

Lilacs

Where hung clusters,
 heavy, bee-dusted, whose
fragrance stunned memory
 to ache, now dust-colored
blooms gone airy as ash
 remind it's ache I love.

This yard a sprawl I've walked
 and walked, as if the past were
perfume I could breathe of
 so the present is worried
as aged lace, frayed,
 yellowing. Mid-summer,

mid-day, my mother sleeps
 in her lavender muumuu;
snug, its pearl snaps tugged
 to zigzag. Glistening
on the lawn divan, she is
 a kind of blossom too,

the air of her alive with talcum
 and sweet sweat. Flower-stitched,
a pink mule dangles from her ankle.
 What isn't a world? A garden?
Where isn't everything growing
 still, invisible, persistent? Piled

fashion magazines beside her gleam
 and slide like platelets shifting;
perfumed pages, torn out, gummed,
 come apart in heat. The only movement
hot breeze and her deep, accordionic
 breathing. Lilacs burned

this year before I got here. Still
 I can almost taste their air
that aches and stays the heart.
 Papery and blank, they stand,
I like to think, for nothing. But
 in bloom, they rouse a question

I was born with and can't answer.
 I watch my mother sleep

for minutes before waking her.

How many afternoons like this?

I recollect the lilacs, thinking

why what I love troubles me.

Late August

Kaleidoscope reposed—
 gulls gyre this fast
receding sea, scrim
 of beach turned
damp expanse across which
 thinned waves make
of sand a maze
 that dizzies. Wind stirs
small crimped straws,
 sleeves of cellophane,
scorched bulbs of kelp
 across my own horizon.
Chris beside me, golden,
 suffering our silence
On the calico quilt, blooms
 of menstrual blood
translucent now, loosed with
 the last of bottled water.
Gulls' naked screams abrade again,
 again. From the gorgeous,
sloughing sun, my heart
 cannot retreat, but would.

Dogwood

Effusions of blooms impossible
to see beyond in June, bride-eager,
pulsing through the dark
in which I sleep alone,
chastened in the dormer's origami.

Dust flocks the floorboards;
my foot prints shine on oak.
Outside, tufts of flowers aloft,
a fleeting swoon—spectacles
of lace and beads of stamen.

Up close, each flower
more green than white,
more leaf than petal, eyelid-soft,
bright-edged as a star.
I've come to need the tree

to be this—object
I don't understand
and cannot take my eyes from
so that, waking after rain to birds'
absurd hyperbole, I saw the branches

flowerless again and drowsed
down to the floor by the window
to gather the spume of petals
strewn into the room.
How strange

that they weren't flowers
but were several slight, white moths,
upturned and dry as pages,
powdered wings so fragile
they dissolved at my most careful touch.

Cliff Dwellings, Mesa Verde

What could we have found there,
awkward with our maps, silences,

grievances? Speechlessness was so
thick, thank god the red, parched road

wound up, starkly, so our breaths
thinned, and the dark, charred shrubs

along the carved-in mesa. I wanted
to be near you again, but you turned

to echoes from those shallow ruins
as ordered and homely as teeth.

How small they must have been.
I found only echoes—and the awful

closeness of people who aren't there.

The Garden

—*For Katherine Doyle Smith*

Something's gone to seed;
seeds remove themselves
and hover, incandescent

as the dead. In her garden,
in rough, accustomed sun
that tires the chard, my friend

works. I lie out here, burn taut
as hide, urging my skin to age,
watching it darken. Beside me,

among the anonymous greens,
her bent head, red as a flare,
regards me, concerned.

From time to time a breeze comes,
or a helicopter chortles overhead.
When I wanted to be dead

I worked to keep it to myself,
and helped string up that chaos
of tomatoes: cherry, brandywine.

I worked, stitched myself to this earth
of hers as it were the only world.
My friend said I was good at it.

She thanked me.