

Cantaloupe

Cantaloupe was my mother's favorite fruit and probably favorite food. So I was hardly surprised to find myself alone with her on a planet that was a cantaloupe, enlarged and peeled.

It was homogeneously the color of peeled cantaloupe, because it was a peeled cantaloupe. Its texture was the same; its smell was a mix of cantaloupe and nothing the smell of cantaloupe couldn't dominate. And it wasn't as big as the Earth, or even Earth's moon; there was no illusion of flatness. It was very much spherical, planetary, cantaloupe, very obviously cantaloupe, but the gravity was strong like the Earth's. And all around the cantaloupe, it was night, starry, silent but for the new sounds of our feet stepping along the cantaloupe, and we were alone.

Nothing changed, as she led me. The stars, the colors, the same exaggerated spherical perfection, texture, footsteps, and even the space between us, always several paces. But the texture. A thing or two of the texture – at once slippery and soft, such that sufficient footing could be had such as to step more so than slip, but not too soft such as to sink. No, we walked on this cantaloupe as if walking on heavily packed powdery snow or with rubber soles along the back of a whale, except less cautiously, for we stepped without fear of falling into anything but more pure cantaloupe.

Then my mother stopped, and I maintained my distance of several paces. She didn't turn towards me nor utter a word of explanation nor signal any orders. She knelt. She knelt on one knee and felt around the surface with bare palms, as if gauging ripeness.

I'll tell you about my mother. She wore a backwards baseball cap hardened from sweat dried long ago, a gray tank-top she used to jog in when we were younger, shorts, and a black backpack. Without looking at me still, she dug her fingernails into the cantaloupe. Carefully, she lifted herself up, still gripping the cantaloupe, back arched, hunched over, so that the whole of her bodyweight might soon contribute to whatever she had

planned. After some twisting about, her fingers sunk. After a bit more twisting about, she dug out a piece. This she brushed aside. She licked her hand lightly as if double-checking, still without having acknowledged me in any noticeable way, and the piece slid to a stop between us. I walked up to her, so close I could touch her to check if she were real, just in case I was dreaming. Instead, I knelt beside her and gazed at the surreal surface on which we stood. I found my reflection next to hers in the wet surface and saw I was wearing an orange hooded sweatshirt and gray sweat pants. I put the hood up and saw I was a cantaloupe resting on its peel.

Glancing back at my mother, I saw she had already dug a hole in the cantaloupe the size of a bathtub. I glanced back at my reflection. I smiled, but the reflection would not smile. I must not have really smiled, then. The hole was now too big for a bathtub, and then, it was too big for a grave. Finally, she turned towards me, as if for the first time in a long time, in the longest time, turned to check on me as if checking I'd been born alive.

"Where's the peel?" I asked. It was the best I could think of in that instant during which I realized I had to think of a question to ask her, or risk her never turning around for me again.

She shrugged in a way that rendered the peel, and consequently, my question, of secondary or of no importance, and faced forwards again. As if there were no peel ever, and that without a peel, there could be no questions about a peel, either, ever. She focused her digging on one side while I watched, inching forwards only when she did, maintaining a distance. The hole was a tunnel in progress.

I tasted a piece that she in her furious digging had flung at my face and I had caught. It tasted as I remembered cantaloupe to taste, cold, wet, sweet. A piece broke easily off the wall, and then I caught another piece before it hit my face, remembering snow.

This went on. She would dig, fling cantaloupe at me, and I'd eat it. Her not eating surprised me, because I knew she loved cantaloupe, but I didn't ask her anything, not wanting to disrupt her ferocious digging. I thought that if I were to ask her something, if she were to turn around again, I would ask her if she would like me to help her digging, because she looked tired and it felt wrong not to be tired and not doing any work.

Then I saw her eat a piece of cantaloupe, after which she discarded the next ten, beginning a pattern. As if one piece in every ten or so were all

she needed to keep going, to keep leading me down this tunnel in her favorite food while all I needed was ten in every eleven or so to keep following her. Almost as if the pieces of cantaloupe were a bribe. A bribe if and only if bribes could be without rules or consequences. That whatever we were working our way towards would be well worth the stomachache. And I don't even like cantaloupe any more than I do any other fruit, not now as I reflect, nor then as I ate everything my mother would discard my way.

It grew cooler, darker, damper, narrower. Ahead of me, she burrowed, digging up all she could see, and all I could see was her digging up all she could see and the dark walls, barely illuminated, the clean color of cantaloupe as I remembered it to be.

"We have to get to the center," she said. "We have to or the world will die of hunger."

I had nothing to say initially, in part taken aback at her finally saying her first words, finally meeting my expectation for explanation with both an order and a consequence, in part unable to speak with a mouth full of cantaloupe, and in part because each piece felt progressively colder in my mouth and throat and stomach and all.

Imagining between bites what could be in the center that was so vital for all the world, I ate, and ate. And then I thought, which world?

"What's in the center?" I asked finally.

"Seeds," she said.

I ate, everything I could, and ate, more than I'd ever imagine I could, and ate, following her through the narrow tunnel.

And ate, all she clawed back at me, and ate, crawling, almost slithering, and ate, my lips numb, my cheap, ruined sweatshirt barely keeping the rest of my outsides dry.

And ate. Beyond full, and ate. I compensated for hunger's exhaustion with a new motivation, by imagining I was a child again learning to bicycle, and ate, hungry for my mother's approval, reminding myself, unconvinced as I was, unconvinced because physically it didn't make sense to me at that age that in order to stay up on two wheels you had to keep moving, pedaling... and ate. And ate, and ate. It was easier to eat than to breathe. And ate. The cantaloupe lost its flavor, its temperature, and ate, even, as my throat went numb, its texture. And ate, and ate, and there we were and

there I was, full as I'd ever been, having reached the center.

And she didn't have to tell me it was the center. I knew it was the center when not a mere piece of cantaloupe but a whole cantaloupe that, unpeeled and the size I'd always known cantaloupes to be, hit me in the eye and fell before my nose.

"Seeds," she said. "Seeds."

So, the seeds at the center of this planetary cantaloupe engulfing us, once merely tempting us, were seeds that were cantaloupes the size of cantaloupes in life as I'd had known it before, ordinary, unextraordinary cantaloupes the size of youth soccer balls or heads. Soon there was no more peeled planetary cantaloupe to eat, only many unpeeled cantaloupes to traverse. I rolled through this core of familiar cantaloupes, behind her. But not so much as if rolling downhill, rather, as if swimming, or, rather more accurately, as if dreamily dumpster diving laterally, weightlessly crawling, floating, through the dense, mobile void.

"Grab as many as I can?" I suggested, surprised at suggesting such, suddenly dismissing the surprise, understanding the question as natural.

"Grab them all," she said.

This inspired my greatest questions. I kept them to myself. Grab them all? I wondered.

"Eat them," she said.

Eat the fruit? The world would surely die of hunger. All of it? Really? Yes. Die of hunger as a consequence of my failure. My world. But not by me. I can eat one cantaloupe, why not a continuous amount of cantaloupes, one at a time? Who's to stop me? Who's to salute me upon my return, before my funeral?

"Eat the fruit, carry the peels," she said.

I was having trouble peeling the first cantaloupe. She turned around, handed me a peeled cantaloupe and its peel. Her fingernails noticeably longer, sharper than before. I ate the cantaloupe, feeding myself with one side of my body, clutching peel after peel with the other.

"Eat them," she said. "Good. Eat the fruit and it will become part of you."

I paused between mouthfuls. My shell of a sweatshirt felt like cantaloupe on the inside, against my sweaty body. "Until I shit," I said. I felt it coming, too.

“And then that which you leave behind becomes part of the Earth,” she said.

Earth. That was my world. Our world, to which we intended to return with enough cantaloupe to save.

And so I peeled. I peeled, and peeled, and peeled, and held it in the long way home, because I’d do anything for my mother and the world we shared and cherished.