

What We Had to Do

(for Mary Graves, survivor, Donner Pass, 1847)

(1)

He said he'd never mention what we had to do,
but I see him watching me in the kitchen,
always asking what's in the pot before he tastes it.
And the children, who have no reason to wonder,
look at me warily over their bowls,
spoons clutched in baby-fat fists.
What they don't understand, will never know,
is that it's all food, everything—trees, oxen, grass, leather—
the only question is what you're willing to eat.

(2)

They have wandered away from their food again,
and I fight down my rage, trying not to begrudge
their chubby legs, their dimpled hands.
I've spent years watching each bite greedily,
counting the drops and spills cleaned from the table,
loading full platters onto the groaning sideboard
and reciting the prayer for the dead under my breath.
Meals are such petty funerals.

Kel Munger