

ANNIE BOUTELLE

Caravaggio's Mandrakes

I try to sneak them in—as signature, joke,
seal, my personal avatar—delicious,
dark, fleshy as hell, their thick leaves
pushing out and up and gone. It drags

along its own fetid stink, its shrieking
roots, its fame as the one botanical
that flourishes under the gallows,
fed lavishly on semen of the hanged.

In truth, it's clearly my sort of plant.
Both aphrodisiac and sleeping potion,
flagrant as Cleopatra, a known user—
“Give me to drink Mandragora

that I might sleep out this great gap
of time my Antony is away.” What
mischief to plant it next to Saint
Francis's humble brown habit, or

let it brush the hem of the Virgin's
coral robe. Or, my boldest moment,
how about the *Entombment of Christ*,
where his grey-blue hand dangles

over it? At the end of the day, John
the Baptist wins the most—nude
boy with ram, as the leaves caress
his knee—or sulky teenager, two huge

flamboyant mandrakes at his feet—
or the sleepy petulant one, whose staff
pierces the plant's heart, as casually,
as ignorantly, as it pierced mine.