

THE  
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This Summer's Peonies

Everything in this room is a scummed surface  
needing to be washed: metal rims,  
plastic mattresses dotted with grated airholes,  
molded furniture of textured plastic. *Nothing*

*is beautiful here, my mother mumbles, all tears.*  
Her room's a clutter of walkers  
and wheelchairs, privacy curtains never  
drawn shut. I want to lie, to say

I visit often. My arms are filled  
with clusters of this summer's peonies.  
I've wrapped their silky stems in a bandage  
of wet napkins to keep them fresh. How these flowers

puff into layers of rounded petals, each center's  
faint knot foaming to the richness of pink  
or lavender! Pale fragrance scents my hands. Dirt  
bruises my palms, these stems and petals taken

from bushes in the side yard. Put them in a jar.  
Let them billow over thick glass, shed their color  
across plastic and disinfectant. Two old women  
snore above the fretful hiss of catheters.

As their urine slowly rises in plastic bags,  
it darkens to umber. Mother doesn't sleep at night.  
She tells me smudges of hallway light drift  
through the open door when the orderly arrives.

*It's time, it's time, she whispers. The tube  
in her nose cramps its way down her throat  
and the machine clicks off another feeding.  
Cloth diapers gather between her thighs, glow*

*sweetly beneath the warmth of clear urine. She needs  
to be changed. He's all the way in. They listen  
to the old women moaning behind their empty mouths.  
Do the women dream of desire, of rolling over?*

*Who could imagine the beauty of this gesture?  
Mother's eyes slip shut, the only movement left.  
His hands, his hands. Now he eases down  
bedcovers stamped black in blocky letters, pushes aside*

*the gown marked with her first name. When I ask  
What is his name? her stiff white arms  
roll up against her chest, flatten her breasts.  
Forgotten muscles spasm into memory,*

*everything she has lost. Take a breath.  
Inhale this odor of old bodies, of flesh rotting off  
the bone, of skin needing touch, of soft convulsions  
and lush summer flowers bending in a castoff jar.*