



missing

addresses

poems by

**BETH BENTLEY**

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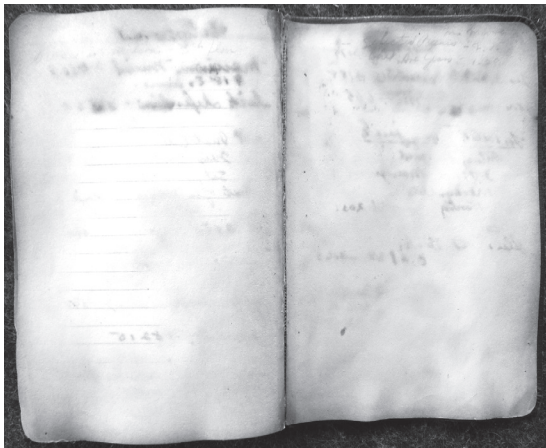
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# MISSING ADDRESSES



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**BETH BENTLEY**

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I

## Over Goldengrove Unleaving

As she begins to clear it, the garden  
itself flaunts its decimation.  
Bent pale stalks and crumpled husks  
bow over mounds of ragged leavings,  
discarded shells, gloves, clenched fists.

And the wisteria, that fragile traveler,  
how did it come to be implicated  
in the sickly branches of the rose  
on its last, leggy journey? Remainders,  
reminders, bite her ankles, she  
who so lightly made her goodbyes.  
So long, *à demain*, see you later,  
*à tout à l'heure*. After the raking,  
the clearing out, she sees  
how hard the ground is, how un-  
encouraging. How colorless.

To be the keeper of this is to learn  
to love and let go, every  
October the memory of relinquishment.  
“What is the winter for? To remember love,”  
wrote Roethke. Ah, how to remember  
fullness, confronting these dry sticks,  
these ashes hanging from the trees  
like wadded handkerchiefs? She’ll strew  
some bulbs, just as dry, and bury them

in earth and mulch and pat them down,  
putting them to bed for the winter.  
It's a toss-up, for her and them, which ones  
the dark and silence will bring to light.



## The Blind Botanist

(A Lithograph by Ben Shahn)

He is holding the plant to his face,  
grasping it with both meaty hands,  
as if to feel the entire length of it,  
the whole force of those thorny bracts,  
from thighs, to waist, to head,  
feel the essential pain prick  
hands, arms, face

and his goddamned faithless eyes  
which have deserted him, failing  
to stay for the long haul  
like a disloyal wife who couldn't cope  
with the inevitable, and turned away.

His own skin reminds him  
of the garden's texture, the sharp,  
grainy soil, the pebbles on the path.

He lets the branches rake his cheeks,  
scratch his useless eyes.  
He wants to force his senses awake  
as one arouses a woman, flay  
his every pore. He wants his finger-pads  
to paddle in small puddles of blood  
until they are red as the remembered  
root fronds of the plant, until  
their thick, rough, wiry veins  
transfuse him, restore his vision.

## Miracles

And we emerge in a late afternoon hush  
to leaves pattering across the pavement,  
crisp as potato chips. The woodland prodigals  
are living it up, painting the town red

in the driest October in decades. Our eyes  
dazzle. We collect streets and yards  
we never noticed before, nameless parks.  
The maple on 40<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup>  
which has layered the ground with yellow,  
itself its mirror. Or the line of oaks

bordering the reservoir, a sanguine haze  
we drive under. And then there's that mile  
from 85<sup>th</sup> to 125<sup>th</sup>  
of *Fraxinus angustifolia*  
some park department visionary planted  
thirty years ago, a canopy  
of bronzed purple, fit for a cortège;  
when it turns red they call it 'claret.'

Evergreens lurk in the background  
in gloomy importance; their day will come.  
Who cares? We're all a little tipsy,  
riding the market, squandering *gelt*  
as if there were no tomorrow.

In the studio at Magnuson Park,  
blinds closed to simulate darkness,  
we hunch over paper, painstakingly

creating shadows in short, sharp strokes  
until a white shape lifts from the page  
and, out of the shadows, a perfect  
transparent oval of light is born,  
the image of an egg, a blown egg,  
like the ones that lie before us on the table.

Outside, leaves land on our heads, weightless,  
October's last legacy.  
November rains begin to cull and crush  
the tea-pot dregs, wash them down drains.  
From a thicket of fog the smoke tree flares,  
the last miracle, a burning bush.

*Fraxinus angustifolia* Narrow-leaved ash

*Cotinus americanus* American smoke tree

## The Old Jewish Cemetery, Prague

A stone village has been dropped from the sky,  
gray pointed roofs perilously tilted,  
jutting upward like capsized hulls.  
In a crowded sea, they are their own waves,  
immobilized motion.

We are walking through a quarry of eloquence,  
a frozen sermon, relentless  
in its weight, its harsh texture.  
We would like to cover our ears, our eyes,  
but dare not.

The stones refuse to shift, to allow  
space or air or light to invade them.  
Nor, even if their designated borders  
fall, would they allow one living soul  
to claim kinship, shelter, comfort,

to move among them, share their sedate  
wreckage. Weep though he may.

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