

Gathering Sea Lavender

Gathering sea lavender
in salt marshes south of Brunswick
we ease ourselves into contours
so gentle they don't show on maps.
Only the washboard effect
of successive waves of lavender
reveals a dainty presence.
Sea lavender sells for five
dollars a spray in Boston,
but we're harvesting just enough
to warm us one dreary winter,
a candelabra as nostalgic
as my mother's genealogy.

Last night when the wind banged the doors
in our rented cottage and the tide
swept our neighbor's dory from the beach,
we felt each other quicken in sleep
as we both dreamt of gathering
sea lavender in brilliant light.
I also dreamt, quite separately,
that a former lover came home
to sort through my possessions
and take away what pleased her,
especially sentimental
items like the shard of slate
from the Deerfield Massacre stone,

the purple ribbon from Robert
Lowell's grave, the small glass cat
that was my first gift from my wife.
No wonder when morning came
I proposed we scout the marshes
for sea lavender, despite the rain,
our bodies still uneasy
upon us, the briny damp
revealing as X-rays or radar,
the losses of our previous lives
reflected by the stony fog
and empowered by the radiance
ignited by our love of the sea.

Hurricanes Named After Us

The season's first two hurricanes
have named themselves after us.
As they plow across the Atlantic
toward Florida, we drift over
books we've admired all our lives.

You're still retreating from Moscow
in the bosom of *War and Peace*
while I drift along the equator
in the doldrums of *Moby-Dick*.
Your storm will cross to the Gulf

before mine. Your violence spent
on the cringing Everglades, you'll ease
long before reaching Galveston,
while passing south of the Keys I'll trip
unimpeded down to Veracruz

and shatter on Mexico's highlands.
The summer heat drips from the trees
in long greasy strings of drool.
Your air-conditioned townhouse
insulates you from the silence

that centers in my tiny house
as though a giant foot has crushed
the finest of my earthly functions.
Soon the fall semester will fill
our datebooks. Scholarly poise

will sculpt you upright and prim,
but I'll slump like Igor to class
and growl and frighten young women
and make the stoned young fellows laugh.
Neither of us look like hurricanes,

but the government knows better,
and named its storms as precisely
as decorum allows. Enjoy
your book. Palm Beach and Miami
curse you, but don't worry. Soon enough

[stanza break]

the sun will shine in your wake,
while safely offshore the hurricane
named for me will parallel you,
but diverging as subtly
as I do almost every day.

Truro: the Bay Side

Watching blunt men surf-cast sand worms,
you want to learn to catch the groundfish
we sauté and eat with gusto.

But flounder, halibut, and cod
avoid shallow bays. Rockfish, croakers,
bluegills, shad, bluefish. If you hook

a big one—a forty-pound bluefish—
it could drag you into the water
where you'd squeal in Technicolor

until I dragged you out again.
These long July days seem delicate
and blue-white as Delft pottery.

The sky revolves on a pivot
about a hundred miles overhead.
The surf-casters mutter to themselves.

They rarely speak to each other,
and never to us or the other sun-
people scattered on the seamless beach.

Maybe at dusk when fish are biting
I'll rent a casting rod and teach you
to fling bait far enough to tease

a cruising striper to strike. Maybe
you'll catch one. But then you'll cry
for the pain you've inflicted. You'll free

the creature back to its netherworld,
and for the next few hours regret
that you ever invaded its space.

The Posthumous Look of a Diner

The posthumous look of a diner
on a hot Vermont afternoon
forces me to stop for lunch.

The parking lot saddens, one car
angled in the shade, the gravel
stippled and rutted and weedy

where a wooden picnic table
crumbles with decay. The metal
sheathing has dented. Concrete steps

trip me into gloom. The waitress
sags with adolescent splendor,
hunching to avert herself

from my potentially male gaze.
I order with downcast eyes
so she doesn't have to blush.

Three ceiling fans rotate slowly,
and an air conditioner rattles
in its window perch, a chilly sigh

exuding like the breath of a tomb.
The other customers, a couple
in their eighties, leave a tip

shining on the table and depart.
Stevie Wonder on the radio
sings something from the Seventies.

The waitress proffers coffee. I nod
as politely as I dare, vacant stools
rebuking me for being here,

booths haunted by food-smells
many years old. The ski crowd
will pack this place winter weekends,

but the summer glare exposes
the delicate grease-film embalming
the fixtures, the ground-in filth

[stanza break]

of the tile floor dutifully mopped
every evening, and the fatal
heart attacks ghosting from a grill

tended with care by a cook so lean
the waitress, if she weren't so shy,
could strum his ribs like a harp.

Milkweed Days

Across the Fremont land the wisps
of milkweed flutter like strands
of exploded cobweb. I palm
a half-pod and crumple it
to feel the papery compression,
then feed the fragments to the breeze.
When I was six I pestered

Joanne Szluc with sticky tangles
of milkweed filaments. Armed
with the milk squeezed from the leaves,
I pawed the mess into her hair.
The cottony fibers were white
as Grandma's earnest and faintly
senile gaze, so Joanne cried

that I'd made a hag of her.
We stared at each other a moment,
thrilled that she'd used the word "hag."
The tattered milkweed stalks relaxed
as we ran off laughing; then later,
to punish, she pushed me face-down
into garden mulch, and I let her.