

Vanilla Leaf, *Achlys triphylla*

Often in the forest you will find a carpet
of rounded yellow-green leaves. Among them
are slender *spikes* of cream-white flowers
like miniature torches in the forest gloom.
Each leaf is held a foot above ground
by a wiry stem sent up from the rhizome.
Its shape: a circle with scalloped edges
and deep clefts running like spokes to the centre,
dividing it into three lobes or leaflets.
To children's delight, if you take out the central
lobe, the remaining two by magic
transform to a pair of angel wings.
First and last the leaf is ghostly.
In spring it emerges furled, an almost
colourless membrane, a delicate fan;
in fall, when the leaf itself is gone,
its veins persist as a lacy network.
Each leaf contains an elusive fragrance:
drying, they release a faint scent of vanilla
or new-mown hay. Once country folk
would collect them and hang them in bunches to perfume
the house and ward off flies and mosquitoes,
and they named the plant Sweet After Death.

Sedum, Stonecrop (various species, especially *Sedum spathulifolium*)

The sedentary sedum
squats on broken rocks
and clings to the faces of cliffs.
From its stiff and pudgy leaves
with their dusty grey-green surface
you would think the plant absorbs
the stony substance of its place
-- then magically transmutes it
as the leaves take on new colours,
some in winter, some in summer,

orange and deep rose-red.

The first hot suns effect
another transmutation,
to a carpet of brightest yellow,
as the flowerstalks open their buds
and hide the leaves from sight.
Examine an opened flower
and encounter a different image:
five slender, wide-spaced petals,
firm and shining, fashion
a delicate, formal star;
other stars cluster round it,
a close-knit constellation
just inches above the earth.

Now come the long dry days,
dog-days of summer, and now
a further marvel, for sedum
survives under scorching suns,
amidst rocks too hot to touch,
where moisture is long since dried
from the parched and hardened soil.
It lives on liquid hoarded
in those fleshy succulent leaves,
whose dusky, waxy coating
resists evaporation;
and so it endures the drought,
till autumn's rains arrive.