

Mule

by John Riley

Sometimes cats had to die or dogs
and the pigs slaughtered every year
at the first sign of winter and once
a mule was led away to be, I was told,
turned into low-grade dog food.

The old man who told me this liked to tell me such things
because he knew I slept fitfully and dreamed
about the death of everyone I wanted to love
and that this fear kept me from loving him
or loving anyone else.

I remember the mule's name but that I won't share
and that he had almost died two years before
from eating too much clover when he escaped
the dull electric fence and wandered through the woods
until he made himself at home beneath bright trees
beside the creek and ate until his stomach swelled
with gas and the old man tried healing him
until the mule fell asleep with his head in his lap,
there beneath the full summer trees
beside the creek that poured itself into the river
a mile downstream.

