JACK, THE FOLLOWING SUMMER

Robert Crum

Last fall our house was almost lost in a jungle
of tumbled beanstalks. The air was green awhile.
The light was yellow. But with the first frost
the fat leaves turned brown, lost body, and,
crashing softly to the ground, they kept me awake
all night. They were too large to rake.
And we couldn't burn them without burning the house.
And so they festered, until it snowed.

Around Christmas, then, we lost the hen
to a red-tailed fox. I found its tracks
behind the barn, and the scattered, bright coins
of blood, and followed them back to the fence
where I stood a long time looking into the dark woods.
In no time at all mother had spent the golden eggs.
We're back where we started, though poorer, I think,
for what we know. The sky slept in the pond
all winter, defeated. Hunger consumed the spring.

And now it is a year. The air this morning
is electric with cicadas, though it is too heavy,
too humid, to move. Mother smokes in the kitchen,
the shades drawn, counting the change. I sleep in,

and wake up thinking about the woman I met
at the castle gate in that star-misted,
far and fertile place, from which the beanstalks rose
no further. She must be very happy now
that the ogre's gone. Or very lonely. She must
be lovely, lost there, among the stone,
corkscrew stairways, the crockery large enough
to hide a boy, the outsized doors, the enormous
hearth. I am sorry I deceived her, that third
and final time, disguised in my dead father's clothes.

The lyre stands by the window now. Wooden,
self-strummed, it still works, though the cat-gut
strings come untuned in this humidity. Touched,
it sings, and keeps time with the memory I have
of the hatchet chopping the trembling stalk,
the foliage falling around me, the snapping of a neck.

There is a terror I have outgrown, but cannot give up.
Sometimes I think I can smell my English blood.
I lean out the window for air, and hear mother,
done with the books, suggest we sell the cow again.
But I object, I think differently now, afraid, still,
of monsters, afraid of becoming one, yearning
skywards, yet filling my father's shoes.