

ONCE MY MOTHER KNEW MY NAME

For Penelope

Once my mother knew my name
as she did those of violet, trillium,
cinquefoil, the poppies in Flanders' fields.
Nothing will ever feel the same.

Surely what sustains us is just this simple.
A shadow racing across a pasture
faster than thought and then we are caught
in a hot pure light. Once my mother knew my name.
I heard her, like an answer.

These nights I watch the moths cicade
through the light's halo and dream inside
the moon's perfect globe a flower unfolds
furtive and luxurious as womanhood.
Petal by petal, I assume my mother's myth
and begin the unraveling designed
to transcend time. First my name, then hers.

As a child, enthralled, bewildered,
I would watch for hours as Japanese flowers
bloomed from clam shells no larger than my thumbnail.
Mute. Huge. Blazing.
Names I believed were transformations.
I stared into the water glass as if into God's face
the equation was that exact.

Now I am left with a sensory trace deeper
than memory, the pressure of my mother's shoulder
as wordlessly we watched together. Like homecoming,
to name is to lose, reclaim. The thought threatens
to tear my mind as if it were flesh:
She knew me before I knew myself.

She doesn't know where she is any longer.
She doesn't know what makes her face clammy, wet.
As I stroke her forehead beads of sweat break inside my hand.
Glass. Water. Mother. Daughter.
Once she knew my name.
I hurt her like an answer.
Now I hold her because it is the language left to us.
It is the deepest form of worship.
If the past were a glass, enough grace settles here,
petal by petal, to define a lifetime.