

ELEANOR BERRY

Not Burning the Christmas Greens

*Their time past, pulled down
cracked and flung to the fire*

—go up in a roar

—William Carlos Williams, “Burning the Christmas Greens”

Not yet, not so quickly. Though the tilted earth
has moved onward in its orbit
well past the solstice point, the sun’s rays
still strike our hemisphere too shallowly aslant
to give much warmth, and the days
lengthen only slowly.

So dismantle only little by little
all you gathered and arrayed to strengthen
your shelter against midwinter—the bunches
of evergreen stalks and crimson berries, the holiday
dishes and linens, the woodcraft reindeer
and plastic gumdrop tree, the small papier-mâché figures
of humans and animals reverent around a newborn,
the candle-smoke-stained brass angelabra.

Slowly, one by one, remove them from your rooms.
Follow the assembly directions for the angelabra
in reverse. Wrap each fragile nativity figure
in brittle tissue. Slide apart the flattish plastic pieces
that slid together to make the bare-branched
little tree. Swaddle the reindeer’s twig antlers
in bubble-wrap. Settle them all into their labeled boxes.
Fold up the holiday linens, put away
the once-a-year dishes. Return them
to the darkness of cupboards.

Leave the Doug fir,
cut fresh from your land, for last. Keep it
until its needles start to drop. Only then
slowly divest it, starting from the bottom
with the stuffed cotton cat, the pipe-cleaner
snowman, the yarn-and-toothpick
God's eye, and the few big, tarnish-dimmed balls
that weren't shattered by cat paws batting
at their erstwhile shine. Move slowly up
the tree, lifting off, one by one, the smaller,
fancier balls, the reflectors with their faceted
scintillant centers, the blown-glass birds and miniature
scroll-handled urns, the silver-painted glass bell
that actually rings, the tiny red one that doesn't, the dangling
salt-dough stocking with your name on it,
the gilded sand dollar and the sparkly comet.
As you take it down, nest each one in a compartment
of a waiting cardboard box. Then gently unwind
the string of lights. See the tree bare
as it was when you first brought it in,
when it first filled the room
with the scent of its sap.

But not yet,
not now, when the glass birds
seem almost to rustle amid the green needles,
and brushing by the branches makes
almost enough breeze to coax
silvery notes from the delicate glass bell.

Like Breathing

What is emptiness for? To fill, to fill.

—Robert Creeley, “The Language”

Unpack the grocery bags,
stock the pantry, fill the fridge.
There’s pleasure in it —
a quiet pleasure at seeing
the tidy rows of boxes, cans, and jars,
the bins replete with fruits and greens.
There’s pleasure, too,
at the end of the week, in finding
the bins and shelves uncrowded,
down to an easy choice of what
to have for lunch, make for dinner.

Unload the dryer, shake out and fold
the clean clothes. Stuff the bureau drawers
with socks, underpants, knit tops.
Drape a shirt over every bare hanger.
It’s a satisfaction to see them all
waiting to be worn — and, days later,
almost a relief to find
the drawers depleted,
the closet sparsely hung, to be left
with so little choice of what to wear.

Over and over, we gather around us
things we need, then use them up.
It’s like breathing —
instinctive, mostly unconscious.
But sometimes we feel
pleasure in filling the lungs
deeply, pleasure in slowly releasing
the held breath.