

## PLANT STUDIES IN THE ARBORETUM

A plant can be either one thing  
or the other, a conifer or a broadleaf,  
pinnate or palmate, simple or complex.

In the shop, Olivia and I shared a thick book  
bound in green leather. A dichotomous key,  
the botanist's method for plant identification.  
It was something I could do on rainy days,  
trade spades and trowels for the yellowed pages  
of the book, run my finger down the list  
of this-or-that options until my choices  
had carried me to the last, true answer.

One species out of twenty thousand. One name  
singled out of a book so big and heavy  
it had once been used to press dried flowers.  
These I discovered when they tumbled  
out of the pages, as if the names had come to life  
and then died. I wanted to press those days  
at the arboretum into the book too,  
preserving the sun and the work and Olivia  
and me. An image of us kneeling side by side  
to weed hellebores pressed between these pages;  
between others, the smell of fresh-cut grass  
heaped in the shade beneath a magnolia,  
or the sound of her shears snapping  
on jasmine vines under the arbor.

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I used the pocketknife in the shop  
to cut open flowering asters, so that  
I could discern the number of stamens  
radiating from their pollen-powdered heads,  
and I consulted diagrams to distinguish  
dentate leaves from serrate leaves,  
but some plants weren't so easy.  
Flowers so small that they blurred, indistinct  
and immeasurable, under my hand lens.  
Leaves that defied both options  
I presented to them, falling on the spectrum  
between two choices, neither of which  
made any sense at all.