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Where the Blueberries Are

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Where the Blueberries Are

In Maine, they seem to be everywhere. The blueberries I mean. They appear in the fields I know and in the poems I read. Robert Frost wrote about them; Amy Clampitt too. The poets know that specific location is important. Clampitt says the blueberries grow "Away from the shore, [where] the roads dwindle and lose themselves." Frost is more explicit, reminding us in a poem titled simply "Blueberries" that the best berries grow in burned-over territory: ". . . you may burn/The pasture all over until not a fern/Or grass-blade is left, not to mention a stick,/And presto, they're up all around you as thick/And hard to explain as a conjuror's trick."

So the poets tell us what we blueberry hounds already know: you have to know where the blueberries are. In "Midsummer in the Blueberry Barrens," Amy Clampitt, who summered at Corea, Maine, in the 1970's and 1980's, no doubt knew that the geologic shifts that produced the state's rock-belted islands also produced the treeless barrens that ultimately enabled extensive blueberry production. "Barren" is the operative term for Clampitt--depleted soils, lost communities. For her, the blueberries grow only where the road "dwindles," moving "away from the shore" and the usual settlement we find there; they occupy the places eschewed by seekers of ocean views.

But Clampitt is not writing about blueberries on the small island I know. The only road on Gotts Island, the “town road,” is a wide and rutted trail that at the narrowest point on the island “dwindles” into a path. And this is hardly a barren spot. Or at least not now. It was temporarily clear about four decades ago, when a severe winter storm took the trees down. But as ever, the spruce, birch, and alder took over once again, stifling the brief exuberant life—just a few years—of the raspberries that had thrived in suddenly opened sunlight, tangling around the toppled tree trunks.

Nor can the town road that bisects the small island east to west be said to lead “away from the shore.” Never lost, it’s always heading to another shore, the end mirroring the beginning—to the east the blocks of granite that take the brunt of the open sea, to the west the fields of the old village that slope down to the quieter waters of the Bay.

I cannot say where the town road begins and where it ends, but I do know that it does not lead to the blueberries.

With no far-off barrens to call their home, the blueberries on the island where I have spent all the summers of my adult life are of a much more civilized breed. They like the open fields whose owners keep the spruce and juniper at bay. These small beautiful berries are inextricably linked to the social relations of a small community, woven into the fabric of the place.

This means, as Frost reminds us, that knowing where the blueberries are is not so simple. You have to know the people involved. Frost's community includes both the character he

calls Mortenson, the man who "won't make the fact that [the berries] are rightfully his/An excuse for keeping us other folk out," and the indigent Loren family, who are dependent on berry-picking, and hence keep their blueberry knowledge to themselves—leaving Frost's narrator to say rather ruefully, "I wish I knew half what the flock of them know/Of where all the berries and other things grow." Blueberry knowledge is also secret knowledge.

If you know summer on a small island in Maine, you know the people Frost describes. You know that blueberry knowledge never exists in a vacuum. Except for the berries that grow in the beautiful rolling meadow at the north side of the island—from which a lone house was moved more than a century ago— island berries, though growing wild, are, for the most part, property, often much guarded. Two families on our island engaged for years in a conflict—dubbed the "blueberry wars"—over who owned a particular patch of ground favored by the berries.

Looking for berries on property announced as belonging to another person can be an invasion. It's venturing into a realm where one has no right to be. Even knowing where the berries are in a neighbor's field can be construed as undue access to some intimate knowledge. A particularly difficult property owner told me that he didn't like my body language when I looked at his berries as I passed along the path by his field. He could tell, he said, that I had blueberry theft on my mind. Since I have ample berries in my own field, I can't imagine why he thought this, but the mindset is noteworthy. When he put up tall ugly stakes in a field that we had always thought was ours, we feared that some shed

or other building was planned. But no, the stakes had been erected simply to indicate to us, and to everyone else with a mind for blueberry picking, that whatever berries grew in that bounded space belonged to him and were under no circumstance to be touched (or looked at). Later came the signs—"Do not pick the blueberries"—and still later five surveillance cameras.

Admittedly, this is an unusual level of blueberry paranoia. But these were very particular blueberries. Perhaps fertilized, they grew in large clusters, creating a blue carpet in the field. But daring, despite the warnings, to look more closely, I found something unappealing about this patch. The berries looked unnatural. They were there to be harvested in some controlled manner, offering none of the pleasure in gathering wild blueberries, in pulling aside the grasses and low bushes to find the treasure beneath.

This is the pleasure that the speaker in Frost's poem describes as he recalls blueberrying with his companion in Mortenson's pasture. He knows what it is to crawl around in a field, seeking out the best blue patches, smelling the bayberry and juniper that you hope won't snuff out the berries, knowing that if you cut the field one year, you won't have the wild berries until two years later, and, of course, eating the sweet berries still warm from the sun.

Mortenson's field is open to everyone. All the discussion over competition in the berrying places, fears that the wily, needy, Loren will take all the berries, give way to this: intense pleasure, warm memories ("It's so long since I picked I almost forget/How we used to pick berries . . . "). Strained relationships are, at least momentarily,

forgotten, the human comedy on hold. In looking forward to picking once again, the speaker knows that "We sha'n't have the place to ourselves"; that the Loren family may arrive and be less than happy to see others picking in what they thought their secret spot. But it doesn't matter, he says. "[W]e won't complain." He won't complain because he has seen the beauty of the blueberries, wet with light rain or morning dew, "mixed with water in layers of leaves,/Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves."

No thief can steal the berries that thrive in a poem, Frost's "field," open to all. We come with our baskets and jars; we come with our own memories. The meadow on the north side of our island is like that. It has owners, but they, like Mortenson, are entirely comfortable with sharing their berries. The land, rich with its treasure, slopes gently and gracefully down to the sea. The silence is broken only by the raucous scolding of the odd crow, the crying of the gulls, the irregular chugging of a far-off lobster boat. There are no ugly property stakes here, no knowledge that I want, or need, to keep secret. My basket is soon full.