

KIMBERLY JOHNSON

The Doctrine of Signatures

Giambattista Porta, sunburned, intent
on the ranunculus, repositions
his sketchpad, headscratches whether the bloom

more resembles a red homunculus
fainting in swoon or a rheumatic fist.
His other sketches show in minute hand

the likenesses of lung to lungwort, the bruise
of color through the iris, the beetroot
swollen like a dropsical foot, the field

splayed in lovely, grotesque anatomies.
He is careful in his study, careful
painting his pocket apothecary

to let each plant reveal by its sure signs
what it will cure. He loves the body so—
not with a charnel curiosity,

not like louche bone thieves and hair-sellers
but with the relic seeker's hopeful greed,
or like Solomon smitten, who sang

Sheba into gardened fame: *Thine eyes, love,
are as the fishpools in Heshbon, thy breasts
the grape-clustered vine, thy nose like apples.*

Queenly woman, she must have smiled to read
herself disfigured by his praise, all that
wisdom for a miscellany: sheepflock teeth,

armored neck and a honeycomb tongue,
immortal and unrecognizable,
inly wishing he'd just learn her favorite flower,

remember every dress she ever wore.
But as she posed swooning in his arms
like limber meadowsweet, she sensed how love

seeks to remedy its shortfalls with compares,
how the body makes monsters of us all.