

Betsy Sholl

THE TREE: A RIDDLE

Just like that, I let. They loosen
and leave, my leaves. Inside,
the pulpy rise slowly subsides.
Stems dry. In wind rush they flee.
Like scree. A few hang on, turning
brittle, cracked and brown. What am I?
An *am*, not an *I*. You are an *I*, thinking
to make me speak, but is it me you seek,
or your own rune ruttled into my trunk?
You who want so badly to be, it is not
a *me* before you, but a stretch, a reach,
from root to leaf, thick to thin and less—
an *is* and *what if*, as much hidden
as seen, an *under* as much as *above*,
a grope down through soil to sluice
and muck, tip ends melting into earth,
a loosening, an ooze into other. Is that
what you wanted to hear, you who have
no root, who want with words alone
and no loss to be lifted up?

ANTIQUITY

Dark as my bedroom curtains their heavy cloth
that shuts out the light and doesn't fade

Stories that don't fade girls gone wooden
boys lost in the mirror of themselves

The son coming home on his ship with two sets
of sails one black one white

Dust donkeys women with hammered gold snaking
up their arms water jugs on their heads

Buildings with columns but no roof or walls
Easy to see what's going on but what's going on

The gods making decisions that trickle down that trick

A speck in the distance—what is it

Wars fought with swords shields fires on hillsides
gods like generals far away looking on

Vats of oil barley water jugs with penises
chasing each other around the sides

Stories in which seeing turns people to stone

How quickly a beautiful youth becomes a star
a tree a bird with no tongue a corpse

Togas sandals slaves speeches in public squares
statues with stone blank eyes

Wars fought for what appeasing one god
aggravates another

Olive trees steep paths goats glinting aqua bays

Is that a ship in the distance

The blind man tilts his head

What color are its sails

TO A PLUM

Love child of summer,
born of a bird cry and the blue moon,
no wonder you can't make up your mind

between magenta and mist, honey
and blood, night and the sun-struck
glistening bay. Your blue-black rump

grown fat on a limb, hangs between
brooding and bursting your powdery sheen,
its shimmering kimono silk the color

of midnight and bruise. What's there to lose?
What soul, filled like wine wobbling at the rim,
doesn't long to spill?

What sweet fruit wouldn't split its skin
to let out the juicy light, its ruby translucence
like a hummingbird's secret stash?

Ah, but once it's out, there's no stuffing
the light back in. With a hint of frost glazing
your flesh, your hue dark as winter mulch—

there's no praising you without praising as well
the sugary rune you come to, wrinkled lips
licked by the moon's dark.