

Toward Them

In the meantime, as the world is burning,
before the brink of extinction,
we must take stock.

Ten bushes of *Asclepias tuberosa*, butterfly a-flying-weed,
a citrus-colored singing, an aria along the roadside,
prefer glades and prairies born from rain shadow.

Oh forb, coarse perennial, milkweed-one,
near the longleaf pine habitat, burned
for restoration—you, pleurisy, yearn

for open air, a broken canopy,
and grow in the wake of controlled burn,
seem to thrive when we comb you and try to understand.

Named for what you would kill
or cure—a tea steeped with skunk cabbage
for that pain in the chest,

a hard breath—some colonists later considered you
a panacea after learning
botany from the Menominee people

but instead of truth they learned use:
there wasn't a tobacco offering; there wasn't any singing
to your roots as they dug in a meadow of quiet,

a songless air, hushed and torn radix.
They possessed you like brocades, damask, or scarlet shoes,
used you for flu, colds, fever, diarrhea, nausea
and assorted pulmonary issues.

Was there once a chance to evolve:
the ecstasy of an herbarium,
the euphoria of Thoreau walking clubs?

Learn the names again, say the Latin
from Asclepius, Greek god of healing,
the medicinal, something sacred, *sacren* the obsolete

twelfth-century verb “to make holy” or the Old French
sacrer “to consecrate, anoint, dedicate,” another
act of dominion—it seems to all lead back to this place.

There were those who told us what to love,
who told us of this approach, this encroaching
grief upon our shoulder.

Even at this late hour,
all long asleep, covered in sheets,
we could still wander out to a glen,

near a pine wood;
their orange stars will open one by one—
let’s make our way toward them.

Groundcover

The ground doesn't belong to you but is also yours
in that it's made of your body—
your cells, your pulsing, the things you're remembering

now about your mother folding laundry in the hallway
as you drifted to sleep amidst that dim light.
Perennial, glow-gray, silky-lanate hairs,

so wooly, antispasmodic,
named *wooly woundwort*,
as wound dressing, poultice, antiseptic.

These carpet below, hold the buttoned mass of us.
They're a way to stem bleeding, analgesic,
eared-leaves, wrinkling warm,

not listening, ear-to-ear, the flowers,
sessile, without petiole, closest to the stem.
No distance of a leafstalk to grow away from harm.

We have to come closer.
The cold silver bundles together.
The root is felt by the stem and by the leaf, felt.

Like what a family won't say about death.
To stem, to stanch, to hide one with another.
We follow and are undetected.

Internally, we could steep it
in a tea for fevers, hemorrhaging,
a hidden, inhibited clotting,

weakness of the liver and heart.
Above ground we bend back
into alabaster *stachys byzantina*.

The lamb's ear holds us
for a little while.

operculum terra, Lancaster, 1977