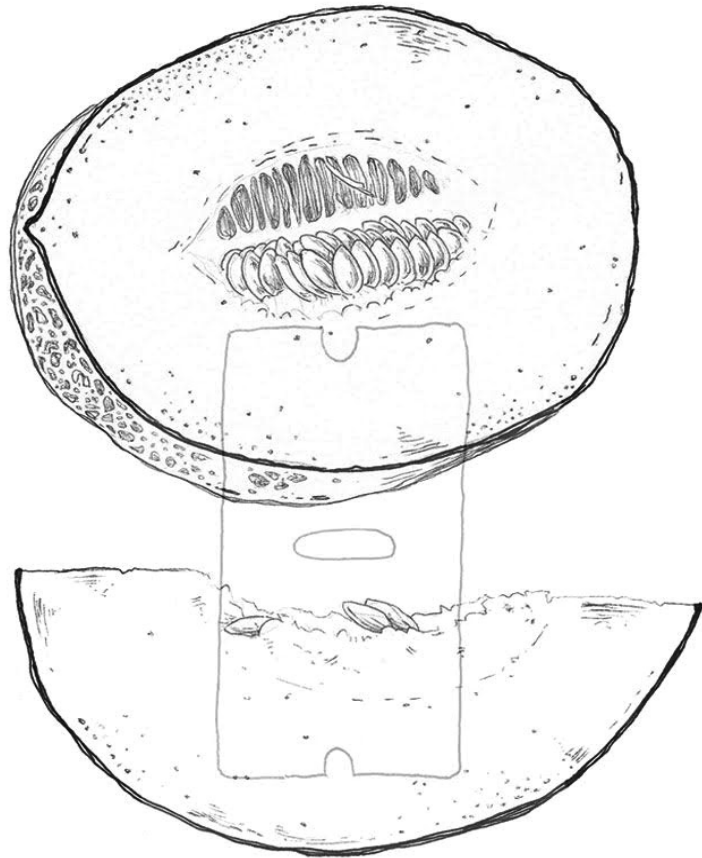


From Fierce Wounded Things:

A GOOD MELON

By Eric Bennett



E VERY CONVERSATION WITH NAN GOES LIKE THIS:

“What about my legs, do you like them?”

“Yes”

“And my hips, too?”

“Definitely.”

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Very.”

“What about my face. Do you like my face?”

“Yes, I love your face.”

“Do you like all of me, my eyes, my nose, my ears?”

“Beautiful.”

“Do you think I have pretty ankles?”

“Pretty.”

“Would you do me?”

“Yes. I would do you.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No, I mean it. I would fuck you.”

Afterwards, one of three things happens: I fuck her, she gets angry, or she cries. If I fuck her, she doubts everything I say. Supposedly, I’m voicing whatever it takes to get into her pants. If she gets angry, we repeat the conversation at furious decibels. If she cries, we have the same conversation at whispered decibels while I hold her. But it’s always some version of the same conversation.

No matter how many times I tell her “I love you,” “You’re beautiful,” or “I like fucking you,” Nan won’t believe it. So we rearrange the words and repeat. Our conversations are characterized by the instructions on the back of my shampoo bottle, “Work into a lather-frenzy, rinse, and repeat.”

I met Nan in the produce aisle at the Piggly Wiggly. She was rummaging for a ripened melon.

“Pardon me. Do you know how to tell if a cantaloupe is ripe?” she asked.

I had no idea but quick as a wink I said, “A ripe melon has a solid sound when you thump it.”

She fumbled the melon to her ear, tap, tap, tapping. I lifted a cantaloupe, thumped it and declared it ripe. Handing it to her our forefingers touched creating a synapse across which our hungers leapt. In that melon moment I knew Nan was needy, but I also knew I wanted to rescue her. That afternoon we kissed in her veranda, our tongues tied in fitness, infiniteness.

I imagined myself a hero like the neurologist Robin Williams played in the movie *Awakening*. In a breakthrough moment, a catatonic De Niro comes out of his shell. This is how it would be with me and Nan. Yet, three and a half years later Nan remains catatonic. It looks like we’ll never move beyond the produce aisle at the Piggly Wiggly.

Time passes and we’ve eaten more unripe melons than I can count. Nan suspects that I don’t really know how to determine if a melon is ripe at all. Of course, I don’t.

Last night she came home with her hair bobbed. We're not people who get dramatic haircuts so I wondered if this might be an awakening of sorts.

"New haircut?"

"Yes, do you like it?"

"I do."

"And my makeup, too?"

"Definitely."

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Very."

"What about my nails? Do you like my manicure?"

"Yes, I like the white tips."

Panic rises – I have the uncontrollable urge to bolt.

"Honey, I'm going to pick up some toilet paper at the grocery store."

"Will you grab a honeydew?"

I picked up the car keys without responding, praying she wouldn't ask again.

Driving to the Piggly Wiggly, I picture Nan going into the bathroom to discover we have plenty of toilet paper. She glimpses her reflection in the mirror, and I the interminable question on her face, "Am I pretty?"

I've been ready to leave my life, Nan's neediness. Yet, I am kept like a zeppelin tethered to the ground. What can be done in the face of such

disappointment but strain at the cords? My lips ache from years of kissing Nan, convincing her of her beauty, her worth. Why is it so difficult to believe we are loved, worth loving?

Pulling into the Piggly Wiggly lot, I veer to the furthest spot from the front door, my intention to park where I had never parked before. Mumbled, "To boldly go where no man has gone before." Less adventurous than envisioned, I cross the distance between my car and the automatic glass doors.

Click, verrv and the doors slide open, sousing me with fluorescent light, canned music, and happy "How may I help you?"s. The Piggly Wiggly is a metaphor for my relationship with Nan – artificially bright and altogether benign.

I wander aisle one, aisle two, aisle three. At length, I awake from my trance to find myself in the produce aisle staring at a mountain of cantaloupes. I forgot my wallet.

A brunette with a slight overbite and curiously long ear lobes sidles up to me lolling cantaloupes till she finds one she prefers. Absentmindedly, I ask, "Do you know how to tell if a cantaloupe is ripe?"

Without hesitation she answers, "A ripe melon has a solid sound when you thump it."

I look up and into her hazel eyes and immediately fall in love.