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## A Cottonwood Leaf Can Be Taken Apart

*so gently it does not bleed, though its essence  
lodges in the heart like an eight-year-old  
in the arms of a tree.*

i.

Fireweed burns up the hillside in a slant of morning sun.  
It is late summer on the Richardson Highway,  
midway between Glennallen and Valdez.  
Yesterday's inner tube floats on the pond.

She searches for the beaver that swims  
with branches in tow. She will swim with her brother  
and sisters every day until the end of summer  
when they return to town for school and pending snows.

In early August cottonwood discard green  
and take on the womanly scent of blood and balsam.  
The odor clings to her clothes  
when she slides down a leaf-coated slope.

She smells like her mother does on Sundays,  
doesn't understand why that is, knows only  
what her sister tells her: *When Mom smells like that  
in the morning, it's because of the sex.*

She gathers leaves in her arms, tosses them up  
and turns her face to catch as many as she can.  
None of them land on her tongue, yet their taste  
brings saliva, and she swallows and closes her eyes.

At eight, she knows only that her desire to lie down  
and roll in the leaves is as strong as any she's known,

that the biggest cottonwood in this stand is the hide-and-seek home base and that—for now—her brother will win every game.

ii.

She breathes out all the way, then sucks in hard and fast to flatten a green leaf against her nostrils, to make a vacuum there beneath the cottonwood and try to live in it.

Once, she thought she was going to do it, hold her breath exactly forever, but she woke with a leaf on her chest, dizzy and missing her mom.

iii.

Because she has nothing else to do until supper, because her brother went fishing without her, she strips a leaf, one chamber at a time, exposing capillaries that branch from the leafstalk.

Thumbs and fingers come together on either side as though she is miming binoculars. She pinches and the leaf decides where to open. She continues until the leaf is tattered,

hanging by a thread to its spine.

A shredded mountain in her palm, she stretches and rolls down the hill, arms above her head. She rolls

until buds embed sap in her skin. She rolls, and twigs poke her torso and thighs. She rolls, over and over, gathering dirt and leaves and the scent of cottonwood.