



Jean James
A Start of Leaves



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A Start of Leaves

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A breeze squeezes into the room,
past pictures on the sill,
rippling the pages of a leather-bound book
from where a slip of yellowed paper flutters.
He picks it up.

How to Open a Bible

*Open the volume violently or carelessly
in any one place and you will probably
break the back and cause a start of leaves.*

He has flown across the Atlantic
to be here beside a metal bedstead
and an old man, caged.
Outside builders are calling to each other
from the top of scaffolding,
their words another language,
while here inside his father's fingers
are hooks in a blue blanket. The grip
of winter enters in
and all he can think of is that time
they had to shelter in the bog
when the banshee winds came
rattling the birches, pressing
the two of them together, framed
in a start of leaves.

My Father's Hands

My father would take an axe
and cut in just the right spot,
until, with one touch of his finger,
he could fell the whole tree.

The day he went for tests
I watched him stop
to smooth the dog;
his hands were butterflies.

Sunday Water

Under a hooded sky the man in size-twelve boots
slips down to the wide-eyed shore,
down to where, as a weed-wader boy, he
swallowed the green rain and laid lines for pike.

This is his pilgrimage:
here the dusky lough skin sloughs away
from the slumbering timber ribs of the old jetty
and the water boatmen skipper backwards.

In his overcoat, with pockets the size of bowls,
he stands shin deep in Sunday water,
while overhead a ballet of whooper swans swoop west,
their white light bruising him.

Captured

We brought his jacket back
ready for the year's hard rains,
a shame to let it go.

Six months settling on the peg,
its weight of winter shoulders.
Sunday we pulled it down.

I pressed my nose in close, snared
in the scent of some far country
its bog land sluicing my heels.

You shrugged it on,
and then, him, dog at his side, striding that
far hill, clamped in the damp.

He dwelt inside yon coat, wore
the weather in Fermanagh's sodden fields
captured in green.

Seasons

This claret flower, a trumpet for the bee,
droops to her honeyed tongue; we long for summer.

Through a litter of leaves, breastplates of the dead,
we scrape along, scratching their bronze and gold.

Snug in the drawer of our feathered beds we lie together
listening to the snow grow up the gabled walls.

How we rise again: the song-bright blackbird in the holly,
the jackdaws' spatter pattering on the ridge tiles.

We are tied by a white thread to life's ghost balloon
that rises and falls, lassoed by the tide.

Bog Oak

The tractor's wheels had caught,
as if the skeleton of some old wreck
had reared up from a black loam ocean.

A pod of bog oak,
beached whales stranded on the shore.
No more cocooned in suits of silt

the bog beasts rise,
and bask,
flanks heaving in the July heat.

Unmuzzled

in the night
after a sweet

September
the storm comes

whale-mouthed
and wonderful

ripping young oaks
from shallow beds

leaving them stranded
like starfish

their disjointed fingers
socketless

in a blind reach

Out to Pasture

I have shrunk
to a speck
in a cow's eye,
across the crusting fence
she mirrors me,
every breath
my halter.

Kenfig Haiku

October morning
bent blades of grass
springing back

beyond the dunes
oystercatchers
on an ebb tide

Tanka

the chill
of an owl's hoot
in the dark
I move closer
to your back

Snowfall

You have left white space
and I will write on you
in wellingtons

sinking each foot carefully
so as to avoid treading
on the throat of spring.

Murmuration

The air is thick with them in the gathering dark,
black ribbons spilling as iron filings to a magnet.
Snabirds.

I know them by their old name,
can recall that winter when they came,
one turning, then its neighbour,
time and again, looping out over bare-skinned trees.

They spoke to me when I was quite lost,
murmuring my name, like a hand upon my forehead,
cooling.

I felt not healed but humbled,
knew there was more than that black shore
on which I stood,
some kind of truth that ever since

I won't forget.

Question and Answer

You ask me
how to live with the absence within you,
and I stop before a photograph,
a sheepdog's white face,
a bicycle beside a tree.

You ask again,
and I walk in the garden
my feet making prints,
bright shadows on the grass.

And still you ask, so
I say to you, each night
we practise the art of dying,
but in the morning
open the day like a window.

Last Box at the Auction

She stands at the back of the hall, wraithed in the must of
books,
mouth mildewed, waiting for the box that will be last,
outcast,
and all her treasure in it:

a willow-patterned cup, gold-rimmed, well lip-worn, with
matching saucer;
a purple velvet throw, some Emperor's reject, moth-bruised
and blowsy;
a fractured horse's head, a scar across his nose but eyes still
feverish;
a pair of crocheted gloves, cream cotton brindled, smelling
of hymns;
an oval brooch, a landscape scene, carved out in black bog
oak;
a linen tray-cloth fleshed with peach and pink-cheeked
roses among thorn-tangled stems;
a bowl of blue glass that, held up to the light, will bloom
into a lapis lagoon,

and finally,
a hare within a splintered frame, whiskered in long grass,

waiting, like her, for the hammer to fall.

The Visit

in the heart
a hare's cry
quickens the beat

We are visiting our grandfather and grandmother; they lie together in the graveyard at Derryharney Church, where a huge copper beech shades them like a watchful guardian.

Our mother carries flowers, fresh from the garden—a drench of sweet pea and an apricot rose, still in bud. She stoops to empty the bronze jug and then heads to the tap for clean water. We lark around the graves, chasing each other until her look tells us to stop. This is not the place.

We begin to read the headstones instead, chanting names and ages out to each other, seeing who can find the oldest, until we come upon a granite cradle, its dark edges softened with moss. Someone has left a bunch of violets in a jam jar. Their small heads are already wilting where they sit under the inscription: 'Mary Millicent, only a year in this world.'

For a fleeting moment we are still, but then the crows begin to caw to each other and we come alive again, cawing back to them. Our mother is ready now and she takes our hands, leading us down to the gate where our father sits patiently waiting.

under the soil
soft voices murmur
to each other

The Mole

Little labourer,
sightless in the light.
The sun, our friend,
cannot save you. And the earth,
your chamber, has turned you out,
here, where the edge of the gardens
and the dry-stone walls collide. I see

no wound. Only the wasps speak
of death from your open mouth. I think

of you, solitary in the foisty dark,
small miner with those extra thumbs,
shearing away the weight
of soil until

this dawn. Much later I come back
to find you gone, and in your place

a quickening
where a wreath of pale primroses glazes
the grass.

Inishmore

We have come in from the damp green and are sitting at the kitchen table in my father's childhood home. An oilcloth, worn through in places with the weight of elbows, protects the surface. I trace the faded pattern of tiny squares in reds, blues and greens—up and down, round and round. We wait.

In my rumbling thoughts, Campbell's cream of chicken soup smells smooth. So often I have licked the taste into my bones. My mother's freckled arm stretches over. Here is my white china bowl, fluted at the edges, a small chip on the outside, but brimful of gold.

Our feet drum against the legs of the bentwood chairs. First, we must blow. I catch the tick of the mantle clock. Click. Click. I stare at the window ledge, at the old bible wrapped in brown paper, the spider's web in the corner with its parcelled fly.

We begin—the lapping. Our spoon tongues dipping. Behind us a great fire has caught in the hearth; it rubs its hands over our backs.

curl of woodsmoke—
over the roof
home is calling

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