

*The Sound of Falling*--Caitlin McKimmy

On certain fall days the atmosphere itself seems to emit a crisp golden light—that's when I venture into the Arboretum. I go out alone to watch seventeen million leaves sputter like dying embers in that patchwork forest. Leaves crackle as the earth meets my feet, and the snap in the air smells a little like freedom.

The river's laughing at me now, because I said I was alone. "You silly girl," the Cannon chides, "stop thinking and listen." Did you know that, on some afternoons in late autumn, the trees have quiet conversations? I didn't until I heeded the river and took off my hat for a change.

Once, as I was eavesdropping on whispered forest musings, a raccoon came trundling out of the underbrush all a-bustle. He froze when he saw me, and for an instant my eyes (sleepy) locked with his (bright, russet, and wild). But then his hunchback and gawky forelimbs struck me all at once, and, before I could control myself, my startled giggle sent him galumphing back into the forest.

You're right, River—now I'm laughing too. Here the grasses are company, and if I'm lucky, I'll see a flash of the red fox who's watching. Even as winter's snuff threatens, the Arb is ablaze, humming in perfect harmony with my footsteps. I just need to listen.