



Inner City

An Excerpt from *Bring Me the Ocean*, by Rebecca A. Reynolds

Arriving at an AIDS chronic care facility in an inner-city hospital for young children, we transfer our autumn materials to a trucking cart and wheel it into the hospital. Inside we shift everything again, this time onto a gurney. On this stainless steel cart, ordinarily used for bodies, we pile our bounty: pumpkins, hollow logs, grapevines, ducks, rabbits, gourds, cattails, milkweed pods, pine needles, and stones.

Wheeling this unusual, burgeoning gurney through the stark halls of the hospital, I have the urge to call out, “Emergency! Mother Nature coming through!” In the elevator, with ducks quacking and bunnies scuffling, a new voice enters the hospital with us—the very alive voice of nature.

Eight frail children come into the meeting room, their eyes widening as they follow the path of pine boughs. The pungent, crisp scent of crushed pine needles rises into the hospital air. The children gather into a small circle. Seated in the laps of staff members, they reach for our hands.

Together we walk through fall. It is the first time most of them have seen a sunflower, or an ear of corn unhusked and on its stalk. Sadly, it may be the only time for these very ill children.

We build a meadow together. Children who are able to, choose something to carry into the center of the grassy circle. As each piece is added—the hollow log, the stones, the water, the milkweed—the meadow grows. Gradually the meadow takes form, replete with smells and textures.

The children ask questions about everything. Even in their illness, they are thoroughly kids. Upon finding that milkweed seeds float on their breath, they blow clouds of them up into the air, laughing as fluff drifts back down and lands on their heads.

Shaking tall stalks of corn, we talk about the wind running through the dry cornfield. The youngest and sickest child, Jenny, lies listlessly in her nurse's lap, eyes half closed. But when we pass her two pods of honey locust, she grasps one in each of her hands, and suddenly raises her arms into the air to shake the dried pods with great energy and the most incredible smile of joy. Small, fragile Elaine holds a huge yellow sunflower up next to her face, like two suns meeting. The memory warms us on our drive home.

These children were born HIV-positive, and several were abandoned shortly after the diagnosis. They are extremely sick and most of them will continue to live within institutional walls for their short lives. Even so, they are kids like any others. Their illness would seem to exclude the possibility of light and humor, and yet they shine through all labels, reaching for an animal or piece of nature with the particular intense curiosity of children.