

The summer of 1913

On the meadow flats the angular legs
of horses rise in the air, as they press
their backs against the grass. The mistle thrush
cocks its head and listens for the movement
of a worm beneath the earth; the marsh water
ticks under the lady's smock while the rag-wort
picks its colours from the sun. Townhall clock
and ploughman's spikenard you bring them
to me with your face against the light,
as the mustard field steams amongst formal
trees that stand dark above the swollen hill.

In the garden, the laburnum adjusts
its yellow feather boa, and lowers
its perfume to the ground. The flowers move
restlessly, conscious of the chestnut's
creamy stiffs. Once more, like an old servant,
the wisteria flowers against the house
and pours its scent obediently upon you.
I feel your hands touch my neck as I stroke
the iris's soft tongue of yellow fur.
Your muslin dress sways gently. My tweeds
are out of season and prickle in the heat.

All over the world now, the musk plant's hairs
are shrivelling as its heavy perfume fades.
Today, at the nurse's cottage, you picked
a monkey flower and held it for me.

Close to my face, your eyes watched, as I smelt
nothing. Over, for ever. Far from the Aleutian Islands
the parlour maids are closing up the shutters.
From my bedroom window, I notice that
imperceptibly the chestnut's blossom
has faded. Beside it the lilac shines
a luminous white in the early darkness.

The summer's programme unfolds as the song
of a pianola. The syringa shrinks
into rusty curls, and the hawthorn's breath
turns sour: the blossom that we picked has changed
to spikes. The gardener ties up the daffodils,
and tactfully removes the headless tulips.
The carcasses of queen bees lie soft now,
young rooks are falling from their nests
as their parents starve. A cat hesitates
among the aubrietia as it watches
a sparrow crack a snail upon its anvil.

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