

MOUNTAIN ASH ●

Alison Hicks

The mountain ash grew next to the stone wall.
This wouldn't matter except that everyone remembers a tree
from childhood. I had a book about a doll
carved from a piece of mountain ash
carried for luck by an old peddler
who makes the doll for a little girl
to thank her family for sheltering him
during a snowstorm in Maine.
Odd pinnate leaves, white flowers, red berries in fall,
smaller and lither than the maples and oaks and pines
that thrived through the winter it too survived.

I had a wooden doll, carved from a single block
of brown wood, two braids coiled at the base of her neck,
that came to me through my mother from the grandmother
I saw only once, in a hospital bed in Philadelphia.
Her disease turned her body into wood.
She could wiggle her nose, that's what she said to me.
Like a bunny, she said. When my mother told me
that she'd gone to meet God, I pictured her rolling up the big hill
to the stand of pines outside our old apartment in a wheelchair.
When I told my mother this, years later, she said,
Did I really say that? And then,
Well, that's what she would have wanted me to say.

There were other trees:
the maple in the upper meadow, next to the woodpile,
from which my father hung a rope and a board
to make me a swing. The white oak with its shaggy bark
that hung out over the driveway. The lilacs
that reached to my second-story windows.

Unlike these, by whose growth you could measure time,
the mountain ash never seemed to change

much in size or proportion.
It wasn't a tree I played in or climbed on.
In Europe it was said to ward off witches
and the pentagram on the shaft of each berry to bring good luck.
I don't know what happened to the doll
when my parents packed up the house.
None of this would matter, except that
things made of wood have qualities of trees,
breathe, absorb, and release,
offer up fruit for birds and small mammals.