

Robert Bly

THE WILLOW LEAF

This red willow leaf is a long, slender thing with a dark line running down its center. Other lines slant upward, as when a thunder storm causes oat-straws to rise, and crows fly off the fence posts.

My hand remembers stroking a sleek bird years ago which was crouching under my fingers, longing for the roof on top of the roof, the forgiveness high in the air.

As for me, I have given so many hours to the ecstasy of detail, the shadow of a closing door, the last syllable of a poem, which is already gone, looking back over its shoulder. Well, well, well, so what? Sometimes in our wasted hours a child climbs down into this world.

THE FRUIT OF THE PRICKLY PEAR CACTUS

The fruit of the prickly pear cactus is plump but still prickly; it resembles the swollen tongue of the tortured truth-teller. The palm of my hand reports that there are spikes attached to whatever forgiveness is there.

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You remember that Hansel had a little problem with his parents: they wanted him to die. He and Gretel wandered one day, as we all do, into the witch's territory. She lived in a wilderness just like this one, where the prickly pear likes to grow. She put Hansel in jail. She was fattening him up. He stayed in his little wooden prison, and each day he'd poke out the spine of the prickly pear cactus instead of his finger when the witch came by. Witches are near-sighted, all of them; it must be some genetic deal. Everyday the witch would say: "What is going on? This little sonofabitch never gets fat!"

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The problem is, there's no father here. Maybe he agreed to stay out in the woods. And my father was a master of cunning distance, a black olive from solitary and rocky ground, some spiny fruit from the Norwegian sea bottom. There is something likable about this witch. She did jump willingly onto the oven door. I guess she knows best. But it's worrisome to me. You'd think this sort of thing would have happened before. I suppose no mother is perfect.