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I put the pyrocanthus in a blue vase and spread the coneflower over my kitchen table. I had to make sure they could bear the noise and catch the benefits of my small radio as if they were more than flowers—glass frogs at least, or metal quail, their ears amazed, their small heads nodding with the music. As far as the changes in government, as far as that noise, the frog presides over that, he is a kind of congressman anyhow with his huge mouth open to catch the flies and beetles; he has turned green from money sticking to his skin. As far as the coneflower, as far as the rays, they were already gone and only the wood was left, only the naked beautiful heads. As far as my love was concerned I picked them before the snow came, before the ice filled up the cavities and the cold leaves turned thin and curled themselves around the stem. As far as the pyrocanthus, as far as the vase, as far as the metal quail, their eyes turned up, their tiny beaks in the air, I turned the knob from music to religion and let it rest on wisdom, two or three voices, an English, a German, discussing rape in Asia, discussing starvation, the quail nodded, even the pyrocanthus nodded, and I, a little furious, I turned to Canada to see what the French were doing. That day I ate soba, with parsley; I ate standing up; I fed the quail: I fed the plants, though they were dead, I listened to the forecast, I shaved in the dark, making sure I got both cheeks and the hair above the bullet. Afterwards I opened a 1970 New York Times, something
about the new mayor, something about a murder behind a bush, something about a dump on fire, either a bomb or a match, a heartless speech by a Georgia senator, a horoscope, a kidnapping, a stock decline. I sang first to the cloves but I whispered to the garlic and ate two pounds of grapes. The frog lay down, as far as I know, with the pyrocanthus, it was something like bestiality, the coneflower wrapped itself around the vase and I lay down on the sofa; but first I put my glasses in my right shoe and dropped my keys in the delicate acorn bowl, then turned my leg so the wallet wouldn't cut my buttocks. As I recall I thought of the quail before I went to sleep, one of them is tall and straight, he is the watchdog, the other bends down to eat. I have to lie just so with my head like that and my feet like that, it is a little small for a bed, although my sleep, of all my happy sleeps, is happiest there on that white silk. I had a word with the frog and one with the pyrocanthus, I had to school them considering the date; all the holidays were happening at once and it would be disaster if they didn't get ready. "America may not have room for you," I said. We giggled and turned the lights out; even a little light can ruin your sleep, no matter how much Mozart flows over you, no matter how much Fats Waller. Darkness is what we love. "Darkness, darkness," they sang; the frog was a tenor—what a shock!—the pyrocanthus was a pipe, the coneflower a wheeze or two. I was an alto—after all those years a measly alto with only a little range: "Oh put us all to sleep, it's 1994, put us to sleep, darkness, darkness!" a little tin shout from the lower two registers, a little broken glass from the upper.