

Harvesting a Return

Jarita Davis

Over and over again, owners and overseers of cranberry bogs pronounce the Cape Verde, whether he picks by hand, scoop or snap, the very best harvester of cranberries on the Cape Cod bogs.

Albert Jenks, anthropologist, 1924

I can look at the cranberries, yes, but not eat them. It's their color that's sweet when the pink beads and candied crimson pebbles tumble into their wooden boxes.

If you buy your own land, in three to five years, you can harvest a full crop. In three years, I'll be in Fogo again, telling my sobrinhos stories of the bog.

Not about arthritis snapping my hips and ankles as I crouch in the dewy dawn, or the skin splitting my hand as I reach from the cold, dry air into the wet vines.

I'll bring back different stories, American clothes, and a handful of cranberries for each child. I'll laugh when they spit the bitter flesh back into their hands.

When their faces gather, scattered brown layers eclipsing each other, I'll tell how here parents picked and scooped and told the children stories of Nho Lobo, the lazy wolf.

And how women picked too. Mothers in wide brimmed hats stained their dresses while kneeling on crushed leaves and cranberries hidden in the wet bogs, teaching

the children those old Cape Verdean songs: the one about the rooster who longs for his youth, and wishes he could fly. And how the children helped, too,

stumbling under the awkward shape of empty wooden crates, gray and bigger than themselves and brought them to their parents, bent in the bogs.

I'll tell them about autumn tumbling behind boxes of cranberries set at the edge of the fields, and how the end of the day would fall from the hills with a quiet fire

of trees like narrow volcanoes exploding orange and yellow leaves. The evenings folded with the smell of burning wood, and colors collapsed into the sunset.

And all through September and October and November, late into every Saturday night, we sang along with the accordions and mandolins in the cabins by the bogs.

The workers danced, and the children took warm bread with cranberry jam from their mothers' rough hands, hands torn by the berries' vine and stained red beneath the nail..

Work on the bog is work that makes you feel old. Old enough to wonder how you are still bending your back over another man's crops, not your own.

My scoop snaps across the vines' twigs. The money comes slowly, but it comes. Boxes stand stacked, bulging with berries. If the picking is good this year, and next,

I'll bring back an aching armload of stories and bloody berries from the fiery fields of this other Cape to the brown faces in the beige mountains of Fogo.

Alone in Plymouth

Jarita Davis

for those few Cape Verdeans who became owners in the southeastern Massachusetts cranberry industry in the 1930s

What kept you in the bogs, Domingo
when the other crioles left the shanties
at the edge of the cranberry fields
each brittle November to return
to Fogo with gifts wrapped in pretty boxes
for girls they'd loved in their youth? Didn't you
have sisters or grandparents or these dreams
to go back to, or were they lost in the famine?
Did word from Fogo say the girl you left
had married another? Alone in Plymouth

you tended bogs as they iced, then thawed
then reddened into summer
on land you'd bought where pickers came
to you each fall, as if returning home.

Jarita Davis is a poet and fiction writer who earned a B.A. in classics from Brown University and both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in creative writing from the University of Louisiana, Lafayette. She was recently the writer in residence at the Nantucket Historical Association. Her project called *There Should Be More Water* is a cycle of poems that focuses upon Cape Verdean and Cape Verdean-American culture. These poems, which are both narrative and lyrical, present a romantic sense of longing, nostalgia, and quiet reflection. The Falmouth Historical Society featured some of Jarita's poems in their 2009 *Living Off The Land* exhibition, and Jarita taught a poetry workshop at the Falmouth and Woods Hole libraries in the winter of 2009. She works at NOAA Fisheries in Woods Hole and lives in West Falmouth.