

Paul Rice

Herbs

for Lois Baldwin McConeghey

rot cannot take my hands
secure as they are in resins of herb.
dirt reaches for me as I kneel,
but I cannot be taken now
concerned as I am for the redolence
of future meats.

vague light schemes
with the promise of snow;
I gather herbs to sweeten winter flesh;
leaves give up their lives
getting richer,
stronger as they are drying.

I know someone who is dying.
green light touches her face,
makes frail leaves of her hands.
all the while I gather this crop
to sweeten birds
to feed our children's living flesh
knowing that when we eat these herbs,
she will be mere ashes in a cup.

I gather thyme against a month
when she is gone,
who lies curing
in the sweet of hopeless flesh.
rosemary, basil, lemon balm,

dried in wind of coming cold,
will enrich the little corpses
baking in our stove,
that we might take their sweetened meat
to ward off January's early dark.

till then the herbs, cut off,
begin their drying.
I know one whose breath will soon be cut;
I know someone who is dying

while I sit sinking in rich loam
gathering herbs as if there were a time to come.