

Jenna Butler



Forcing Bloom

ALBERTA SERIES #6  
above/ground press

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Birth, life, and death – each took place on the  
hidden side of a leaf.

*~Toni Morrison~*

In memory of Nancy Wynn Fairley



1.

Daffodils peeled out of bud;  
bilious in crystal, expectant.

Stripping your house clean;  
annulated Victoriana.

At Arviat, the caribou  
browse tundra grass to the roots.

This lean old fence  
demure under an onslaught of wasps.

Slag heaps announce town,  
coal tipple, gutted hills.

2.

Seals pupping by the harbour rocks:  
arabesques of prescient gulls.

How you hold nigella pods.  
Green whorls, faintly sussurating.

Starved, drowned, burnt;  
ground elder cropping from the roots.

What we were taught:  
barbican scarecrow undone by cottontails.

Roman-white anemones,  
a coarse halo of quince.

3.

Spine of the summer garden:  
monolithic cardoons.

Sunken, pitched drystone wall  
built to last. Our flimsy house.

The blowsy magnolias pinioned  
by northwest wind, lingering frost.

How you arrived: edgewise.  
Bolstering obliquely.

Four ash trees marbled with fruit;  
solid fronting of waxwings.

4.

Thunderheads in the perennial border:  
inked pendants of aconite blossom.

The vibrato hum of the apiary.  
A welter of bees, arcane golden burrs.

June humidity in this house.  
Parquet floors abraded to the grain.

Composition: me and you, sepia tones.  
A stranger in the background, standing sentinel.

Prelude to winter argument:  
ragtag descant of chickadees.

5.

Chronometer of all things: sun  
ripening spindles of fennel.

The phonology of beeches in wind.  
You on the front porch.

Learning how to harvest flax;  
a lattice of petals lifting and dropping.

Liminal space at the bay's mouth.  
One rowboat, taunting the current.

A plaintive voice in the pre-dawn garden;  
lone frog amongst arum lilies.

6.

July evening: bowl of runner beans  
on back stairs, the crisp snap of spines.

How I thought twice about  
bringing you gladiolas. Flesh wounds.

Inside the traps, a curl of Kokanee  
against fragrant cedar.

Scarlet and heretic. Maltese cross  
pared down to vase.

Betrayers of the winter fold:  
militant whiskeyjacks amongst the firs.

7.

In your palm, birch bark  
like papyrus, curdled fog.

A density of dark over backcountry.  
Rainfall cries of loons.

July twilight storm-heavy;  
the poppy petals tattered to gauze.

Under the jack pines,  
blunt, grained snouts of morels.

Frost heaves on the winter lake,  
the coyotes' attenuated peals.

7.

8.

Cloudburst jangle in the eaves;  
the mimosa withers under rain.

Celeriac buried deep to blanch.  
Your bedroom, its blinkered window.

The camphor scent of clary;  
bright mosaic of scattered bracts.

On the roof, the shingles  
clatter, slip like palms.

We hold this within ourselves.  
Midsummer hail, the ability to shatter.

9.

What could I have said?  
A farther sky in you, your wings.

Clapboard fingered down to soil,  
moss like dappled baize.

At Kispiox, the totem poles  
thin to silver.

Nothing left to chance:  
autumn, or the crows' dark temperament.

Torch lilies clock the season;  
verdant horology.

9.

10.

Ammolite flash of feathers.  
A kingfisher by the waterway.

The basil comes up first.  
Everywhere dark seedlings, Siam Queen.

Moths unfold on bare cherry branches,  
pale mimicry of blossom.

Your conglomeration of books,  
smudged pages spreading open palms.

A week of warm winds at the end of October.  
The horse chestnut a ballista, hurling shells.

11.

An exuberance of dogwood. You,  
translucent. Winnowed to the core.

Runner ducks trolling the grass for snails;  
frost-pocked summer wastrels.

The back field cratered with cellar holes,  
clinker brick shirred with phlox.

This room in fragmentary sunlight:  
burled maple, angleirons like bones.

Wild clematis strangling the eaves;  
sweet almond boon of blossom.

12.

Blown down from the plum tree:  
a fistful of ragged nuthatches.

You come home, turn  
every mirror to the wall.

September gales shredding the woodlot.  
Maples stripped of shriveled keys.

In the Slocan, we find  
remnants of fire. Glass fused to sand.

Outside, the haggard litany of the wind.  
Weals of snow across the garden.

13.

Late winter germination:  
pinnate trailings of frost over glass.

Stalled in the sun by the windows.  
The house a vivarium.

February's dubious clarity.  
A jaundiced tracery of catkins.

Nothing but the rooks,  
precognitive, beside the road.

Clocking time: the creeping dark  
behind your eyes.

14.

Plump bats coagulate under the eaves;  
shrewd dark pipistrelles.

Not wanting to know how much longer;  
refusing stops the clock.

Culling roe deer: chuffs of frosty breath,  
their dim, frantic eyes.

Such aquiline treachery.  
Two herons crooked over koi.

Meditation: a rigging of hawks  
across March-blue sky.

15.

A cool abundance of borage  
in your hands, sheaves of blue flowers.

At the lake's margin, a clangor of reeds  
and wind. The grebes, brilliant, darting.

That spring, the garden unkempt.  
Lemon geranium claiming the pathways.

What you would most have missed:  
abbreviated thimble-cups of crocuses.

Fermented apples furred with wasps,  
the long orchard grass thrumming.

16.

Combine harvester under an orbit of gulls,  
skeins of heat lightning.

In the gazebo, friends dole out wine.  
The air underwritten with bitters, gossip.

A sun porch in the next yard.  
Two old men smoking, a chesterfield of cats.

The water garden thick with hyacinth.  
Your wasted hands, coaxing jasmine to trellis.

The vent of June wind: sweet rocket, chamomile.  
Heat pulses from stucco, brick, brindled pine.

17.

The orchard's soft incline  
shingled with early pincherry.

Reclaiming lost time:  
jubilant atonement of August heat.

Your denim coat behind the door.  
Agates in the pocket, fumbled smooth.

In Lille, a shuffle of grasses,  
foundations, Crowsnest ghosts.

Forcing bloom: the two of us;  
this long, slow spiral out of dark.

18.

Six a.m. Ravens outside the window,  
plum-slick and furious.

Eaves hung with pungent hops.  
The shambling collies drugged into sleep.

Where the cliff trail falters over:  
sea pinks, heady, luminous.

The side path to the wood shed;  
underfoot, a brittle counterpoint of hazelnuts.

Oat grass seamed with early frost.  
Mornings; new silver in your hair.

19.

Rocks slick and crosshatched with mussels.  
The leavings of a running tide.

Seismographic scribble across October sky:  
geese triangulated to destination.

What you leave behind: hothouse crammed with orchids,  
buds unfurling against greening glass.

An afternoon's occupation.  
Bullrushes gone to seed. North wind.

From the window, a smouldering burnpile.  
Furtive, sable-bruised raccoons.

20.

Sagebrush bruised between the palms;  
ichor and archaic scent.

Side yard gone in a thicket of nettles;  
ishidoro crests the rambling leaves.

In the woodlot, a spring trove.  
Grass gemmed with trillium.

The field fallow under morning sun,  
pocked flints tumbled into crescents.

What you take with you:  
the day's calm tilt of light.

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**Jenna Butler** was born in Norwich, England in 1980, but has spent most of her life on the prairies of western Canada. The landscapes of the prairies and mountains – their severity and incredible richness – feature prominently in her poetry and fiction.

Butler's work has appeared in numerous literary magazines, journals and anthologies in Canada and abroad. Her poetry has garnered, among others, the James Patrick Folinsbee Prize, and has been produced by the CBC. She is the editor of more than twenty collections of poetry in Canada and Europe, and is the founding editor of Rubicon Press.

She currently makes her home in Edmonton, Alberta, where she lives with her husband, and works as a teacher, editor, and book reviewer.

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