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, fingerling 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,
solemly, 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

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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.