

Susan Ludvigson

The Man Who Brought The Gypsy Moth

I, Leopold Trouvelot, am guilty,
 though I meant no crime, and could not imagine
 the apple, basswood, poplar and willow
 gone, had not foreseen the loss of hawthorne
 and sassafras. Only the butternut
 still stands in my old field, a sentinel,
 and a single dogwood sighs near the house
 we had to leave. My Boston neighbors believed
 I was sent by the devil, but it isn't so.
 No god, either. I alone am responsible.

I saw silk in my dreams, flowing blue silk
 wrapped twice round Marie, trailing her down
 the stairs like water. *To make silk*, I thought,
more perfect than petals.
 I remember Marie in the yard after dinner,
 her long hair wound at the base of her neck
 like a rose. She loved the grape arbor
 and that white clapboard house
 so different from our cottage back home.
 She was happy, and I, with my secret project,
 rejoiced.

But in May, the white flowers on the shadbush
 opened, the oak leaves unfurled,
 and my small friends betrayed me.
 As the air got warmer,
 the town began to fill with black worms
 blown tree to tree on the strands they'd spun,
 and in weeks most all the leaves disappeared.
 Not even Paris green deterred them.
 One woman we knew scraped worms
 from the sides of her house
 and into a pan, poured kerosene over and set them
 on fire. All day long she did this, weeping.

Even here in France I can't forget.
Those caterpillars with red and blue warts
became the most hated sight in New England—
next to me. In my nightmares, oak leaves turn
in an instant to excrement. Yet sometimes I still dream
of innocent moths that float through my nights
like cherry blossoms, of incredible silk
lovely as Marie.