

WILD BLACKBERRIES

On a rainy day turned sunny, soundless wind nudges lingering clouds from the horizon. Today marks the second full week I've spent in Scotland, the place I'll call home. Temporarily.

I spend a few moments each day reminding myself where I am. It's hard to forget but difficult to remember. There are the simple and obvious cues I'm no longer in California: it's September and I'm wearing multiple layers, or the unmistakable crossed blue and white flag that waves boldly from the castle on the hill.

Then I walk outside and forget which way to turn my head when crossing the road. The buildings are stained stone and spires prick the sky.

A month ago, I was on the floor of my sister's bedroom, staring up at the world map hovering over her desk. Little airplane pins and red thread holding together memories in each place she's traveled. Much of the map's area is unclaimed by string and pins. I glanced up at the unfamiliar island above mainland Europe and wondered what it would be like thousands of miles away, across two landmasses and an ocean.

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I am eight or nine years old when we drive up the California coast, over cliffs and through forests, to the Pacific Northwest. Green seems to fill every blur as I look out the car window.

At each unpaved road we pull off at, I step out of the car to the rich aroma of deciduous forest and moist undergrowth. I walk, mouth agape, staring up at giant trees that seemed to brush clouds from the sky.

My father, whose unpredictable and free spirit seemingly burns brighter when outdoors, bends down into the bushes by the side of a quiet creek. He burrows his torso into the brush,

taking step after step into the unknown and down the gravelly decline of the bank. A few minutes later he emerges, holding something in his hands. Before he reveals his treasure, he walks up ahead to a clearing in the row of bushes, dipping his hands into the moving stream.

He offers it to my mom who takes a small handful, throwing it into her mouth, flinging excess water off to the side. My sister and I stretch our necks, peering to see the mysterious—and apparently edible—object in his hands.

Nestled in the cavity of his palms is a mound of glistening, juicy—

“Blackberries?” my sister and I ask in unison.

“But what if they’re poisonous?” Leila persists.

“Mom already had some, though,” I realize, concerned for our collective health.

“Perfectly fine,” Baba dismisses us, popping one berry after another into his mouth.

“But how do you *know*?” I ask, not convinced.

“I had these all the time back in Lebanon.” Baba munches away as he explains. “We would pick them by the water source in the village. Perfect for late August afternoons in Maaraboon, cooled by the running water.” He offers me his hand again, the supply of berries already dwindling.

Leila and I gingerly pick one from the pile as our parents swallow them in rapid succession. I hold the perfect, ridged berry between my fingers, squishing it slightly to make sure it is in fact a blackberry. One of the drupelets pops, melting a deep purple stain into my forefinger. I put it in my mouth. It bursts almost instantly, sending infinitesimal ripples of tang and sugar through me. Wild and fresh.

I look at Leila. *We need more.*

Baba finds an area along the trail with bushes close enough for our short arms. He shows us how to gently twist and pull the berries from the base of the fruit, careful not to put our fingers onto the actual thorny stem.

I follow his lead, jumping as the bush recoils at my touch. Everything seems to be prickly, except the fruit. My arms acquire scratch after scratch from poking leaf and stem as my fingers dive into the bramble.

After ten minutes of foraging, Leila and I present our harvest. We crouch on the side of the path as Baba goes to wash our prized berries in the stream.

In just a few minutes, the berries are once again gone, their only proof of existence being our purpled nails, reddened fingertips, and stained lips. Leila and I spread out our fingers, displaying our hands proudly to our mom. The juice is so bright; it looks like blood.

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The rhythmic thunk of wheels passing over rail joints set tempo to the peaceful landscape of the Scottish highlands. In the seat across from me, my father dozes off while my mom checks the route stops on her phone. In front of me, a pocket sketchbook and pen are at the ready, but I can't seem to take my eyes off the curvature of the world outside. Golden midday sun casts confident contours onto dimpled mountains and reflects a deep blue onto the crystal lake residual from a glacial age. And suddenly it's dark, black replacing the ancient scene, the steady beat of the train tracks echoing in the tunnel. We emerge from the mountain, and another valley appears, a handful of farms swimming in seas of pine forests. Minutes later, the tracks bend inward toward a mountain, and a great green mound rises from the earth, so tall I crane my neck into the window to see it in all its glory before it dissolves from my sight.

A dirt path runs alongside the train. It's been miles since the last sign of civilization, but I see a small figure, walking at a steady pace, their pack hoisted up high on their back. They seem so small in the massive valley, the thin profile of their shadow trailing a few steps behind.

Scotland passed legislation in 2003 on public "freedom to roam." It originates from *allemannsretten*, a Norwegian concept and ancient tradition of nature being regarded as a public resource. For both recreation and educational purposes, the Act grants virtually all land accessible to hikers, backpackers, and bicyclists, as long as we don't leave any trace or disturb habitats.

Our train surges forward, heading toward the Scottish highlands, where my parents and I will spend a couple days roaming a northern corner of the country before they drop me off at my new flat in Edinburgh.

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Blackberries are an invasive species, always growing in close proximity to water, crawling through bushes and from crumbling river banks. It only takes one small piece of stem or rhizome for a bush to pop up, spreading its spiny arms, braiding itself into an impenetrable thicket.

If they're grown mostly in the shade, they're less sweet, but carry an exciting rebellious and wild taste. In full sun, they're likely to be sugary and juicy. In partial sun and shade, there's no way to know how they might turn out, sometimes bland, sometimes brighter than both counterparts.

Foraging for berries is one of my favorite treats about being in nature. I love any sort of fruit I can scrounge from plants. But when it's free, or in unlimited supply, I could spend hours pricking the pads of my fingers on thorny stems. White mulberries from the tree in my

grandmother's yard in Lebanon, wild blueberries on the steep bottom shelf of Mount Rainier, huckleberries lining empty roads in Yellowstone, bright salmonberries in Denali, strawberries from U-Pick farms in Oceanside or raspberries on farms north of Santa Barbara.

In the U.S., I'm nervous of toeing this line, wary of passersby, hikers, and park rangers. I'm convinced my family is the only one who knows about these hidden treasures. But I fear one day we'll get caught, our guilty faces plastered on every park website, banned from eating what nature is generously offering.

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The resounding clacks of the railroad slow and we pull into the station of Fort William, a town at the feet of the highlands, silhouetted by the towering Ben Nevis, and bordered by a bend of the deep Loch Eil.

Within an hour of arriving, my parents and I find ourselves roaming through brush on the verdant hills. Short grass sways in the wind ripping through the valley, swiping past the towering stone mountains. The light green of the sun-bleached grass, the bright greens of the soft, hydrated valley, and the multicolored fields of purple and orange flowers seem to paint new scenes at each bend. We pass two campers, taking a dip in a small lake. The morning sun warms my nose as the breeze plasters my shirt to the front of my torso. I shiver, feeling the immensity of the land.

I walk up ahead of my parents and the wind takes over my hearing. Their conversation about our house and potential security system back in California are swept away. I realize that in just a few days I'm going to be here on my own. A continent to myself, free to roam. Free to be.

We're hiking toward a series of waterfalls, and as I listen for the source of water, a familiar compound leaf catches my attention.

“Blackberries?” I call out, my voice a lilt of disbelief and trepidation.

Though I’ve picked thousands of berries, there’s always the risk that I pick one of the ten percent of wild blue or purple berries that are, in fact, poisonous. I test the nimbleness of my now-practiced fingers as they reach through a shadowy cave of brambles, dodging prickly thorns, made more difficult by the swaying wind. I weed through the bright red berries to find the dark purple ones. As I retract my hand, filled with the perfect berries, a thorn snags on my forearm, leaving behind a thin red line. I wince and brush it off.

I present my collection to my parents, and they excitedly pluck the berries from my cupped hands. I didn’t think about there being blackberries in Scotland.

Upon tasting their tangy interior, we embark on an impromptu harvest.

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Every evening this summer, I run to Baba as soon as he walks in the door, home from work. I hug him, squeezing the warmth of the sun-baked car from his button down.

Most nights, I queue up a movie or show for us to watch, curling up against him like a favorite pillow.

The other nights, I tuck my mom into bed, after keeping her up way longer than she intended, telling her stories from books she’ll never read and drama from people she’ll never meet. When her eyelids start to flutter, I kiss her cheek and turn out the light.

Standing in line at Costco, I wrap my arms around my dad’s neck, resting my head on his shoulder.

“What?” he asks.

I shake my head. Nothing.

I wonder what it was like for Baba to leave his parents at seventeen, to fly off to a country an incomprehensible distance away. Across a sea and an ocean. And not knowing when he would see them again.

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I'm at an orientation induction session, staring at the University of Edinburgh crest etched into the wood on the stage. On my phone, a notification flashes across the screen. It's a picture and a message from my parents, a couple miles away on a hike.

Almost to the top of Arthur's seat and plenty of snacks, my mom's message reads. It's accompanied by a photo of her cupped hand, brimming with blackberries, overlooking a cavernous valley. It's one of the most recognizable postcard landscapes of Scotland, but with an added familiar berry-filled flair.

My eyes wander back to the presentation at the front of the room as another text pops up:

Don't worry, we left some for you when you come hiking.

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The day my parents leave Scotland, I wake up early. I've spent the night in my undecorated flat, halfway across the city from their hotel. I pull a jacket from my still unpacked suitcase, despite the warm spell that has brought sunshine for the length of our stay so far.

Barely eight a.m., the morning has a youthful glow. As I hike through the Meadows, I weave between school children in white shirts and green checkered uniforms. To my right, a little girl braids a friend's hair on a park bench. A mom ushers two young children forward, too-big backpacks hitting the backs of their knees. A bride and groom giggle across the cobbled road, white tulle bundled in heaps in both their arms. Their photographer jogs after them, capturing their spontaneity.

I meet Baba outside the hotel, who hugs me and sneaks me into the lobby to join them for a bootlegged breakfast.

I haven't had many thoughts or feelings about them leaving, but I don't want to make myself feel guilty for feeling or not feeling something. I'll let myself feel whatever I need to.

We move to the lobby, and it suddenly arrives. I hug my mom, and we distract ourselves talking about some mundane thing outside. I let go and put my arms around Baba. I feel it coming.

I can't continue the mundane jokes or conversation. He doesn't try to.

There's something about a wordless hug. I feel the tears leave the corner of my eyes and pull him tighter.

I hide my face and turn back to my mom for a second round. As if the longer the hug, the shorter the distance spanned across this country, the Atlantic, and the U.S. That we wouldn't be on opposite ends of countries an ocean apart. But because I'm aware of the distance, it seems bigger.

I hug them until the very last minute that I need to leave.

"See you at Christmas. Love you."

My mom says something in return, but I don't hear it. All I can manage is a nod.

"Bye," I let out softly as I open the door. I see them climbing the stairs out of my periphery, as I turn to walk out.

The cold air rushes over my bare skin, the sun hidden behind a graying layer of overcast. The tears slow as I tuck my chin toward my chest and pick up my pace, willing my internal body heat to equilibrate my cold skin. I wipe away a couple stray tears, now cool to the touch.

The city is now awake, yawning and stretching out into the streets. It's almost like I've crossed a threshold from tourist to dweller as I weave through the crowds and pass the grazers on the sidewalk.

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My bedroom window in my flat faces west. I often drift off, testing how far I can see. The sun slides down my windowsill, casting the outline of my basil plant crawling toward me. I try to squint through the light blurring as it hits the streaks of rain on the glass. Some thousand miles in that direction is my sister's room and the pins and the uncharted map.

My gaze falls to the street in front of me where overgrown bushes seem to collapse on top of a stone half-wall. I recognize the compound leaves and their placement as they weave through the other bushes. Wild blackberries.

I try to predict what they will taste like, after watching the light kiss them for a few hours each day and the rest of the time simmering in their shadowy recesses.

I pull on some boots and walk out into the windy golden hour, shivering as cool air hits the back of my neck. I reach up over the wall and pluck a blackberry from its thorned, protective vine. I run my finger over the berry's dimpled surface, feeling its warm top, lingering from the day's glow, and its underbelly, cool in the shade. It's a little smaller than its highland counterpart, perhaps a different subspecies. I try it, and my nose immediately wrinkles at its initial sour burst. But the inside is sweet and free.

It's new, unlike any of the blackberries I've picked before. I savor it, studying the rest of the bushes to see what's left to be harvested. There's still unripe berries—temporarily—pink and red and hard. They'll remain that way for a short while, as long as the sun stays out for a little longer, urging the half-grown ones to bloom purple.