

## Fiddleheads

Elizabeth Bolton  
Swarthmore College, USA  
[ebolton1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:ebolton1@swarthmore.edu)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4651>



### 1. Feint

Searching for fiddleheads, I almost crush  
the fern's prothallus, that tiny heart-  
shaped leaf whose underside produces eggs,  
plus sperm that needs water to find and fertilize

another's eggs—a drama invisible  
to those of us distracted by the spirals peeking  
through brown papery wrapping  
as if an old-time grocer had left them,

still growing, half-packaged, on the counter.  
Stiff-armed beside them, last year's fertile fronds  
raise their stipes and blades, pinnae held high, enclosing  
spore-bearing sori that rupture and release.

Here, says the fern: take, eat. In two moons  
the real game begins, fertility emerging  
inconspicuous amid the showy twice-cut  
finely-dissected sterility of plume.

### 2. *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, once *Onoclea struthiopteris*

Who died and made Linnaeus  
a second Adam, naming and claiming  
dominion over species around the globe?

Despite his force, his stamp, his fame,  
names drift like ferns filling the valley:  
Linnaeus matched this fern with the flightless

ostrich, saw its sterile fronds as arching  
feathers, fertile fronds as *onoclea*, closed  
vessels, pinnae enfolding sori. A hundred years

later, an Italian botanist (Todaro) claimed fern-naming  
rights to honor an Italian scholar of bio-electricity  
(*Matteucci*) in the year of his death, as if tucking

a fern-feather in his colleague's cap. The names so  
arbitrary, despite the consequence  
of human signifying. The ostrich feather

first a mark of bravery in battle,  
then an over-prized, democratized decoration:  
in producing feathered caps to meet demand,

the worlds' largest, fastest birds were hunted  
to extinction in their northern range. Ostrich fern,  
duplicitous in reproduction, faces better odds.

### 3. Tonic

Look north instead of east to find the name *mahsus*,  
associated with *good magic*, shared by the Maliseet  
of New Brunswick's Saint John River valley—

but all these names do damage too: call the river  
Wolastoq, inhabited by the Wolastoqiyik,  
people of the beautiful river, who fed *mahsus*

to starving refugees, loyalists fleeing  
the British defeat. The Wolastoqiyik  
ate the vitamin-rich spirals as spring tonic,

some cooking the whole crown on heated stones  
beneath spreading branches. The refugee-colonists  
took the tonic, the good magic, very much to heart:

*Fiddleheads steamed or boiled with butter and lemon,  
or pickled in vinegar three ways: try pepper,*

*nutmeg, cinnamon, allspice; or garlic and dill;  
or onions, sugar, turmeric, mustard seeds.*

*Steam or boil, roast or grill, mix with buttermilk,  
cornstarch, dijon mustard, tarragon, lemon juice.*

No heated stones now, no spread branches, but still,  
between your teeth, the earthy crunch of spring,  
hiding beneath the far-fetched seasonings.

#### **4. *Spira mirabilis***

Of course the fern predates the fiddle,  
follows a different curve—that of ram’s horns,  
elephant tusks, the chambered nautilus,  
the flight path of moths approaching the light  
or peregrine falcons attacking their prey:  
the slow curve of growth, the fast rush of death.

*Spira mirabilis*, the wonderful spiral;  
proportional, equiangular.  
For Jacob Bernoulli a symbol  
“either of fortitude or of constancy  
in adversity, or of the human body...  
restored to its exact and perfect self.”  
On his grave: *eadem mutata resurgo*.  
though changed, I rise again the same.

#### **5. Ghost bowing**

Romy, my sister’s child, fiddlehead  
of the best kind, bends over the scroll  
  
of their fiddle, its spiral dancing when the bow leaps  
up; improvised ornaments, ghost-  
  
bowing syncopation, and double-stopped drone  
as percussive as their fast feet lightly stomping,  
  
heel-and-toe, close to the floor, bowhairs snapping  
in the dim cottage light. Tragedy toils  
  
behind the good magic of their playing:  
near Wolastoq, the beautiful river, displaced

people battled to displace other settlers both  
old and new. Romy's ghostly syncopations

register the residue of French Acadians, who shared  
words, foods, raids with their Mi'kmaq hosts, but refused

an oath of loyalty to the conquering British and so  
were exiled from their non-native land, many

perishing at sea in enemy ships.

The grand dérangement. New settlers disputed

Mi'kmaw sovereignty for centuries. Those who took  
the land carried their own displaced histories:

clansmen slaughtered in the Highland clearances;  
evicted families emigrating to a world new

to them, bringing their reels, their music, rebellions  
replayed in the stepping feet, counterpoint

to Acadian ghost-bowings. Drums and dancers,  
fiddleheads consoling the forlorn: all still here

for those still listening, like the Wolastoqiyik drums—  
still playing, still improvising, still here,

though non-indigenous fishermen fight  
reclaimed Mi'kmaw fishing rights to the present day.

## 6. Double bluff

Coiled vegetative strength forcing its way  
through leaf litter to the sun: a form to shield  
the tousled pinnae already harvesting  
scraps of solar energy to drive its slow unfurling.

That sterile beauty both an engine and a double feint:  
below the prothallus' tiny heart,  
the water-stressed challenges of reproduction,  
sun-powered rhizomes extend, reproducing the self

through secondary crowns, clonal stands, leaving

in this two-week harvest window just the taste of time  
vanishing, sweet tonic turning bitter with age,  
plumes tattered by early fall, curling toward

another spring: no unchanging resurgence here,  
but still a spiral of resilience, a survivor's canny strength.