**His Kind of Vegetation**

David Mathews

“Your hand, sir, it’s bleeding.”

“No, no, it’s the juice. It’s alright.” The old man, on tiptoe, is picking blackberries at the side of the path. His right hand stretches high, his left holds a plastic bowl half full of the dark, shining fruit he has gleaned from the first few yards of bramble bushes.

He stops picking to turn and speak to the woman showing concern for him. In contrast to his jeans and faded checked shirt, her outfit is classy in toning greys; she is on her way to some occasion this August evening. She’s in her early twenties, if it matters.

Behind the brambles, a fence, a high bank, and the railway line. A local train passes, its diesel motors straining on the gradient.

“It could have been blood,” the old man says, after a pause for the noise of the train. “Could have been, with all these prickles. My hand has quite a few holes by the time I’ve picked what I need. My wife calls it my annual self-harm.”

“There are some outside my window,” the woman says. “They were green for weeks, then last week red, and now many are black. I didn’t know if you could eat them. We don’t have these at home. I’ve seen birds take them, but that’s not proof, is it? Are they like mulberries?”

“Try one. But mind your blouse. They’re deadly on clothes.” The old man offers the bowl.

Her long party nails, all blue and pink swirls, make it hard for the woman to pick a single fruit, and by the time she comes away with several, her fingers are as stained by juice as the old man’s. She tips her head back, and drops the fruit in her mouth. “They’re warm,” she says, “from the sun. You don’t have to chew them, just … press … like that … with your tongue and they burst. So sweet. The bits are seeds, yes?”

She takes a few more, then waves her fingers, unsure what to do next.

The old man holds up his right hand, purple-red with juice. He sucks the thumb, then the first and second fingers. He holds up his hand again, spotted with age, but no longer stained. “Voila.”

The woman’s clean-up is more oblique than the old man’s. She licks her fingers side on, twisting her hand, avoiding the nails that gave her the problem with picking up the fruit. Watching, the old man says nothing. “You think my nails are mad?”

“To be fair, you didn’t set out to pick blackberries.”

“It’s my supervisor’s birthday party, so I make an effort. She’s 40, and twitchy – is that the word?”

“A whole forty? Bless the child.”

“You became 40 once. A big deal, surely, all about maturity or something? People make a fuss of you, yes? You felt something … a thing happening?”

“Ironic somethings. Friends gave me tonic pills, and advice on aging, and they asked me if I could see the horizon. The horizon, at 40? You can’t say that to your supervisor; you need to keep her onside. You’re doing a doctorate?”

“I have one year to go, and we write a joint paper on it.”

“Make sure your name goes first. It’s your research, not hers. Mind if I ask … ?”

“Carbon uptake in varieties of beetroot.”

“Really? They’re as purple as my blackberries. It’ll be the sugar, won’t it, the carbon? Sucrose mainly. Loads of carbon in there, we just need somewhere to put it. I grew beetroot as a child, but never liked to eat the things. Here’s a thought. We could pour the sugar down old coal mines.”

“I think my beetroot are dull, compared to your blackberries. Beetroot do as they’re told, stay where you put them. Your blackberries are … are … they misbehave, yes, the bushes? They have a special name, the bushes?”

“Brambles.”

“In the wrong place, they must be a nuisance, and even seem nasty, deliberately. What’s a word for that?”

“Malign. When I was a boy, blackberrying behind the steam engine sheds, a man taught me the word. A poet, Welsh, and a priest. Thomas his name was. He told me he had included blackberries in one or two of his poems, but he’d never celebrated the closeness of brambles and the English railway system. So he wrote me out a few lines about how the Devil, Old Nick, Prince of Darkness came to take against the bushes and the fruit, and tried to put the mockers on them both.”

The woman folds her arms, leans her head to one side. “Are you teasing me? What were the lines?”

“He never published them. And I lost the piece of paper.”

“But I think you remember. You do, don’t you? Come on.”

He admits, yes, to learning lines you would expect a small boy in those more innocent days to enjoy reciting to maiden aunts, when his mother was not there to restrain him. Once, to a vicar, who grew as red as, it must be said, a beetroot.

*The Prince derailed the train,*

*and alighted. Smug from sabotage,*

*he snagged his careless buttocks*

*on a trackside bramble.*

*He cursed the thorns,*

*but, unruly, they disdained him,*

*prickly and malign. Surely*

*just his kind of vegetation?*

*But no, he took it ill,*

*and riled, pissed on the fruit*

*to foul their flavour.*

*It was late September.*

“I have a little brother. And my sister has a boy and a girl. Would you say it again for the phone?’

The old man repeats the poem, and the woman photographs him, the brambles, the bowl of fruit and another train, all in one.

“Would you like to have coffee tomorrow?”

Which of them asks? Does it matter? Eight years later, as a new professor, the woman will read the poem at the old man’s funeral, to happy laughter.