

Inside the Branches

Matthew Gilbert

I pluck memories like maple leaves from high branches.
You taught me to climb that first summer
we stayed all night. I crawled outside my mother's shadow,
felt hardness of roots reaching from the earth.

I was eight years-old when I learned to make mistakes,
when I climbed too high in the tree outside my grandmother's
porch, and she convinced me I could make it back down.
Hands and arms scratched, but intact. I ate strawberry shortcake

and caramel apple pie. I learned to indulge in my sweet tooth
and found creativity in the tasting of chocolate and vanilla batter
when my grandmother taught me how to marble cake with a knife—
she let me swirl my designs with vanilla chips, her mountain hands

teaching me mixtures of art. I bit into fruit where her peaches grew,
built my first bookshelf from oak in her woodshop by the road. She pulled
two splinters from my hand and kissed the wound. That day
I learned to treat the smallest gash,

her people's yarrow oils cared for the spirit, same as the body.
Now, I trace footpaths on the limbs, follow dirt trails where
highlander hooves roamed free, listen for echoes of hymns
over the Blue Ridge.

I can still feel the rays of summer and smell baked chocolate
tingling the nose, reminding me to listen to myself.
I hear my grandmother's words faint in the leaves as
I count branches beneath my fingertips.