Translating a Life

for O.M. and M.R.

Someone spread a blanket of wild buckwheat
over a meadow. Someone tucked puffball pillows
in each corner of the purple-green sheet.
It is summer everywhere, except war.
War, where it used to be home,
and now, war by government, here.
And what does it matter that the meadow
sings to the bees in pollen, or to me in lines
of a poem, or that I hear perfectly good
Russian names for plants and translate them
into You-and-Me-ish? Take the tea mushroom,
the little fox mushrooms and piggies,
the early field-dweller, the mysterious
cheese-eater. These words are undocumented
here, and the country that sent them erases
every syllable with its crimes.
Take an under-birch-mushroom
anyway—it's a choice edible,
birch bolete in your tongue, on
the tongue. The language for falling in love
with forests, and stories, and friends
does not care who's killing whom.
Unfortunately, I care. And, sitting here
by a huge flowering bush, I see no refuge.
What languaged fantasy could stop us
from being murderous strangers? Would you
take a Russian mushroom name,
tuck it in your lapel for the brief banquet of life?
Does that translate anything else for you? Is this
how it works?

Eating a Persimmon, 1954

At four years old, in her grandpa's lap,
sun-warmed inside an Odessa courtyard,
my mother tests out a persimmon.

She has never met such weird fruit:
sweet jellyfish creepy-crawling.
Nu, es, little *meydeleh,* eat,

her grandpa glows at her, a Jewish wizard
visiting from a collective farm.
His beard smells like cow poop.

In quiet Russian, she asks: *Grandpa,*
do people actually like per-sim-mons?
Oh, *mansy!* Silly stories!—he brushes her off.—

Is this why I walked all over the Privoz Market
for one perfect piece of fruit I could afford—
just for you? Have some good selch *and eat.*

My mother sighs and tries to swallow the globe,
which spins sixty quick times around the sun,
finding her with her grandson and me,

all of us considering a bowl of conical,
identical supermarket Hachiyas, freckled
by California, where she lives these days.

And this story she tells us. And Adam,
with his *nyet, thanks but no thanks, Grandma,*

for that fruit. And my mom, who decides

to reveal, then, the DNA of our family's
eating: a pogrom, she says, chewed up
her uncle, a violinist, as he ran to shelter;

the world chomped on a branch
of our family like a deer, just needing to eat,
just minding its own business,

for instance, a six-year-old boy—
had he not died, he'd be an older brother
to my mother. She was not born yet,

the first child to sprout in that great
mishpooha after the war. *They all gave me treats,*
she smiles sadly: *Going a bit hungry themselves.*

I ask what a treat was back then. *A handful*
*of sugar?*How godlike, that persimmon,
I think to myself. My mother's grandpa

must have imagined he gave her the chance
to be—just this once—the eater.
How, instead, he gave her

an order, force-feeding the love of forced
feeding, the unsubtle art of forcing
that I spoon-feed to Adam, with a dash

of Russian, which passes for some
Vitamin R—to make a child Feel Rooted.
How there may still be a persimmon

here: couldn't my great-grandfather
want his only grandkid to know pleasure?
He could wish for her to dive

into a suprising place—
neither the unwatered earth,
nor memory's ruinous hug,

but softness.