

## The Orchard

Even in the dream he's old, returning from his shed  
with a bucket of grubs he's picked off the roses.  
Dead already these twenty years, in my dream  
he moves steadily enough through the back field  
landscaped clear to the power lines  
that marched the length of Beacon Hill.  
My grandfather tended an apple orchard there,  
then set to making rows for sweet pea vines and tomatoes  
though his wife complained of this cultivated Eden,  
worrying it looked too "country" to the neighbors.  
In the winter my grandfather ordered seeds  
from a company out west, and all summer and partway  
through fall sprayed the fruit with a thick mist  
the catalogs recommended until, years later,  
hard, berry-sized tumors grew in his pancreas  
and his wife's small breasts. In the dream,  
he wears one of the thin T-shirts he favored,  
the raveled neck gone transparent at the seams,  
below this a familiar pair of faded slacks—  
"Mao-blue," my uncles ruefully called them—  
bought in Beijing during the Reagan era.  
He'd returned a final time to see his mother,  
and for gifts brought back Mao jackets  
and caps, Mao mailbags and figurines  
my uncles and mother promptly buried  
inside closets and dressers. On the fireplace,  
the last, framed photos of his mother before  
the children packed them off, the woman's shape  
spidery with age, slim feet bound in black.  
She died twice the summer he visited, the first  
after a stroke from which she revived a day later  
in the village's burial hut. My grandfather was good,  
I remember, at fixing bicycles and making shelves,  
he could replace a car clutch and once  
devoted an entire basement wall to a series  
of aquaria he'd built himself and stocked.

None of these interests did he pass on to his children.  
He sat instead quietly through dinner,  
fingering his dish of salted plums, slipping each  
from its waxed wrapper to suck the meat to a pulp  
full of the brined, tart juice of summer.  
Though he wouldn't have been able to tell this  
toward the end: the pesticides, the chemo  
having poisoned his taste buds, perhaps his tongue—  
For in the dream—as in my memories of him—  
he remains speechless, one thin figure working  
in the garden or basement, the neighbor's  
hissed assessment of him filtered  
through the juniper hedge he'd planted as a border  
to gate our garden: *Such an odd man,*  
*he seems intelligent, though who can tell,*  
*him unable to speak a word of English—*  
So that I was startled, years later, coming upon  
his notebooks to find blazons of Chinese and English  
blooming alongside photos of Depression-era girlfriends  
clipped and pasted in satellite configurations  
on black paper filigreed with white paint.  
Curlicues of dragons' tails, emperors, rose trellises—  
The English so carefully rendered, so perfectly phrased  
that now, besides his secret art, it is my lack  
of remembering this voice myself that most  
disappoints, his silence renewed  
in imagination that renders me similarly dumb.  
In the dream, my grandfather holds out a box  
filled with stamps torn off missives from Taiwan  
and Russia, Denmark, Sweden, each one faded  
yet folded carefully up, some in onionskin,  
their water stains and ancient postmarks  
like pressed flowers from a winter garden.  
Whose stamps were these he wanted me to see?  
Why did he believe such minutiae needed preserving?  
I take the box, ignoring his long face looming

in a worry over my own, attracted by the sudden  
Steller's jay that startles past his window.  
I look, and the box slips from my lap, spills  
its stamps like a spray of feathers from the bird  
that has begun feasting now on the apples  
in a corner of the orchard. Its dark head darts  
into the branches for the fruit before the bird rises  
again, flies off, its wings shuddering their streaks of blue  
that fade into the darkness.

## Flowers from a New Love after the Divorce

*Cut back the stems an inch to keep in bloom.*

So instructs the florist's note  
enclosed inside the flowers.  
Who knew what was cut  
could heal again, the green wounds close,  
stitching themselves together?

It doesn't matter. The flowers, red  
and white, will bloom awhile, then wither.  
You sit in an unlit room and watch  
the vase throw crystal shadows through the dark.  
The flowers' colors are so lovely they're painful.  
In a week, you'll have to throw them out.

It's only hope that makes you take out scissors,  
separate each bloom and cut  
where you last measured. Did you know  
Venus was said to turn into a virgin  
each time she bathed? She did it  
as a mark of love. She did it

so as to please her lovers. Perhaps,  
overwhelmed by pain,  
she eventually stopped bathing  
altogether. It doesn't matter. It's a pleasure  
to feel the green nubs stripped, watch the stems  
refresh under your blade. They're here

because they're beautiful. They glow  
inside your crystal vase. And yet  
the flowers by themselves are nothing:  
only a refraction of color that,  
in a week or two, will be thrown out.  
Day by day, the water lowers. The red-

and-white heads droop, blacken at the stems.  
It doesn't matter. Even cut stems heal.  
But what is the point of pain if it heals?  
*Some things should last forever*, instructs  
the florist's note. *Pleasure*,  
says one god. *Shame*, says another.

Venus heads, they call these flowers.  
In a week or two, you'll lose the note,  
have to call the florist up.  
*With sympathy*, you'll think he says.  
Perhaps: *With love*. It doesn't matter.  
You've stopped bathing. Alone,

you sit before the crystal  
vase refracting you in pieces  
through the dark. You watch  
the pale skin bloom inside it, wither.  
You petal, inch by inch.  
You turn red and white together.

## Possibilities in Love

I am so used to not clearly looking  
that even the little ink drawing  
on the wall of this restaurant  
is a negation: the old king standing watch  
over two young lovers,  
only height marking one the hero,  
the other his beloved.  
While the dream etched inside her headpiece  
opens like a window  
onto an owl in winter, giving away her name,  
Guinevere, the white wing of shadow.

The king has an absence in his breast.  
It is a window, too,  
which looks out onto a blue field with a girl  
on a swing, not moving but watching,  
solemnly, her entire world  
a keyhole of green leading  
up to the tiny mansion in which she must live.  
The king's bone arm has been  
denuded of flesh, fallen half  
into death as the romance works itself slowly  
to dust: his cool green eyes stare  
at his wife, her lover, but cannot see  
into each one's dream: hers,  
the snow-white owl; his, the hummingbird  
of vivid green feeding at a trumpet flower.

While under their wild, marvelous heads,  
they too are bones and bones:  
skeletons speckled with rich inks, dappled white  
and pink like the carapaces of the crabs I've found  
littered on shore all week,  
the white sea pounding the stone beach,  
white clouds, white horizon  
that grows and swells only

so that it can later recede.  
*Possibilities in Love*, the title reads,  
and it is perhaps because of all these weeks of white  
I suddenly want it: the details  
so fantastic with its colors that don't dissolve,  
the too-pink flesh, the too-green greenery,  
that though this is not the first time  
I have seen it, it is the first time  
I have chosen to admire it,  
feeling how it's been changed in me:  
this patient accrual of detail that's become  
a measure of belief if not beauty; that makes borders  
and enframements where the horizon  
only slips away.

I have walked all week  
among houses built against and on top of  
the bones of other houses, one era rewriting  
the next, and seen kelp tangled in the broken  
shells of clams and mussels, huge trees  
stripped and rolled to shore, bits of Styrofoam  
and sea-worn glass, strips of tire, a sheen  
of oil, and once even the half-eaten body of a seal.  
All of it evidence that the sea,  
in its relentless working, makes equivalent.

But here, in this painting, the lovers  
who lock themselves into the same gaze—faces  
bridged by an iron clasp literally  
pinning them by the chin—reveal  
their differences: there is no transience, even  
in this romance I keep imagining  
in which a king gives away his wife to a man  
too afraid to keep on wanting her.  
Here, each figure wears an expression of refusal  
in desire: he does not want to see the confession

of his wife. She can't unlock herself  
from the gaze of her timid lover.  
At the most, they want to formulate  
a dream that might explain what it is  
they will not, cannot be.

I have been sitting for hours inside this restaurant,  
watching the sea outside break  
and recede in white waves where fishermen  
shout from the docks, cautiously navigating the cranes  
that swing their cargo over ship railings,  
each one the same size and color and shape,  
as the men, too, in their upturned hoods  
soften and blur, turn into the same man,  
waving and waving.

A ferry turns its sleek side suddenly to the east.  
As it starts to dock, the noon sun  
glazes out its windows, one by one,  
changing each from black to white, and then bright gold,  
blanking out the passengers' faces with light,  
blanking out the flagpole and metal railings  
until I have to shield my eyes by raising up a palm,  
until to see the thing at all  
I have to stop looking.