

White Ptarmigan

It's too late in the year for blueberries.
Sitting on haunches, the girl scrounges
among red-tipped leaves, brittle stalks.
Finds three shriveled berries. Pluck.
Plops them in her tin can.

When the gun goes off, her head pops up.
Berries bounce out and are forgotten
as she runs through prickly shrubs and mosses
to stand next to her brother.

Their grandfather turns the bird
belly-up, feathered feet towards him.
Spreads and steps on wings, nestles the body
between two rubber boots.
Thumb and forefinger firm, the head pops off
like a dandelion blossom. Dangles a bright red string.
Bare hands hold the feet together. A swift yank.
The rip of fabric, the crack of wings.
Out slips the meat. Clean
as a store-bought chicken breast, bone-in.
A tiny heart still beating.

Her brother wraps the meat in plastic.
He flaunts it like a trophy while the girl
stoops to look at feathers. An intricate mix
of browns, reds, greys. Ripples of white.
The solid black of the tail.
Her grandfather tells her: the willow grouse
turns white in the winter.
She fills the tin can and dreams at night
of an angel bird. Checks the feathers until spring.

Dana Evely