. Jacques follows him down the thin brown line that leads to the house. His father, he sees, no longer walks. He shuffles. He shuffles with his head down, as if bracing against a strong wind. His neck is thin and

pink. He holds his basket of shallots with both arms, tight against his chest. Jacques takes half-steps to avoid scraping his father's heels.

In the orchard, Emmanuel hangs with his arms wrapped around a tree branch as Alexis peels bark off the trunk. Jacques tells the boys they are leaving soon and starts to move on, but his father stops in front of the house and looks up at the tree.

"Your great-grandfather planted this orchard when I was your age. My mother made jam. We ate pieces of bread with cherry jam for our breakfast."

Emmanuel lets go of the branch and thuds to the ground. He stares up into the tree with his grandfather, looking between the invisible cherries for the right thing to say. He's only ten but has already learned that words can set off courses you never imagined, that the difference between carrot and beet can become something enormous, because words have deep, hidden roots you only see when you say them.

"Why don't you go for a tour of the forest," Jacques says. "We have a while before dinner."

"It rained last week," the old man calls on his way to the garage. "Stay on the main path."

Jacques waits for Emmanuel and Alexis to cross the street. Arms swinging at their sides, they are swallowed by the trees.

At the garage sink, they scrape the dirt from under their nails, scour their palms with a rough cube of soap and dry them on the towel that hangs on the wall. Jacques's father steps out of his boots and puts on his house slippers. Jacques's shoes are clean, but he wipes them on the bristly mat at the foot of the stairs. The rubber boots that he and Guy wore had a permanent crust of dry soil that tumbled off in chunks during the summer. The boots went on in the garage and came off in the garage, exchanged for house slippers with slapping plastic soles. It was important to keep your feet clean.

"You can take one to Guy," his father says, handing him two cardboard boxes from a shelf. "You'll see him before we do."

Jacques follows his father up the stairs, the baskets hanging at his side, the boxes tucked under his arms so that he barely passes between the walls. On the phone, he'll tell Guy the contents of the boxes and Guy will say that he doesn't like vegetables and that Jacques is the one with a family to feed. Guy lives alone and eats in restaurants. He only visits his parents at Christmas and Easter. He

stays in the house with H       and Jacques's mother while Jacques goes to the garden with his father. He eats his oysters and foie gras, takes a walk in the forest, kisses his mother, gets in his car and drives away. When she's angry with Guy, H       says he's a selfish bastard. When she's jealous of Guy, she says he's lucky to be free. When she's thinking about inheriting the house, she says nothing at all.

H       and Jacques's mother are drinking tea in the kitchen, which was painted chartreuse before the renaissance of the color. The teapot, with its pattern of yellow daisies, doesn't match the blue cups, because it belonged to a great-grandmother while the cups belonged to a great aunt. On one wall hang pots and pans made of thin tin like that used for children's tea sets. Biscuit boxes with pictures of little girls bearing baskets of flowers and smiling black men in turbans line the top of the refrigerator. H       keeps spools of paper towels in the cupboard, Impressionist cocktail napkins in the living room buffet, pastel boxes of tissues on the bathroom counters. But Jacques's mother pats salad leaves dry with a linen cloth, reuses teabags and saves candle ends. When you've lived through a war, she once explained, you learn to save everything.

"Leeks," H       says when they set the baskets on the table. "Lovely."

Her lips turn down on the rim of her cup and her blond hair slips down the sides of her face. But Jacques knows the expression, the quick intake of breath that narrows her nose, the tightening of her lashes so that they hover together over the blue planes of her eyes. Leeks she resents more than all the other poor vegetables. She hates their rubber texture, hates the way they infuse everything in the refrigerator down to the milk with their sweaty smell. The previous winter, she made leek soup two weeks in a row until Alexis refused to eat another spoonful, and then she yelled at him about starving children in Africa. They used to laugh about it, when the boys were babies and they spent long autumn evenings straining the vegetables into jars. Endlessness was funnier then.

Jacques pushes the basket farther down the table toward his mother as his father leaves for the parlor. His mother sets a basin of water and two paring knives on the sheets of newspaper covering the table. Jacques watches her scrub the dirt clumps and slug slime and sap from the leeks, with gestures like those used to bathe a child. Across from her, H       chops the white from the green, two thin gold bangles clinking on her wrist. The night before, as they lay under the comforter

Jacques's mother had crocheted before her hands went bad, H  l  ne told Jacques that she was tired of putting up a good front. "At least Guy speaks his mind," she said. "At least he sets limits." But Jacques knows he'll never be like Guy. The best he can do is to throw a shallot, leave early, wear the wrong shoes.

Jacques's mother pats his arm and he lifts it off the newspaper so that she can roll up the leek peelings. She twists the ends of the paper and throws it away in the empty juice carton that serves as a garbage can. Jacques says he'll go get the boys and his mother looks out the window and tells him to put on a coat; it's growing colder—the neighbors have already closed their shutters. In the living room, Jacques's father is asleep in the recliner, a wool blanket slipping off his knees, his mouth slightly open.

Past the garden, the forest rises above Jacques. Glimpses of sky show through the cracks. Jacques takes the central pathway, which cuts through the same oaks and poplars that sheltered him when he was a boy. On Sunday afternoons, when their father was at the Party meeting and their mother was doing the week's wash, he and Guy would race each other down one of the narrow side paths, slapping the trunks as they flew by. They built a tree house one spring, where they waited for the gentry to thunder below them with their horses and hounds and crisp white collars and long jackets and their bugles cracking the silence, a sound Jacques could feel in his bones. They snuck up on the woodsmen felling trees in the clearing and cheered when the trunks crashed down. In the forest, they were no longer the sons of the schoolmaster, whom the other boys disdained because they didn't write on the undersides of their desks or pass notes in class. They had no rules to obey or lines to follow. They were anonymous and free.

From the mouth of an abandoned logging road, Jacques sees the boys moving quickly but carefully, avoiding the puddles. Emmanuel stoops to zip Alexis's parka with a quick jerk of his arm, grabs on to his flopping hood and holds it over his head like a leash until the younger boy yanks it away, holding out his hand instead. Emmanuel says something that sounds insistent. Jacques stands in the middle of the road and watches their routine. Guy used to lift him to the garage sink, pull up his sleeves and run the soap through his hands. If their father became angry, he always took the blame.

When Jacques calls out, the boys run toward him, shouting and waving their hands in the other direction, something about a man in trouble. Jacques hurries down the road, imagining what he would imagine in Paris: a pervert, a corpse covered by leaves, someone playing dead, lying in ambush. But the catastrophe turns out to be a truck that has tilted off the logging road into a ditch, its tire lost in thick mud.

“I’ll go,” he says. “You two head back to the house. See if your mother needs help.”

“We found him,” Emmanuel replies. “We saw it happen. We were coming for you.”

Jacques looks down the road, then back at his sons. Alexis waits on cue, but Emmanuel’s chin puckers with disappointment.

“All right, then,” Jacques says. “Show me where.”

They walk down the fire road, through a section of forest with abandoned log pyramids that will be torn apart in the winter and burned in local fireplaces.

“He was too close to the edge,” Emmanuel says. “We yelled but it was too late. I think there’s something wrong with him.”

“Did you touch him? Was he bleeding?”

“No. I mean there was something wrong with him, I think, that made it happen.”

The truck is visible at the next bend, the bed jutting from the ditch, “Garage René Girard,” painted on the doors. Jacques knows the driver immediately from his right shoulder, which slumps downward so that his hand hangs next to his knee. He and Guy used to tease him along with the other children, joining the chorus of Quasimodo, Tin Back, Soldier Boy. When they joked about it once at dinner, their father marched them outside to the garden. He showed them a pear tree that rose in a perfect U against the side of the shed. “His back is like this tree,” he said. “The brace is training it straight.”

Emmanuel and Alexis go around the truck to inspect the front. They make elaborate rescue plans involving logs, rocks and leaves.

“George Nevers,” Jacques says, extending his hand into the ditch. “Let me help you out of there.”

“I was checking the tires. I told your boys I’d be fine.”

George Nevers lets go of Jacques's hand and makes his way, slipping, tottering up the slope. His spine has grown worse with age. Jacques remembers his mother telling him something about running into George Nevers in the bakery and how George hurried out with barely a word. He's doing odd jobs for René, his mother said. Sympathy work. Jacques imagines the conversations that must circle about this man between the villagers, who now have little left to talk about. Poor, crippled George, who tried to make it in the city and had to come back home.

"It's been a long time," Jacques says, wincing as George Nevers's foot slips on a twig. He steps back to avoid speaking into the top of the man's head, into the fine white part of his scalp, where the hair has been carefully combed and gelled.

"I moved back last year," George Nevers says as he pulls himself breathlessly onto the path with the help of the truck's bumper. "You miss the country after too long in the city."

"Yes," Jacques says, "You miss the fresh air."

"My mother's not well. I've been looking after her and helping out at René's garage." George Nevers stares bleakly at the truck. "I guess this will be the end of that."

"The roads are slippery," Jacques says. "They don't maintain them anymore."

George Nevers shrugs with his good shoulder. He fumbles in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes and offers one to Jacques, who takes it even though he doesn't smoke. George Nevers sits down on a pile of logs and lights the cigarette. He closes his eyes when he inhales. Jacques peers again into the ditch, and then calls the boys over.

"Let's give it a try," he says.

George Nevers sits in the driver's seat with the window open and guns the engine. Mud flies from the tires and speckles the sides of the truck. Emmanuel and Alexis call out excitedly each time the engine churns. A stream of black smoke shoots from the tailpipe.

"Hold off," Jacques yells to George Nevers.

He crouches in the ditch and examines the sunken tire, which is being absorbed by a pool of stagnant water. George Nevers's wrist hangs out of the truck window, the end of the cigarette a limp line of ash. Jacques doesn't know how to get the truck out of the ditch, no more than he once knew

how to keep the weevils out of the potato plants or to cut back a blackberry bush. And yet his sons clearly think that he does, as they peer down at him with their patient eyes, waiting for instruction.

“Go look for some rocks,” he says. “I have an idea.”

George Nevers stands with Jacques and they form a chain with the boys to move the stones in front of the tire. Jacques and George Nevers roll a log from the stack. Jacques pushes most of the weight and pauses when he hears George Nevers wheezing. The other man’s face is red and dripping with sweat, but he’s lost his downcast look and even smiles when, with the help of the boys, they manage to rest the log against the front of the tire.

Jacques sets his hands on the bed of the truck and his sons scramble down to do the same. George Nevers walks to the front and shuts the door of the cab. The engine roars around them as the truck struggles against gravity, crushing the rocks deeper into the mud, churning against the side of the log, until Jacques feels a lightening of the bed in his hands.

“Harder,” he cries, and then the truck is heaving out of the ditch with a screeching, sucking sound that is drowned out by the triumphant honking of George Nevers’s horn.

Once the truck’s driven away, Jacques leads his sons down a side path that follows a grass ringed pond, where he and Guy would swim in the summer. Beyond the pond, the path intersects with another and Jacques sees his father, standing next to an empty basket, looking in the other direction. The old man turns around at the sound of their voices, his face tight with fear.

“Were you looking for us?” Jacques calls.

“No,” his father says. “Your mother wanted mushrooms for dinner.”

“We’ll help you then,” Jacques says. “It’s getting late.”

He pretends to check alongside rocks and under bushes but mostly watches his father to make sure the old man doesn’t slip on the slick bed of dead leaves. The boys have good eyes. They make light and dark brown bouquets of chanterelles and morels and set them gently in the basket, which is almost full by the time the sky starts to turn purple.

“What took you so long anyway?” Jacques’s father asks as he plucks leaves and twigs from among the mushrooms, the trembling gone from his voice.

Jacques looks down at his sons' sneakers, thick with the same layer of mud that has seeped through his loafers, into his socks.

"Nothing," he says. "Just getting some air."

Then he takes the boys' hands and they follow his father through the trees. Their feet make a soft, wet sound as they move across the ground.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

When my husband and I lived in France, we often visited his grandparents' house, several hours away from the city where we lived, on the edge of a municipal forest. Between stints of eating too much and playing cards with my husband's family, I'd go jogging in the forest and get pleasantly lost. More than anywhere in France, even my apartment in Grenoble, the forest felt as if it were mine, maybe because those runs through its trees were the thing only *I* did amidst all the traditions of my husband's family. (Jogging, or as my husband's grandmother put it, "*le footing*," was a foreign concept.) I brought that same outsider's interest to the vegetable garden of my husband's grandfather, which spread over a lot that could fit a small house. Vegetable gardens aren't particularly exotic, but as a child of the plastic-wrapped suburbs of the 70s, I was enamored of this food that came straight out of dirt.

In 1999, I moved from France to Baltimore to get my MA in fiction. As an exercise for a class on Joyce's *Ulysses*, I wrote a stream-of-consciousness piece about the garden and the forest, from the point-of-view of a character who became Jacques. The first draft of "Autumn Harvest" had a different ending, one that I felt wasn't right. If I remember correctly, Jacques went to find his sons, his father followed, there was some kind of conversation, and they went home. My trusted readers thought the ending worked, but I had the nagging sense that this wasn't THE ending. Something happened in that forest, but the something eluded me. After considering increasingly desperate options—What if the boys get lost in a cave? What if a wild boar attacks? —I cut the last pages and let the story hang for several uncomfortable months. Finally, George Nevers appeared. "Autumn

Harvest” taught me the value of waiting for a story to figure itself out. If I find myself bullying characters to end the damn thing anyway!, I remember that moment when I saw George Nevers’ car in the ditch and felt a tidal wave of relief. ~Jane Delury

ABOUT JANE DELURY

Jane Delury’s fiction has appeared in journals and anthologies including *The 2011 PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, *The Southern Review*, and *Narrative*. She is on the faculty of the University of Baltimore’s MFA in Creative Writing & Publishing Arts program.