

Big Love

I'd been traveling and missed this spring's shy unfolding. So when I returned, it was as if a magician had walked around the yard with a glossy black wand: Pow! Lilacs, purple, white, wine-colored; scent to rock you back on your heels. Bam! Dogwoods, a cotillion of butterflies on bare black branches. Shazam! Peonies exploding, great bombshells of fragrance and silk. Tada! A rainbow row of irises, blossoms shooting from green stalks. Azaleas! Rhododendrons! Everywhere I look, the yard is ready to send its bombs bursting in air. So push down the plunger! Let every twig and stem erupt into flowers. Soon, it will be June, and all of this opulence will be spent confetti littering the lawn. I'm standing here, slack-jawed and gob-smacked, shell-shocked into love. Out by the bird bath, one by one, the poppies slip their green pods, slowly detonate into silent flame.

Poem Ending with a Line from a Workshop

April, and the hills are smeared with pastel chalks: mauve redbuds, hopeful green leaves, a scene that might have been painted by Odilon Redon. In Syria, the hills are ripe with bombs, further denuding a country in crisis. Here, early tulips flicker, light up the town square. There, children search the rubble for what's edible. How can we believe in spring, when we can no longer trust our own government, the one rising from a swamp of lies? The rockets' red flare, tulips bursting in air. Children with kites in a green park. Children on stretchers, poisoned with gas. Families ripped apart. Children searching for candy and eggs. Children looking for their lost parents. The world's plenty. The world's misery.
The possibilities for answers are ash.

Lighthouse and Buildings, Portland Head, Cape Elizabeth, Maine

Edward Hopper, 1927

This April day's as golden as the Allagash beer we drank
on that wharf in Portland; the translucent plate of oysters,
the sunlit wedge of lemon— You drove me out to Portland Head
to see the lighthouse Hopper painted, although walking was difficult:
your labored breath, your stiffened joints, your gimpy heart.
So we sat on the rocks outside the frame, breathing in the salt air,
holding our faces up to the sun, your red hair, brighter than the signal
lamp calling the sailors home. I'd left a bad winter behind, so much snow
we thought there'd still be piles left in the blue shadows come July.
But there we were, on a perfect spring day, the sky the nacre of the inside
of a shell, the ocean laid against the horizon like a knife edge, our backs
resting on the jetty's warm rocks. The buff and tan meadow grass
exhaled with the wind.

And then, years later, an email with the header: sad news, and I don't want
to open it. Grief unhinges me like a shellfish. Hopper said *All I ever wanted to do
was paint sunlight on the side of a barn*. Or on a lighthouse. Look what he does
with his surfaces. Look how the two of us still sit there, beyond the borders,
part of the painting, whose subject is light.

Peonies

Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1920

The peony on the left speaks:
So what if my leaves are starting
to droop, and my stems have turned
the yellow of old newsprint? True,
I'm stuck in a vase, but I'm saved
from the vagaries of wind and weather.
Hail's sharp comments can no longer
cut, and sun's hot stare can't wilt
my blooms. No sudden storm
will drench my petticoats,
drag them in the dirt, and ants can't
have their way with me, caressing
where they will. Now
I'm in full array; my perfume
colors the air, trailing ribbons
and silk scarves. I'm an implosion
of ruffles, a can-can dancer
at the Folies Bergère.
Tomorrow, my petals will litter
the table. But today, it's May,
and the cafés are open. Let's sit
in the sun and drink kir royales.
You know you want to touch me.
I know I want to dance.

Avenue at Chantilly

Paul Cézanne, 1888

Walk with me down this ochre path,
where deep green trees grow into
their own shadows. At road's end,
cold blue roof tiles, shaped like a child's
blocks, loom solid against a frame of foliage.
A fence and its shadow block the lane,
but we can slip around the slide, visit
the Musée Condé: Raphaels, Boticellis,
Watteaus, Corots thickly clustered
in their ornate frames on walls stained
the color of vintage Bordeaux.
Then go and sit under the leafy arbor
by the half-timbered cottages, spoon
crème Chantilly studded with wild
strawberries into our open mouths,
a dish invented by the angels.
Back in the forest, on the avenue,
sunlight still falls in solid planes,
and the umbrella pines keep
their secrets. We look back
from the blue distance,
trying to hold fast to the memory
of this day, which is,
like le Mont Sainte-Victoire,
unattainable, elusive.