

Summer 1996

Summer Solstice, North Georgia

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SUMMER SOLSTICE, NORTH GEORGIA

by Cathleen Calbert

Oddly, here am I, among the bluets,
blue-eyed grass, chicory, milkweed,
beggar's blanket, velvet plant, witch's candle
(*potent charm against demons,*
love potion too), Quaker rouge,
the may apple, wild mandrake
(*though not a mandrake*),
raccoon berry (*the fruit edible but bitter,*
as are so many things),
the heart-leaf which will save me
from the pains of childbirth
or prevent pregnancy
(*I guess whichever way*
the wind's blowing within my body),
the dandelions, with the blowballs
that can tell you something:
number of lovers or babies (*it varies*),
the buttercup, that crazy weed,
which tells me things I know already:
I love not only butter but all bad things
under the sun (*and this is surely*
what will eventually kill me).
Ah, there are dangers
waiting in the simplest things:
hold the stem against your moon-soaked neck
and you'll go crazy.
It all comes (*as does everything?*)
from a troubled childhood, the singing boy
who fell in love with his own voice
(*how many stories are there on this theme?*)

Should we take the whole thing more seriously?)
 and when the wood nymphs wanted only peace,
 they made him into a flower of yellow and green.
(Isn't this a good idea, really?
Shouldn't this happen to all annoying things?)
 Here's rattlesnake plantain,
 which Indian women once rubbed on their bodies
 to make their men love them more fully,
 though the plant's the sad end of another unhappy story:
 Orchis, troubled son, a victim
 perhaps of poor parenting
(product of a nymph and satyr),
 drunk on wine, victimized
 another, bad choice on his part
(priestess)
 and the horrified crowd
 did what horrified crowds do:
 they tore him to pieces.
 His father pleaded,
 and another bad boy's transformed
 into pleasing greenery,
 safely tucked away in beauty.
 Here's the cinquefoil which witches
 once rubbed over their bodies
 so they could see things with bewitched eyes,
 or conversely a protection against witchery,
(everything being its opposite,
if you want to look at it that way),
 though along with spiders' legs,
 hemlock, thorn apples, deadly nightshade,
 a toxic brew can be made.
 Here's goldenrod to heal, to make whole,
 the heal-all *(which we all need)*, Solomon's seal
 for concealment and discretion,
(which I will only give to you,
my secretive and faithless lover,

wherever you may be),
and my personal favorite, the evening primrose,
who opens only a few petals
(they will drop off after her opening).
If not pollinated in twilight,
as she hopes she may be,
she'll stay open all night,
on the off-chance a stray insect will come flying
and do the trick.
I am walking with an old witch
(you should see her walking stick,
with its wicked handle,
splitting for her hands alone),
she's telling me
to smell this, taste this,
put this in my pocket,
leave those mushrooms alone,
if I take just a taste I'll be dead
in less than seven hours, and I don't
want to die yet, I want
to live a little longer, long enough
to understand everything.