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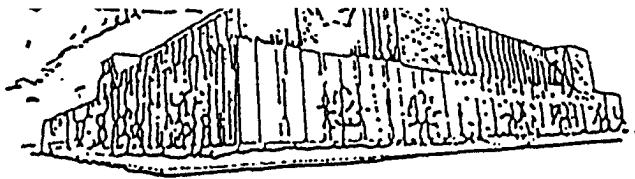
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Bright Absentee

by

Melissa Kwasny

B.A. The University of Montana, 1977

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

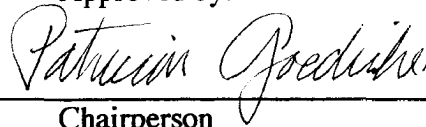
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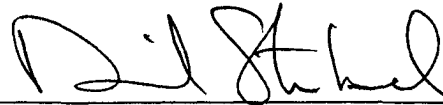
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Nimrod: “Rose Hip,” “Laurel,” “Willow,” “Balsom,” “Hawthorn,” and “Rue”

Poetry Northwest: “White Clover,” “Juniper,” and “Tree Lichen”

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Bright Absentee

I tend my flowers for thee—
Bright Absentee!
My Fushia's Coral Seams
Rip— while the Sower— dreams—

- Emily Dickinson

I.
Prairie Sage

Prairie Sage

She began her own litany of berries. . .

- Derek Walcott

White-beaded, the raceme
and the pale blue buntings of the leaves—
it is blue and I am smeared with it,
dried in north light.
It is a ghost-bundle, bleached
like the light, not entirely. There is often
shade to hide in, the oblong cast
beyond the canyon where the ferns grow.
The snow-seams are blue,
and the underwings of the swan,
or the spring sky so dull that color vanishes.
Invisible, the chime of waxwings.
How can I compare?
When I do, I am found wanting, inglorious.
Claw-footed and torn like the bird
from its roots, the stems are
featherless, tissue-wrapped, archival.
What bride would carry this,
so delicate in its drying, in its almost-color.
From which I tear scraps,
small as sentences. Crisp and crumble,
the sharp inland smell, a menthol
used for purification. For years
I have picked at it, its upside-down haze.
A woman's impotence
is not what we speak of.
But here it is, dogged, invested with swirl.
To burn. To make ourselves worthy.
Not worthy yet to the wildly unprecedented,
the flight of starlings or these stars,
clustered on an ashen stem, this sage

come smoking down. Listen,
the aspen make a soft row by the river.
They were deranged by the winter.
See the mess they've made of growth.
A bouquet? A bride's bouquet?
Eve and all she knows. Subjugated,
and now I search for her.
Doubt, so I can dream of her.
As lackluster. Frenzied.
The blue lobes curled in. What then?
Rinse as water rinses through the stones.
Add dry straw to the putrid.
The pale blue necks collapse in the heat.
Their smoke will be my smoke.

Mountain Bluebell

In seeps near the mud-hatch,
the dark wet suits
of alder, insect legs
like staples through each blade.

Everything warns against approach,
the thistle, the shadow,
the moss-pelt on the step-stones.

Slump-shouldered and ragged
in the sway of benediction,
this hue
I can just make out in the shade.

What a damp life, gone too quick,
—and too uncomfortable—
just for a dram of loose teeth.

They are pebbles meant to fall,
these petals,
death-bent, imperfect.
Are all plants this effeminate?

Like butterflies, the leaves
cling to their stalk
to dry the rain-pinched wings.

If you have bells, then ring, heart
of the overcast,
bog-god of the bitter.
I've learned to duck to hear you.

Multiflora Rose

Half-seen is only half-understood.
Show your trembling,
your madness. We are profligate,
and too wild for a bride.

Cloudy gatherings. In our mind,
faint sympathy
for those on display in gardens.
We grow rapacious, pale
between the pastures and the rain.

If the sun had scent, it would be
this prodigious, clean,
and the world who searched,
hungry as the bees, would stop.

Feather-dropped, drifting from our
origin as hedge, as turn-
of-the-century fence for cattle,
we grow quick,
tangled beyond all intentions.

They call us noxious, their beautiful
scourge. They say
that nothing else will grow here.
We have no defense except to open.

Rue

Who will accompany me to the roots
of my sadness
which dangle like cutworms, like angel hair?

Men won't get close to it. Something
too heavy-handed.
The lids. The stoop. The clothes too large.

But the women are tender. They recognize
my face, a moon
that erases itself as it travels. They feed me

rice, light as moth wings, the yellowed toes
of garlic. They send me
home with hummus, and cuttings of rue.

I remark on its prettiness, but I don't know
what to do with it.
Witch's herb, they say, antidote for poison.

So, what do they think? That my father
molested me? That my mother
thrust an unbent hanger into her womb?

Who knows about those years when
anything could happen?
The milk spills in the grass, open to infection.

Carry something light, they say, a leaf
like a child's mitt, the shape
Matisse cut out when he was too old to paint.

(stanza break)

Handmaiden. Sister to the vetch. I should
tuck it behind my ear.

A string of lakes, the estuary of its stem.

I should carry it with me down the slick,
black steps of memory
at night when water rises, slow as in a dirge.

Tiny, smug. But what if there isn't any poison,
if I can't see
what has happened? What if it's my fault?

Yarrow

Filament. Less than a footstep.

What are you
next to the cave,
the barrel-chest of the heart?

Think of what can make me cry,
adult as I am now,
what the dead
have with which to reprove me.

Froth. Nerve flower.
The inconsistency of my intent.
No one trusts
anything but the largest shadows.

If I take the fragrant, open pouch
of your hand, who will know me
without my wounds?
And how will I recognize myself?

Though I want to be like you, fresh,
a swathe of healing,
tender with the knowledge
that each day comes to me, astir

with heat or rain—I am mud.
Your company. Your interference.
While you are green
pillowed under the skin of apples.

(stanza break)

Look, I didn't try to find you.
You were silver-stemmed like stars,
divaricate,
and called from the dark ground.

Not to cure sadness, but to find it.
To close the raw throat.
We are different. They
could never make you hate yourself.

Comfrey

Remember your porosity,
that you are all skin.
Be floppy,
ostentatious in your spread.

Uncrease yourself. The morning
sun is on your back,
the small chopped threads
you can knit later into a life.

Remember that there is time,
and not to force the breath,
the catch in the heart, the panic.
Say, despite all, it is safe here.

Your job is to exchange the large
wide hands, laid out
to catch every spill of light,
for the good of the bald, pale root.

Dumb it will sit with its glittering
prize, a miser in the kitchen,
until it returns you to us, yellow-
veined, triumphant, shuffling

your gifts between earth and sky.
Over-starched, blue collars,
even dried, be hard
to crumble. Hold that muscle.

Mullein

Soft as the deaf, as tightly
budded, even my name hides
under the tongue, burrows
into the ear like an infection.

Mallow. Cob. I am host
with a hundred ears. What is
here feeds, golden and small,
unable to fly away from me.

Still here in the stair-step fall
of light, I am
infiltrated with aphids and ants
that stick to the glue of my veins.

No one takes what life offers
gladly. Too common to thrive
by the roadside, soft as the roadside
dust that covers us, and thus,

get the poison meant for others—
the noxious, the invasive,
meaning your fear of cancer.
To thrive, you say, is monstrous.

Who can blame me that I prefer
poor soil, as if I asked
for rolled oats without milk
in this land afraid of plenty.

(stanza break)

How long can one stay angry?
I rise out of the green
and obscure, a flamboyant stalk,
muscled, a landmark in the field.

Look around you. You will see
the brown shells of my last resistance.
Immune to what?
I am soft as exhaustion, soft as ash.

Kinnikinnick

Brush it aside, the pock and hush
from its headlong dive,
this snow from pine needles into snow:
Bearberries. That small red choir.

If you find them, it is only because
you have memorized
where leaves, small and shaped
like tears, spread between the granite.

Kick it back. The powdered moon.
Light no fires. In every
room, part the curtains, and if
you have a lover, notice how she ages.

Down with the crushable, where bear,
master herbalist,
claws for her fruits, the well-
wrought and plum trails of the stems.

Everything has its hole, its cave
for concealment.
Except timothy, the blond heads
high above plumes of red and pink—

You dreamt their cry, and closer, this:
Cello. Wormwood. Low.
Who would expect green in the middle
of grief? The grandmother is dying.

Who would think to bring a sprig from
a language few speak now?
Kinnikinnick.
That which is to be mixed with the bitter.

Tree Lichen

You. What I pick from my clothes.
The last shreds of disaster.
The soap-blue splat of kingdom come.

What I have left on the line, a frayed
thread caught on the jagged nail,
the forgotten hose swollen with ice.

Spineless. You are stemmy and dry
as the teased hair of women.
Creekside, when your chartreuse tangles.

To survive on so little, the vertical
soil of bark, and snow to suck
where it lands. You take no chances,

but lean out some to catch the light,
splayed like a cell only this
is your body, simple, a sea-blue caulk

to fill the seams, a certain height which
you have mustered.
How quickly it can all unravel, a cricket

caught by winter. Better to hunker
flat against the host,
to be so slow, outside, and still alive.

(stanza break)

No one is looking for you, a growth
on dead limbs, stiff
and wadded like a frozen, ruffled dress.

Rootless, stemless, flowerless. What
holds you on is fear. You do
what you have always done. What is left.

White Clover

To cleave in all its forms. Cleft,
cloven. Toe-flowers,
the raffle of soft white thorns.

If there are involuntary muscles
in the claws of these birds
to keep them perched while they

sleep, what is involuntary in me?
Breath, the heart,
maybe this impulse to do nothing

but watch. How hard can it be
to enjoy your life,
to lie down in the mussed green

bed of the senses, this rag garden,
the triumvirate leaves.

In clover. You can't just live here

like a swarm of faint-hearted bees,
clogged with emotion.

But really, what is there to do?

Lost days of summer when I produce
nothing but self-complaint:

To be pure is to believe in the search

for your own goodness, pulling each
petal like meat from

between the teeth. Will it be sweet?

Water Birch

Under the lapsed stitch of birch bark,
bronze-dark as oil,
under the inner bark I split
to steep the white pith for my tea—

look up. My gold luck has turned
to rags. I can see the sun
on three hands now, each with
saw-toothed rays, spots from frost.

So painterly, these daubs. The limbs
so thin. A vine maybe
of earth-sparks that float, a fire
that's stirred, or boils that erupt in air.

Forgive me, I have forgotten the grace
of this season, its complications,
how the earth mounds
over the suckling roots, the grass spills

so easily into beds. How my weight
is accepted among the sallows.
Pathos. Melodrama.
How I am known for my indulgences.

Wind arrives through thistle, the blush
and green rye. It is true
that it seems to come in footsteps.
And to say the hardest things quietly.

II.
Laurel

Egyptian Walking Onion

Deviant. At last, we have come to you
after a summer of the delicate:
arugula, cilantro, the bib-leafed lettuces.

Folded over the withered peas, carrots
raw-scalped from frost,
the belts of your contortions remain green.

You were the first thin plumes of spring,
so much of what
was to be expected, straight shot to the sun.

But then came your maturity, so odd we
were afraid to touch you,
when you grew the sperm-shaped, the six-

bulbed stars and exposed those bulbs to air.
To say you flaunted them would be
not too extreme. You, the family curiosity.

You wear the tail-feathers of a poppycock,
party hat of a Venetian,
with green, pink and wood-pale streamers.

Lost, we say, in the gyrations that walked
you here from sands,
and slaves — your petals their favorite meat.

Admit it. You revel in your mutancy.
You stretch, fail,
and drop, weighted by your eccentricities,

(stanza break)

ancient as murder, yet harmless. Why
does it still shock us—
flamboyance as cause for your resurrection?

Horsetail

Through snow-pock up, through sludge,
through basket-dim the loom-slits shining,
a patch of rush under the fir.
The alder skin stretched tight, polished.
Up through bronze root,
contraction, the cacophony of melt.
All soul, in the basin
near the lap and shore of ice. The oldest
anchorite. Up through the buried
before there was a time, the knowing
from the inside out.
Hollow and stemmed, sterile, alive—
the tender brown spores come first.
Before female, male,
they collude in new heat. Breakersplat,
barely shoot, and are moored.
Not gods, which we must blaspheme,
they are close-hatched, cerebral.
Every time they close their eyes,
they go to sleep. Onions
make them drawsy and winter is
the largest one, layer on layer,
earth wrapped in its yellow skin.
All the dead yellow then, yarrow
and mullein. The ice cracks, when it cracks,
snaking fast across its shield.
Dusty with rag-life, the interior mood,
they lie on the floor, sour from waiting.
Our dear near-fish, for it is from there
they have climbed back,
slipping off the bank into sleep again.

(no stanza break)

The moon's horns face left.

That means they are growing,
caught in the folds of the stream.

If spring is a pardon, the horsetails accept it,
its surface intrusion, its blackmail.

Laurel

Filled with the voices of the first
and lesser gods—bay laurel, rose hip,
star—I have grown a third sex,
for which I am thrown
drunk against the world's walls.
Shiny and lost, far from the Aegean,
if there is green fallen into the pool,
I will go to it, half-believing,
as if anything could grow in this cold—
cress, or the white flower
of some sprig a deer descending
has scuffed from its hooves. Not so.
The pond is rimmed with
stretch marks of ice. The snow
is a tourniquet over the watering,
and this, only the needles of fir.
Yes, I overreact to every
condemnation. I was rude to your god
but he is well past his prime.
If I come to the clearing
and find what you have left for him,
on the stump of a tree you felled,
I will steal it for the waxwings,
the eggs for the ravens, the berries
black, wrinkled like frozen thumbs.
If sin is a prophesy,
it is a leaf between my teeth.
In women, they often call this nerves.

Willow

A sibyl, her body wracked by the god's voice
entering, bounces
off the walls of the cave, her mouth splintered.

I am the shape of a woman's madness, and
the exorcism of that madness.
I am a fountain frozen into pewter and stone.

I will tell you what I know. There are no words
for my transgressions, only the space
between the leaving of one god for another,

a male for a female, fraught with fear. But I
have passed it. I am the shape
your fingers draw when they circle for an opening,

a mow of half-dead twigs, fallow and new green.
Hell is what I make of it,
the twisting away from what must be accepted

until my limbs turn muffled, censorious, gray.
You call this decay, but what is it really?
I am the shape of hysteria, a hollowed-out home

for mold, the sea-blue froth of lichen. Sit with me
awhile. You, too, are growing old.
What if the sibyl called the voice of god her own?

By now, we both know that winter will be back.
The white geese will orbit without ruse.
And still, these new shoots, like snakes rising

(stanza break)

on end, like bronze flames there to consume me.
Is it me? The sound of the water
is rarefied, near. The bright irritation of buds.

Balsam

Go, with all your dead, crying
for the broken, crow-voiced,
rigorous, the clatter-trap
of the young. May you bargain
clandestinely, provoke a wide
chastity, eat maple cakes,
or ride ox-carts if you want.
You can't use me for your prayers.
I will sit here, on my thatch
of sweet needles, inside
the unglazed curve of my arms.
Here, with all I've gathered,
the pink and the bisque,
from the dark criss-crossing
of my childhood among forests.
There are no corners
in this suffering. I grow my hair
with its soot and its tangles,
but I start out with earnestness.
Yes, I dismantled the charm.
I took the turquoise ring and dangled
it from my ear before I lost it.
The white rocks from the dream
I scattered. For years, only mud,
the oily black feathers on the trail.
Convince me there is happiness.
Not you. Not you. The gods line up
with their badly built temples,
one father after another. Shadows
between trunks on the ridge.
What a relief it used to be, to feel
their gold eyes on me.

(no stanza break)

Green slash of the world. Water
in shade, the smell of stewing
lemons. I promise: I will begin
not with the false joy of Christmas,
but with my senses, the smoke
of my breath after the kiss,
the one where I am left alone again.

Juniper

Suppliant, low-lying, as if their arms
hugged the knees of some host,
their backs, the piss-green tatter of winds—

Who will recognize them? The wooden spears
of their spines stiffen with sap,
atrophy. They are evergreen, slow-ripening,

yielding only a few berries at a time. Hard,
dark, the nipples of some god we
dare not pluck. Not pure. Pure is undivided.

What part do they hide from the sun? The blue
blaze on their palms they show
to the soil, some strange kind of reversal.

Astringent, adversarial. They persist in the evil
of grappling. Rejection and praise.
The small retractions we have learned to call sin.

Daphne, the ancients say, turned into a bay tree
to escape the rape of Apollo.
And Leda? Old school. To be taken unaware.

But to fall back as if expecting someone there
to catch you, to be a raft in a great river?
It's not I who calls this blasphemous. Just that lust

in a woman is so very unexpected. Bitter-fresh,
intoxicant, the berries blue with age.
They are trying to make incense of themselves.

Horsemint

Junction. The mud is black-jowled.
Wild geranium, the wick

of fireweed gone to froth.
Strewn, the evangelical spread

of alder leaf, the riparian ash,
all the yellow spades of aspen.

Horsemint, umbel of the hemlock,
poisonous. Now past their prime,

the brick-eyed and green bottle-
flies shine like car fenders.

No, it is never enough to name
what we love, the whorl

of the cup, enjambent of the current.
They slip through our lands,

tarrying at the doors to speak in tongues.
Here, a constellation will hold

together by the merest string and tackle.
A measure of my lust, I ask for more.

Fern

Seep, and hollow, I have entered the folds
where the smoke from my fire draws the low clouds to it,
where the waters pick and pick at the black roots of alder,
the tea-dark into which the springs slide.

They slide over the crab-legged stems of winter willow,
between snowberries — corn-shaped — the blackbirds
fish the air for, the blossom of coyote track
pressed into snow, and these fine finger-bones of bracken.

The frozen earth denies. Everywhere, signs of molting.
Mulch-light, the maiden hair is choking the rivulets.
Henna, their curls. This could be the rites
of a hundred shorn women, or the site of their slaying.

We are told that it was beautiful when Ophelia
was drowning, her hair lavish as a fever over the cool beds.
Moon-bream, she rose and sunk under the weight
of the alluvial. The urge for another life that pressed upon her.

To surrender is not grace. But to move without impediment?
The earth here is cold, and reluctant.
Nowhere else in the world did the world match her singing
or her stress. Ice-fronds. Foilage. The ferns into currents.

Though she suffered for love, Ophelia did not resurrect
the red-haired disaster of winter sleeping.
Therefore, we grow up in a fiction of limits, not possibilities.
No Jesus, this. To think she did not have a god behind her.

(stanza break)

Here is a god, in its particular uncurling, and these waters
which freeze and quicken in response to the sun.
There is the loud lap and snort of an animal trapped under ice.
There is a woman's veil shrunk to a religion of brown.

I turn back, return. There is still-green among the dying,
two bracken fans—brilliant—dip their fins into the stream.
This is their season among many seasons,
pool into pool, how their strength will drown into them.

Nightshade

Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kissed
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine

- John Keats

In the small hours, here is something I can eat
with which I am familiar, perfume
of wood and fruit, the elasticity of plums.
Each berry is crimson and tainted as the blood.
What else could I pack to take with me?
The year is closing. The slumped marsh grasses
are yellow with the twilight the hunters
seem to love, when the animals must stand still
to be saved. Chill is the falling through
the flood-dam of the bank. Chill is the sun
as I stare and it stares, so weakened that we don't
turn away. There is bear scat everywhere,
the huge brown logs seeded with pits—
I am weaning myself of the world's excess.
My lips split in the night and stain the white sheets.
I am being called to the religious order
of the leaves. What should I wear? I rub the dirt
from my clothes, my papery clothes turning gray.
These exits are always frantic, and habitual.
There's always a mistake and I am the one
who makes it. I look back. The fruit is red. And I eat.
Later, I must account for the clots on the trail.
I must call the changes winds,
and hide my hands which smell of vineyards.
Twice now, I have seen the nightshade
growing in the wastes, or by the farm yard gate,
and plucked it. It is hard not to think
there will be other women in Hades, pushed

like seeds into the darkness
until the darkness softens into what is light.
We will fail that, too.
Stripped of the berries, the wooden stems rise
in tier after tier, their star-seats wooden,
and vanquished. And our flesh
will brighten the thrones we are ripped from.

Salsify

born in the infinite disorder of prayers

- Andre Breton

We are undisciplined, of the smaller mind,
the white sun multiplied and gone to seed.
Wind, raise us up
like china plates from the suds.
Raise us up with your ideas of rinsing.
The tiny purple grains trail
from shocks of timothy. Breastfeathers
are plucked from the thistle.
And our strange globes, each
isolate, appear,
not overnight like dandelions in the field.
The trees are perfect. They remember
their color, the correct order of its will.
The black birch turns butter and lingers,
the alder blackens and curls.
Then, one cloud tears itself from the southeast
and here, the others follow.
In sleep, small birds will tighten
their claws on the limb
and drift, leaving their bodies to this world.
The fish dreams, a steadying
out of the current. No one talks of control.
We are the palest blond lashes
escaped from the eye.
Perhaps we will see the bird in its dreaming.
Perhaps aeries will fall from their cliffs
and go sailing like an invitation to nest.
All things that fly, and this air
is full of our dismantling,
the bone-light, this loving not-to-be-calm.

(no stanza break)

Once, we were yellow, emblematic,
marked by the black slivers of our seeds.
To get from that to this,
we must be unafraid
of the small expansions of emptiness,
those that billow, knot, and take the rack.
Who are we? We are a collection
of old sayings, all with the same message:
Detach. Detach, feel the tug at your scalp.
A yardlight glows from the top
of its stalk and finds its way
into the darkest crooks of the field.
What do we know of the imminent good?
We have feathers
and the rough-scaled anchor of our seeds.
Seeds? Not now. Bless this time
when we desist, apostate and distracted,
eluding the rough edges of our end.

III.
Rose Hip

The vegetative universe opens like a flower from the earth's centre
In which is Eternity. It expands in stars to the mundane shell
And there it meets Eternity again, both within and without.

- William Blake

The career of flowers differs from ours only in audibleness.

- from the letters of Emily Dickinson

Rosemary

Once, a dark woman fled past me
and in her haste, dropped her cloak.
It was azure. And it
has stained my white fingers forever.

Once, the jewel I clutched to my belly
had shape. It was sharp-edged
like a star. It caught my father's
words, every coarse thread of cruelty.

Though I have lived invisible before,
a briar wood, a background
tangle of green—
If anything, I want you to remember me.

Crush me. I am susceptible to the
slightest storm, to anyone
who has the nerve to call me beautiful.

Once, I was dry as a stem, the flaming
shape of cypress. I nursed
my neglect. There was an oil to it,
too sharp to call a mother's perfume.

The milk was not hers. It was your
milk that I was promised.
Children will grow too large
to be held, and we will leave them.

Here, invite me. Fragrant and bitter,
I will cling to your tongue.
Camphor. Tobacco. Sea cast with salt.

(stanza break)

Once, I was private, exotic, disinherited
from sweetness.

Once, I held a certain beauty, stoppered.

I was planted and I was left to my own
to grow pungent, repellent.

No matter how

old you are, I am too grown up for you.

Evergreen. Constancy. Lie down in my
sharp bed. I will be sad
when you are not with me as you are now.

Jasmine

Bring me something rare. What seas are here
are frozen. A fume to force the bud of my heart.

My heels are scraps. All my friends' mothers
are dying. The trough is narrow and I sleep in it.

Relax. I ask for nothing dangerous. Pink tips
and lacquer, the small green worm of a tongue.

Jasmine. It is the white-flocked hem of a secret lifted,
a confidence breached, packed into its sleek dress,

the one that darkens before it opens. A frill, a frock,
a subterfuge, the wound rain makes in the snow.

Look, I don't know what love is, or what damage
it has done to women. Red lips painted to look like labia.

Love as *not that*. Then what? The petals I ask for
are tender, opaque, doused in the clay of their perfume.

What they are is what I want from you. Heliotropic.
Disrupt me with the shower of your lavish nerve.

Mountain Holly

My use, my name —
How can it matter? I am small,
thorned, and dry as your heels.

The frozen water pools where
motion has bled through,
but I, like you, have retreated.

Flat against the cool, turned cheek
of earth. The drain
of volatile oils and perfume.

Did we call it on ourselves, the soft
blue drag, to wish
instead of ask? Wish instead of do?

And sleep, that marrow, the mind
shrunk back. The rusted
green thumbs that show our age.

What is courage to you? Shallow
and transfixed,
I cling to the rhizome of what you

would call my life, misled, random,
even sloppy. Here,
take my hand. I want you to tug me

up slowly, through the brown cloth
of our own making.
My roots like a chain under snow.

Rose Hip

Red pod of the rose hip, jellied from cold.
Inside, the pith-dry nest of white seeds.

It is a deflated balloon, a hood the self is
lost in. Too red, the nurse says,

having sex must be hard for you. This is not
a scab. Though it is plumped, not sweet,

it is still the first mind that spring returns to.
Green fume around the stems, the dark

pink folds that will bleach in their unraveling—
It is too early to commit to anything.

Yes, I remember the bloom, when each day
seemed contrived for my growing,

the gloss of new skies, the crowding of water.
What is hidden came to feed from my hand.

How is it I grew afraid of my pink swish
and gather, how soft my skin could become?

The rose twigs are brightening, hung with
white tufts from deer who dare too close to them.

I am grievous with complaint. I am faithless
and sore. It is as if my own hands fell away.

Hawthorn

Not May, its musk and bloom. The orchard clings
to burgundy, a russet waste. The packed
soil underneath where cattle, deer sought shade,
is now a rude, abandoned hut that brings
no rest. Misplaced and cool, this fold of earth.
Misplaced the gestures hands will make, collecting
water. The summer flowers are extreme,
a scorch of white. This draught of limbs, this berth
of thorns where I steer clear of you and your
mock chastity. But, look, the birds remain,
off-key, all action. Why? The herbals say
the blue-black haws, their pulp a smear, are for
conditions of the heart. The tortured stem
is sacrament. And I should swallow them.

Moss

Under each lip,
 in the cranny, the crawl,
the mosses grow overt, triumphant.
There is nothing to hide,
 white bristle, beard,
the intimacy with which they regard
water. Claw-shaped between rains,
 they rain upward,
overcoming the stumps, the ruin
 of heartwood.
Burnt umber: softening of the dead.
Soft beasts, they feed on excrement,
 sopping up the clear
eruption of the springs. With open
mouths, they drink from the cracked
 vault of winter.
Claiming it, they claim absolution.
 Dark sludge, this jasper
that doesn't stain the skin, the release
of the tiny gray moths.
 Parasitic? Yes.
There is a tenderness that comes.
Words we use: to cushion, to cling.

Tobacco

How can you not want me,
the dark syrup I offer—
or this smoke rising harsh
from the body in l's and s's
like sketches made in charcoal?
Milton said the angels catch
our desire in their vases, unstopping
the corks for the god to smell.
Brown grains, gilt-edged, the flavor
of cognac—say the word.
And I will call them all back to you.
I know I am pernicious, a secret
blown into the ear, something
sacred gotten into the wrong hands.
A pinch, a leaf turned to parchment.
In the beginning, was exchange.
There was a lack. I sought to fill it.
So, why now the admonitions?
According to Milton, Eve had
everything she could think to want,
the perfect lover, fruit in season,
a stable home. Then, imagine her
reaching forward, then back.
The feeling must have been exquisite.

Chokecherries

The Crow call this time of year the Black Cherry Moon
when the rose hips are blood-bright,
spattered on their overwrought stems, and the creek
calls so clearly in words almost our own
as we come sliding down the bank.
Last night, we covered the gardens in plastic.
The chickadees were back after their wide diet of summer.
We ate the last trout, its spine curved from disease.
So much can go wrong, I want to know
what you will promise me as our hands reach in and in
through the copper, the carmine leaves.
I know you are lonely, alone with your grief
for your parents who are not my parents, for your life,
which, despite all, is not my life. The cherries
are thick here, hanging in clusters, purple-black from frost.
It has started to rain and I am chilled by it.
Each day, we promise, we will talk of our fears
of intimacy, how we still expect to be hurt when we love.
You bring me a coat from the back of the truck,
but I want to stop our task now, to sit in the cab
of the truck while the gray spills, slick with thunder.
What if I kissed you there in depth.
After so many years, I can misunderstand the difference
between instinct and obligation, how my hand
continues to grasp the stems. Keats said
poems should come easy as leaves off the trees,
but see how they cling and wrestle with their ties.
And now, the sun shines. It is not this grace
I had imagined. When Keats said poems, I meant
love. The chokecherries roll easily
into my palm, then fall into the plastic bag that binds
my wrist. Over and over, until we have enough,
until our fingers are bruised with their dark juices.

Thistle

Unrequited. That story.
Allure from the bramble. Like these petals
packed tight within the thorned
body of a flower until
their pink is compressed into fuchsia.
Royal and fly-strewn,
the thistles hang their bright heads,
a banner among the sage, the browning
grasses. Look, *the paired butterflies
are already yellow with August.*
The honey scent is grained with loam.
They hurt me, the poet writes. *I grow older.*
Thistle, then thistle,
the stalks crowd the disturbed ground.
There is an apiary atop their spindling.
Nothing I could walk through.
Nothing I could approach
without my own brand of violence.
Look at us. Each day, we grow more distant,
not touching, toward our own graves.
Is it not a lack of love, your ploy
and resistance? The flower is unguarded
when open. Yet, the leaves
and stem are fenced. Yes, I resent,
and you? We learn to live with less
and less amid the click and fizz of hoppers.

Icelandic Poppies

All summer, the poppies held sway in my kitchen garden,
magisterial and tall, a smear of melon.

They were rare gods I tamed, their four tongues
spread wide, each tongue stroked with a brush of violet.
Those were the last days, their tent flaps
still open for the southern winds that swept through camp.
They were so fragile they would shake in my hands.

My friend from San Francisco had dyed his black hair
yellow. He was bronze, and wrapped
in an orange beach towel, his lover David in dark blue.
They were flowers, too, and I adored their adorations
of each other, how they leaned,
and kissed poolside, as if magnetized by the sun.

Now, one by one, in the shallow rains of late September,
the poppies close. Eventually, they will shatter.
I find their scraps, still fresh, caught on their own
gray-green leaves or brutalized, pressed by rain into the mud.
They are like finding on my footpath
the kill of a tanager or the bruised, soft peels of nectarine.

After the dross of beauty, — their bodies were a sacrament
and they used them as such — what?
The seedheads, frost-blue and shaped like Byzantine cupolas
are rising above the curling, mothy leaves.
The holy kingdom sways in the wind as the petals did.
Its domes are bald and blind, but capped with green stars.

(stanza break)

My friends who were in love have gone back
to their separate cities. They say the summer was an illusion,
due to the narcotic of lust. But wait, I call after them,
to have been *drowsed with the fume of poppies!*
To have been rapt, induced! To have been red chiffon!
The holy kingdom sways in the wind.
I remember their color, as if the heart unlocked itself.

Cattails

The listening I do in winter is simple. I watch you
like a stranger. I watch me.
The ditch wheat shudders like tinsel, a bundled sound.
The day moons appear, bleached and stiffened
into the shape of milkweed pods.
You have hurt me and I have stayed, believing love
to be endurance, back and forth
over the snowcrust until the cattails call out to me.
Stem, pod, seed: they are
the color of sheep, and in this wind, they shatter.

The cattails unravel. Their stuffing unstuffs.
The tight brown pelts split their seams.
My allegiance is vegetable. I am here with the stalk.
It is a distaff, unspinning, the work abandoned.
Unspinning? The seeds
are packed too tightly, a sod-fire without air.
No one guesses the expansion such tightness holds.
My allegiance is ceremonial. I pull
things apart, see how far I can take them past the skin.
And I scare myself then, see those things I never say:

that love has failed, that I am sick of choosing safety.
The cattail down—it lies in a heap,
the transparent brown and visible in its multitude.
I sweep the seeds out the door, onto the frozen ground
where they are tracked in and out by my boots.
I collect and save them, too,
in a red willow basket which reflects my fascination
with the disturbed. Let the drafts in.
Let the seeds find their corners. I will try to name
their color, translucent now. I could pretend this is us

and watch them fend for themselves,
I could choose one seed arbitrarily and let the rest go free.
I could give up my strenuous hold.
Only then, pull me back. Unwrap my summer clothes.
I will see if it is still possible to fit into them.
The cattails grow in the sloughs, where water slides
beneath the cottonwood. The magpies are crying,
offended. This is what I question,
the stems, now stubble, would we find our way here.

Aspen

Hay-moult. The long summer grasses
stiffen with ice.
Under them, cold water goes spindling.

Delicate is not childlike. The madness
in winter trees, limbs
hoary, kinked from their unbraiding.

Lavender. Dusk. And the aspen climb
the watershed, tower
by white tower, a procession of holy days.

Too much goes by to keep an account of.
The chickadees called back
from the tiny flames they tend, tunnels

mice dig under snow. Thrown like ropes,
they loop across my path.
The snow is thin. They are too visible now.

Out of honor, out of ignorance, I tie green
around a branch—
It looks garish, manufactured, in this light—

because the herbals told me. Because I
saw my life was yellow,
shredded, and must be weighted with quartz

to bring it back. Back is the good road,
those overspilling days
when my arms divided and twisted into nests.

(stanza break)

Speechless, the aspen wait until the leaves
will fill their ears again.

There is the clatter now of owl-wings

in the empty, stunted limbs. The ceremonial
year is over. The give-aways begin.

Is the road so thin and grosgrained between us?