

*Edible Flora*

Deuce Black

You know that sound? That hushed whistle through leavéd branches of lively-green maple trees in the latter weeks of August? A clear blue sky, not so cloudless as to be entirely uninteresting, but more than clear enough for...? Yeah. You know the sound.

It was, in fact, more than clear enough of a day to lie on the hammock and experience. Not to experience much of anything in particular, but to simply absorb. I had my eyes closed for most of the nature transfusion, as the breeze diffused through the light cotton tee on my torso, but a thought crossed my mind that shot my eyelids open, yet left my body untwitched and the wrinkles in the tee undisturbed: *What in the hell was growing in the compost pile?* There was some kind of vine, sprawling, thriving, absorbing just as I was, one not quite like anything I'd seen before. I turned my head toward it, slowly, to consider.

Prickly, stiff, upheld by what was probably far too much cellulose and but a glimpse of hope. The base of the stem was rooted, of course, as most plants' stems are, but it seemed like maybe it shouldn't have been. As the stem grew narrower up toward the leaves, I could tell that it wanted to be free. Something was holding it back, as the leaves caught the wind and trembled, from popping out of the ground and flying away. *The roots*, I thought, *the roots are pinning it down. Where does it want to go?* Asking this question, it seemed, was an obvious thing to do. Yet no, the plant did not want to go anywhere, and no, it was not being held back by itself – it simply was, as most plants are.

It was then that I noticed the flowers. At the end of a select few of the vines were droopy flowers, seemingly sun-bleached. They appeared damp and exhausted, yet it hadn't rained in weeks, and still, they were just flowers. *How tired could they get?*

Throughout the year, we threw all kinds of things in the compost pile. Eggshells, rotten fruit, wilted lettuce. Some ground coffee, though not nearly as much as one might expect. What came to mind in that moment, though, were the zucchini and the pumpkins. The gourds. Similarly shaped seeds, similarly rough outsides, yet so incredibly different otherwise. *Would it be possible for them to have cross-pollinated?* The flowers, slightly more orange than a pumpkin's and slightly more yellow than a zucchini's, seemed to indicate so. Such a subtle difference, and yet, as I laid there being, I could tell.

I had seen, once and only once, a fried flower. It seemed such a contradictory action, to fry a flower. To take something so delicate that once it were picked from its stem it might fall apart at the slightest change in direction of the wind, to coat it in the weakest armor of flour and water, to send it off to battle in a suicide mission against the hottest foe it would ever encounter. And yet, it had come back just fine. War-hardened, admittedly, but miraculously it was still a flower. It was plated beautifully, surrounded by two long dandelion leaves encircling it in a forever-continuous recycling pattern, and drizzled with some kind of pesto.

I had felt, once and only once, a fried flower. Such a betrayal it was, for my incisors to destroy one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, for my bones to gnash against the armor of a veteran. It had survived the heat (obvious to my lips, as it had brought some of its oily foe home with it) only to succumb to the pressure. But I hadn't been acting maliciously. It was on a plate, it was served as food; how was I to know?

I had tasted, once and only once, a fried flower. The pesto had been first but was quickly washed away. After that, it was only the taste of battlescars and homesickness, of safety and fear, of beauty and destruction. Its armor, it turned out, was more than flour and water, yet certainly no more protective than that. The petals within, though, were the most interesting – they tasted like something between pumpkin and zucchini.

I still hadn't moved any more than the wind had made me. From the same spot on the hammock, I stared down the vine in despair, in regret. *Had I not so brutally murdered the fried flower, what would it look like today?* Certainly something like the ones on the vine I could see: tired, bleached, draped o'er the wind's kind support, yet at the whim of the breeze, ready to fall at any moment, holding on for dear life for one purpose. That flower would have wanted to bear fruit. I stole its life away, but now, but now, I had an opportunity to make amends.

These flowers would not die young. They would not be robbed of their beauty or their grace. They would be allowed to grow old, to fruit, and then, and only then, when they were ready, when they knew their destiny was to be eaten or painted and used as a decoration, that is when I would pluck them from the vine. They would know the sunshine for as long as summer could bear to last. They would know back-to-school season, but I doubted they would ever have the pleasure of knowing Halloween. ◇