

SATURN'S FRUIT IN SEVEN LESSONS

James Loop

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Here am I in late summer, squatting roadside, looking through a crate of Sean the Farmer's small-batch jellies in White Sulphur Springs, New York.

Sean the Farmer has returned—he doesn't say where from—to farm the land he adolcesced on. I play at reading his face. Is it the mellowed rue, or the smugness, of one who goes and comes back?

In 1890, the town changed its name from Robertsonville to White Sulphur Springs after a hotel so called in town, to place itself more concretely on the Southern Catskills' burgeoning tourism circuit.

He's walked us around the farm, pointing out the many grasses we could eat ("that you can eat, that you can eat, that you can eat"). We've unfolded onto his scale, his expectations figured in decades, his memory butting up against the moment "The White Man Usurped This Land." We nod correctly at his politics, smile at his baby.

Now he talks to me of his medlar trees which he's kept for several seasons and which have not yet fruited.

Medlars,

I tell him, is what my mother's last name¹ means in English. I've never tasted one. Sean the Farmer's eyes blue at this. I

(1) Nespoli

discover he's sexy in a daddyish way ("farm my ass, dad,"
one of us will remark on the short walk back to the van).
I leave my address in the event of fruit. Another name for
sulphur being brimstone

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Picked late in the year and lain away for several weeks, the medlar's managed disintegration yields, in a process known variously as "bletting"² or "mellowing," an edible umber mush. After some thirty centuries of cultivation, the medlar has now passed into obscurity,³ disappearing in the onslaught of prettier and more readily edible fruits. As one of the year's last fruits, the medlar is served traditionally at Christmas, and we must base its exhumed appeal at least partly on this fact. Its sweetness is a species of scarcity. A bletted medlar is called "sleepy."

On Youtube I watch twenty minutes of medlars squeezed through cheesecloth. The cloth as "Raw Lisa" works it makes a sucking mudsound. The brown paste accumulates on Raw Lisa's hands which she wipes periodically against the lip of a clay baking dish. When the dish is full, Raw Lisa swirls the paste with a spatula and places the lopped-off calyx—a fuzzy puckered brownish stump—in the center. It makes a heinous garnish. May I be forgiven? When I am like the medlar I am sleepy. States blur.

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(2) A footnote from the botanist John Lindley in his 1835 *Introduction to Botany*, where the term "blet" first appears: "May I be forgiven for coining a word to express that peculiar bruised appearance in some fruits, called *blesse* [sic] by the French, for which we have no equivalent English expression?"

(3) From Baird & Thieret's "The Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*, Rosaceae) from Antiquity to Obscurity": "Among those individuals who ought to have heard of it—botanists and horticulturists—many have not."

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The medlar came to Europe out of the Caucasus or possible points east, threading through Anatolia along the Black Sea's southern coast, into the lower Balkans, and from there the leap to the islands of the Northern Aegean and into the Greek language.⁴ The Soldier-Poet Archilochus gives us its first surviving mention, a fragment which reads:

μεσπιλα⁵

“mespila”

medlar trees

Which? Traditionally figured as a mercenary warrior—whose fragments are filled with spears and wooden shields, wine-sacks, “dripping blood,” crotches, snot, and the rest (“the field fatted with corpses”)—Archilochus, whose name means First Sergeant, was born on the island of Paros, made war on the indigenous population of Thasos in the Northern Aegean (where the Parians had established a colony a generation before him, lured as the Phoenicians before them, by Thasian gold), and left us the earliest surviving example in the

Western Tradition

of a lyric persona. His is famously nasty. He describes Thasos, far from home:

(4) One possibility.

(5) There's no way of knowing whether this earliest form of the word “medlar,” corresponded to the fruit it does today. It's conventional to translate Fragment 75 of Archilochus as ‘medlar trees.’

This island,
 garlanded with wild woods,
Lies in the sea
 like the backbone of an ass.⁶

How ought one to write clearly about fruit, names? Flanked
by absence

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(6) All translations are Guy Davenport's, from *Carmina Archilochi* (1964)

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We know that the Greeks brought the medlar with them into their colonies in the West, to Sicily and the Southern coast of France. It's thought the Romans first encountered them there, and cultivated the fruit (now *mespilus*) throughout the empire's northern extension.

With the retreat of that empire, the *mespilus* degenerates into the French *néflier*, Spanish *níspero*, and the Italian *nespola*, from which derives the surname

Nespoli

"topographically,"⁷ to which I, by my mother, am attached.

You were falling asleep in the next room as I described my theory of dream genetics, the leveling web of mellowed logic that might correct our proportions and misgivings. For instance, allow a minor node in the history of fruit to be me, an imbecility: the blasted rim a name is. The medlar is a bedfellow of war.

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(7) One of the means by which, during the Middle Ages, amid the growth of towns and anonymity, European surnames were derived.

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Christened Pasquale Nespoli on Easter Sunday 1889 in Santa Maria Capua Vetere,⁸ five hours on foot from the Bay of Naples. On the ship manifest, he's 15. With his mother and younger brother he's designated a "farm laborer." The 1920 census finds him living on Carroll Street in Brooklyn, as "factory help." An alien, he can neither read nor write. By 1930, he's moved out to the country (Queens). White now. A "laborer." He owns his home. The script on the earliest documents is elaborate, winged, grows crabbed and faster through the ensuing decades.

He grows tomatoes. His four sons play stickball and forage for strawberries on land that will become first Idlewild, then JFK Airport. Here he is waking early to take the bus into Jamaica to catch the E train to South Brooklyn where he works at a factory near the waterfront, on Irving Street,⁹ packing fruit—Dromedary Dates.¹⁰ On the weekend he makes pasta and lays it on the bed to dry. He balds young. He never learns English. He plays the mandolin and dies in 1981. I am an aphid, properly rotten with words.

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(8) Until the Italian unification, the town had been called Santa Maria Maggiore. Capua Vetere (Old Capua) was added in the interest of tourism to reflect its proximity to the ruins of a Roman city, although the town itself was founded some ten centuries later.

(9) Irving Street, a narrow alley infamous for its many factory fires during the early 20th century, was officially purged from the map by the city in 1991, though its street sign remains in place today.

(10) "Grown along the Euphrates River, in the very region of the Garden of Eden," reads an ad from 1911. "We of the new countries don't eat enough of them."

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Though the English word medlar has its origins in Latin, it also had for centuries an indigenous Germanic double. Owing probably to the look of its exposed calyx which bears a strong resemblance to the human anus, the medlar was an “open-arse.”

We find it in the Reeve’s Tale from Chaucer:

But if I fare as dooth an open-ers —
That ilke fruyt is ever lenger the wers,
Til it be roten in mullok¹¹ or in stree.¹²

Of old men like him, the Reeve states, “til we be roten, kan we nat be rype.” Experience is expectation’s jelly.

The association with rottenness, along with its proximity to the verb “meddle” (meaning to fuck, adulterate, or otherwise screw with or up) also made of the medlar a word for whore,¹³ the female genitalia, and a “generally disreputable person.”¹⁴

An opening: during the course of anal sex, it’s possible for the human rectum to slip out through the anus and be displayed. For its enthusiasts, the prolapsed rectum is a “rose-bud.”

(11) Rubbish

(12) Straw

(13) From Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*:

LUCIO: I was once before him for getting a wench with child.

DUKE: Did you such a thing?

LUCIO: Yes, marry, did I but I was fain to forswear it;
they would else have married me to the rotten medlar.

(14) Robert Louis Stevenson: “Can’t you hear it rattle in the gibbet?” said Villon...
‘Down went somebody just now! A medlar the fewer on the three-legged Medlar tree!’”

I ask a friend who's into it if he can describe the appeal. He says a rosebud is the opposite of shame. A profounder intimacy embedded in the reversal of surfaces. "Why are you so afraid of assholes?" asks my first boyfriend in the shower eight years ago.

The medlar is a member of the rose family. A name, a mellowing sin.

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“The Fruit is old Saturn’s,”¹⁵ writes the 17th century astrologer-botanist Nicholas Culpeper, on the medlar, “and sure a better Medicine he hardly hath to strengthen the retentive faculty, therefore it stays Womens Longings: the good old Man cannot endure Womens Minds should run a gadding.”¹⁶

Meaning is a sphincter (may I be forgiven?); the medlar
rotted
a knowledge.

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(15) Saturn, a Roman agricultural god, was later stitched to the Greek Kronos, yielding the bad daddy, the schoolmaster, Father Death. As the last planet in our solar system visible to the naked eye, Saturn became an emblem for limit, the edge of all endeavor and greedy seeing. What Saturn touches is marked by difficulty, delay, restriction and blockage. Saturn dries and depresses

(16) — To go from one place to another, to wander; esp. to wander about with no serious object, stopping here and there, to rove idly

— To go wandering, in desire or thought; to leave the true path. (obsolete)

— Of inanimate objects: To move about. (rare)

— Of a plant, tree, etc.: To spread hither and thither, to straggle in growth. (archaic)