1984

Gardenias

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In Puerto Rico in 1939 my mother has leaned against a garden gate, her hands in the black dotted pockets of her dress. In one she holds a small bitter orange she’s picked today. She is waiting for my father, who’s perhaps stopped again for gardenias at the market; his khaki truck might be mired in this afternoon’s rain. When he does come home he will carry beside him his leather case of tools: level and T-square, compass, a little gray testament of trigonometric functions, the rolled prints of a bridge, thunderhead blue. She would like to ride on the seat beside him, its cracked upholstery cool against the straight seams of her hose. She watches the road, pokes a black, strapped heel at the foot of a clump of lilies blaring their whiteness above the fence, taller than anything at home. Here green is magnified, the blooms more headily fragrant than everything she’s known. She would like him to regard her as he does his tools, each set in place in its polished, latched case. Instead she is part of this garden with its dense heat, its lack of boundaries, its insistent green. I will not be conceived for fourteen years, though perhaps I am in some form imagined, the outline of “son” like a vacancy in a mural, a section the painter has saved for last, unable to imagine how the remaining space might be filled. She may imagine the nimbus forms of my sister, my shadow brother who’ll die at birth. (She will tell me where he’s buried, but I cannot remember.) What I can construct of this scene rises from snapshots and the recollection of snapshots. For the moment’s dreamed duration, this is the height of summer, the southern cross already rising, not yet visible, behind the deep blue rim.
of the afternoon's storm. She stands with her back
to the garden of melons and rampant mint,
dizzy as if overpowered by perfume, and leans
into the gatepost with all her weight,
her eyes closed, waiting into evening
for the truck grinding gravel at the foot of the hill.