

Sara Brenchley

Mother's Garden

She knows where to place each booted foot
without crushing the young lives below. She passes
the white and red impatiens, always thirsty,
which could almost clench their petals and shake
their leaves at the sky. She ignores their withered

why me's? steps over fronds of painted ferns,
leaf buds curled like bowed heads, tiny penitents
nudging their path through tree-roots and bark
mulch to salvation: droplets of hose-water,
light filtered through leaves of silver maple.

My mother calls her children by familiar names,
beautiful sky-blue Plumbagos, lavender Liatris,
pink-blossomed Oconee Bells. She remembers
their preferences, grants each desire, shade or no-shade,
alkaline or acidic, moist or dry. For love of them
she ignores her own pain, arthritic knuckles and creaky
knees, humps of dirty laundry, the bored child.

Then come plump moist slugs, gliding stomachs
chewing holes in the broad leaves of Hostas,
the almost invisible aphids, copper-backed Japanese
beetles winnowing through roses, the aggressive crown
vetch that elbows its neighbors. Later, she'll emerge
with fistfuls of dandelion, chickweed, spiky wild onions.
She'll scrub the dirt from her nails, rinse the earth
down the drain, change into her day clothes.

She'll try to explain the wonder of rhizomes,
spring ferns tipping through winter-hard soil, prodigals
returning to their mother's waiting arms, the surprise
of something new, finding what she didn't plant:
the calla lily sprung from the neighbor's garden,
a gift from some bright, thistle-loving bird. Again,
she'll try to reach me with the labor of perfection,

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the making of beauty, summer by summer by summer.

By an Abandoned House in the Woods

Cody sniffs the perimeter of the yard,
the blank cellar, smashed glass,
the rotting girder that rises from fieldstone
rubble like a buckled fist. He lifts

his muzzle, and I follow his gaze, wondering
how tongues of earth speak to him, in scent
of mold on limb, the hollow drum of rabbit
heart in darkness. Imagine he hears tree roots

as they wend through clay and crack
foundations; imagine he hears the rasp of mortar,
displaced pebble, whoosh of air, footfall
of mouse who was there, and now isn't,

the widow sweeping whirligigs off porch
steps or canning peaches on the stove, laundry
rippled on the line, the doors of her daughters'
rooms flung wide as open mouths, cellar

stocked with jam and summer squash.
Her cornfields obscured by paint-blazed
poplars and raspberries red as ink,
no one remains who remembers

the farmstead overlooking the creek,
but her columbine still spreads beneath
the arborvitaes, roots quietly expanding,
clenched like nails, thin as spider veins.

Pygmalion

I yanked a sapling from the crest
of a hill among maples, shook off
the soil, plopped it in my sink.

I civilized the lay of lignified twigs,
wired limbs to mimic the bend
of wind, trimmed roots, and plucked
buds to expose the thin-limbed
lattice of the crown, looking past
wild disheveled youth to decades
of care: a thick-trunked Trident
Maple swept in glorious arcs,
in perfect miniature. I wiped the sap

from open wounds, lodged you
in a gleaming green pot. The water
poured forth—I blessed, you received,
and more than this, I made you art.
So why dart me sour looks?
Why wither and wilt, and autumn
my floor with your complaints?
Have you not learned by now to be still?
Or do your roots yet yearn
for muddy streams, and touching
porcelain draw back forlorn?

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