

Mother Was Gentle

She never wore pearls.
When strong enough

she would rise from her sick bed,
tuck us in,
her fingers at rest on our foreheads,
her fingers a moment of warmth,

her eyes lit by the coal lamp
brightening the side of my bed

until she blew the flame out,
the smoke from the wick
a lullaby her breath drew from her lips,
her leaning forward lost to the dark,
I don't ever remember her
closing the door.

Maybe once I heard her

skirt brushing the floorboards
as she crossed
the hall to her room.
Whenever I think of it
I am still twelve

falling asleep with a doll
I seldom cared for
strangely content in my arms.
A mother had let her
face melt in the sun.

Mother's dying was like the grapevine
Father would tend.

It overwhelmed one side of the house.
He named it Isabella.
I resented him, thought he loved
her every twist more than Mother,
more than myself. I was wrong,

now know as Mother knew
the comfort he found in pruning,

each cut giving shape
to Isabella's dark curves.

I wish Mother had told me.

Such knowledge is climbing
too late with unruly limbs
about the rooms of my flesh.
No longer young,
long used to sitting alone

here under this alder
in Father's praying chair —
sternly sighing *amen*
as it always did under his weight —

I examine each twist of vine
in the leaf-
mottled light of my afternoon

garden where my dogs
cavort like children,
chasing their tails.
Remembering that time,
what little I know of it

is a tangle of growth
and dead wood.

Like Isabella's fruit
its ripeness is sour,
such bruised skin
soon to collapse inward,
wrinkle round darkness.

Mother was gentle,
was Father's reflection,

her grey eyes fine steel.
Strong enough once
she took me, his truant,
into the forest.
We picnicked, the two of us,

all afternoon.
I made daisy chains

while every moment she hemmed,
with straight seams,
broad folds of linen
into a stiff apron for Small.

We both wore daisies.

We smiled secretly at high tea
when we got home.

Mother was so gentle
and now I am old.