

Beech Sapling in a Wood

March rain. Noon. So dark it seems
the night's about to fall, oak trunks
wet black like old macadam,
beech leaves dangling, dead feathers
or a hundred souls in effigy—

as if this sapling had been spawned
by a Byzantine reliquary:
a wooden frame with relics wrapped in silk,
small bundles of essence suspended
in air like sun-shriveled fruit.

Since November the leaves have faded
from bronze to chamois to dried-out
bone. Now, leached of color,
translucent, they hold on, guardians
of what's unseen, keepers of light.

JANE MCKINLEY

Becoming

White wood asters greet me
like old friends: too polite
to ask where I've been, happy
to see me, nonetheless.
Or is that going too far?

Even the weeds look tired
of summer, scrappy
encroachments on the path,
littered now with hickory nuts
in their thick, brown husks.

I love the way they open,
splitting apart at the seams:
four nearly identical pieces,
parts of a puzzle that defy me
to put them together again,

as if they had changed
in coming apart so their edges
no longer match up, the way
you might change when going
to pieces, sloughing off

lives like old winter coats,
thick layers you once hid
behind, curled in a shell
of your own design, not
knowing it could open.

JANE MCKINLEY