

Hemlock

by Harry Brown

“Do you see anything?”

—Marlow in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

for Steve Cope

is first to brag its green come spring. It starts in fall
 but no one notices the low, rich green patches
 along the roadside, lying, pretending there is no death
 when all about is dozing, brightly failing,
 or deceased—sumac’s regal maroon,
 maple’s red and yellow, teasel’s light brown crisp.
 Then come early spring when neighbor souls all
 are barely stirring, the lacy green robe slowly
 rises, rustling thick about its hollow, mottled
 purple bole until by May it’s seven or eight
 feet tall, imperial with habit richly dark
 but to most unseen. Folks don’t know
 its cat urine odor, the rank perfume
 of its crushed leaves, the danger of mistaking
 hemlock foliage for parsley, roots for parsnip.
 And who knows hemlock was mixed with cinquefoil, nightshade,
 and spiders’ legs for witches’ brew? (Socrates,
 whose wisdom lay in knowing he didn’t know,
 knew hemlock well.)

Most never notice
 in April and May the tall monarch they daily pass;
 they never think, This handsome King of Weeds
 is poisonous in all his parts—seeds mistaken
 for anise, the hollow stem carved into a whistle
 by a boy, leaves eaten by a cow.
 They seldom mull, Death lives daily at my elbow—
 just across the road from home, watching
 all my journeyings.

When midsummer’s oven
 lightens hair and bakes the skin, and Johnson grass,
 hidden in May and June, jumps to pollute hay fields;
 when July rains come, prodding life,
 and occasional patches of coneflowers
 pepper Paint Lick Pike with dark brown eyes
 rayed round in egg yolk; when common mullein slowly flowers
 her thick cob stem in tiny yellow hurrahs
 gathering to astound heaven; when jimsonweed
 in flowering youth tells the hour—not yet
 full height but wise to close against the noonday sun,

opening in pleasant evening or later
to bask in the cool moon, barely exhaling
its slight, sweetly acrid attar—in mid-July
when much is rife in garden, berm, and barn lot,
hemlock's sun has set. It's gaunt, the shrunken
skeletons less obvious even
than in their unseen spring fecundity.
The April giants now are tan, stooped,
spidery lattices foreshadowing
cousin cicada's November husk—brittle
sibyls rasping in venomous silence
our Fate as we zip past deaf as dust.