

An Orange Flower Called Grace

There was the afternoon when I came home
and found you on the stoop
of the old Victorian where, upstairs,
I rented a room with dark blue curtains.

The house was a peach whisper in green overgrowth,
painted steps, peeling trim along the siding.

Where you sat, or just below where you sat,
the lawn rose, uncut and untended.

You were like the grass then,
pitched high and rustling,
triumphant, knowing you done well
in the breezy afternoon light.

In your hand, a flower,
orange,
one I did not know the name of.
Though the smooth, furred petals
made me want to know.

You held it tight,
this unnamed thing,
a whole life wrapped up in brown paper
tied with a length of white ribbon,
knotted at the neck.

I remember:
the way your gaze turned,
the way you leaned when you saw me walking.
The way that came toward you, and
like your gaze,
your whole body curved.

Maybe it was a gerbera or a lily,
a delphinium
or a phlox,
Maybe it was something in-between,
Some laboratory creation,
dreamed up by a scientist
whose name no one will ever tell.

I remember how I hurried up the steps
Wanting to arrive, to reach you,
already inside the moment
when you would stand and
hold out the unnamed flower,
your eyes fixed on the slice of air
the line between us
between anger and forgiveness,
(the line between where we once were
and where I wished we'd stood when I think of it now)

I remember the blue air of that day,
the way the paint flecks dangled from the house's side
held their breath in stillness
when you handed me the nameless thing.
My fingers stretched to reach it,
to grasp the line,
to hold the moment when
I would know the word to name the orange petals,
when, in the echo of that sound,
our hands would finally meet.

The World According to Garp

At first it had been simple.

Eyes across the theater—

the haystack smell of young actors' breath,

lingering in the rafters overhead.

Later, we walked home in the twilight.

"Notice Magic,"

letters somebody had scrawled into the wet cement.

It was autumn then, fall in California,

orange haloes made circles around the streetlamps,

and the pavement was smooth,

damp with rain the whole way through.

Memories of other lovers' dewy mornings

stored in the sidewalk cracks beneath us,

they sighed into the night as we disturbed them

with the pounding of our feet.

I remember your dark hair, too long,

the way it looked black in the lamplight.

A metal smell, salt-water scent from the Pacific.
The brine of youth, of evening, bright,
like the promise of the future
it lay suspended in the fog that rose over the half-stilled bay.
Around us, the cool air was half-invitation
half warning
the same scent that all our lives
had marked that place, that rain.

In your face, I saw questions—yours or mine—I wasn't certain.
Knowing, not knowing,
then knowing and not knowing again.
We were only that—young, scared, and uncertain,
caught out in the heart's vast late-night rain.

Still, our fingers made swirls through the hungry darkness
and, for all our doubts, we still leaned forward
found a way to touch palm to palm, skin to skin.

Then, real life again, standing in your doorway.
The knob against your palm a cold mound of uncertain silver
You turned it and the painted door swung back,

the night expanded, made an orange flare
in the thick of the sky's blue bruise.

Later, there would be the final fight.

Hot afternoon, smoggy sun, your Los Angeles apartment.

The low and hateful sprawl of the blue Murphy bed.

Past the windows, the hills cupped polluted daylight,

as though it were something precious and not the sign of the end of times.

In spite of the blinds, the light screamed in, yellow,

managed to choke and press itself into the room.

Now, when I think of that day,

I cannot always recall your gestures,

cannot always see your blue-black hair,

or conjure the slant of your smile,

cannot remember the words of the book whose pages

with their fresh smell of ink

newly bought at the bookstore

would be the last gift you ever gave.

Instructions for Forgetting

Let us not attempt
the tangles and twists of the body,
the acrobatics that our young shapes once performed.

Let us not reach, warm-palmed, toward the past,
with its rose-lipped letters.

Let us not mourn the gray stones
whose names we once thought
we'd be excused from knowing.

Lost now, the sharpness of our features,
shifted in the millions of moment since we were last seen.

Let us be new, then,
here, now
ageless (or almost)
only our two tanned bodies
and the cold of the air conditioner,
quiet now
in the still air of this room.

Familiar as we can be
here, again as though at first

the room chilly and indifferent.

Draped windows that ease onto a slice of building and sky.

High up places, unknown to us,

they range around like ghosts,

hungry all the time,

showing strangers their teeth.

Look West, oh please, look West—

Oh, please. (Come on, just do it.)

West to the shoreline,

to the memory of what each of us was

in the moment when we were last seen.

We were ever only ourselves,

youth and beauty we did not know

how to still or look at.

And so we held our breath

anticipating tomorrows,

years ahead imagined and imperfect,

though

they were always only happening now.

Then, this small white room was

a place unknown to us.

Though perhaps it was as inevitable,

the movement of waves along the sea

that wide, salted, ancient, maritime graveyard

over whose depths you'd departed

on that morning when

you were first flown

and lost to me.

Of Eros and Dust

The blue winter stars
believed they'd dreamt up
the black bed of the sky
in which they gathered.

Like scattered drops of snow, they lay,
sheltering their light (and their hubris)
in the dry grasses below.

Tonight, as I walk,
the roads and hillsides double and redouble,
tense with the blue light
of the high mountain sky.

These are the stars who know
how a moment comes on quick and sudden—
a darkling sun
a burst
a break
in the sapphire quiet of the night.

There, too, overhead, are the stars that cover up the gravesites.

The tall, stony, curves beneath which the airless sleepers lie.

Tonight their plots are still, silver-dipped and dreamless

in the rustling of the leaves, the heaving of our feet as we pass.

They have no voice, but lie

in shared memory

in the garden

it is hard to believe that they once rose and breathed,

walked this path exactly, or more exactly,

touched Earth with their feet

as we are doing now.