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The Back Road

Abbie Huston Evans

Perhaps I needed something gray and brown
 And did not know it, –something spent and bare,
 That morning on the back-road, in November.
 I may have stood in need of something bedded
 Like the ledge beside me barnacled with lichen,
 With a great wave of juniper breaking on it;
 Or darkly needed something straight like cedars,
 Black on the traveling cloud-fringe, –something steady,
 Like slate-gray mountains in behind bare birches.
 Perhaps I needed something bright and scarlet,
 Like winter berries on the stone-gray bush
 Beside the rock-pile, –something sweet and singing,
 Like water in the gutter running down
 From springs up in the pasture out of sight.

But if I needed these, I did not know it.
 If you had told me that I wanted fullness,
 Or life, or God, I should have nodded “Yes”;
 But not a bush of berries, –not a mountain!
 –Yet so it was: fantastic needs like these,
 Blind bottom hungers like the urge in roots,
 Elbowed their way out, jostling me aside;
 A need of steadiness, that caught at mountains,
 A need of straightness, satisfied with cedars,
 A need of brightness, cozened with a bush.

–Whatever it was I needed, now I found it!
 The oak-tree standing with its feet in water
 Behind me, with the wind hoarse in its top
 Of paper, or the thousand-penciled bushes
 Across the road, or alders black with catkins,
 Fed no more deeply on the earth than I, –
 Nor half so passionately, I must think,
 As I, who, rooted in my tracks, appeased
 Undreamed-of hungers with unlikeliest food,
 The first at hand; amazed to find what sweetness
 Can be wrung out of clay and flint, –amazed,
 Like a starving man in a swamp, to find what relish
 Is hid in grass, and bark, and roots, and acorns.

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