Flowers for Gabriella

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I forget if it was tulips or roses
we threw on Victor’s sinking coffin.
I like to remember it as spring:
great handfuls of pastel tulips.

I remember a plane ride,
coming home alone,
thinking all the time of our tenements,
stacked side to side, high and human.
Deep green and orange honeysuckle vines
along and between the buildings,
sucking out their sweetness from the bitter red brick.

Your great grandfather beat his pregnant wife.
He hoped, if she just bled enough,
he could excuse himself from the revolution.
She did not bleed for long, nor did her child.
He went off to fight.
She eased the three-headed pain inside with a tea
brewed from lemon and hibiscus petals.

Before a high school dance
my small blonde date—slight shouldered wisconsin girl—
pinned a carnation to my lapel.
Her hand trembled all the way
and fumbling, pricked herself on the pin.
She left her pale hand on my chest,
still trembling.
Your great-grandfather died at Torreon, going down under his horse after the first volley. When the hooves and dust had passed, open eyes staring on a patch of nearby daisies: (he thought last of his wife and child, like daisies) white petals, yellow center, roots that grew strong and deep, and red.

When we saw Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers* lilting in their vase like forgotten royalty, we suddenly left that place. In central park we stretched ourselves it seemed, to the heatless winter sun and lying, said nothing for a very long time.

Casablanca lilies, heavy headed in the vase pull on their stems and quickly bow. The burden of their fragrant heads always too much for a sudden lack of roots. My mother used to say, if I pulled the pollen off their pistils they would live longer. I could never bring myself to do it.
When your mother threaded orange blossoms
through your hair, her hand also trembled.
You didn’t notice, you were a child,
and refused to come in at dusk when she called.
She told me once,
walking through the orchard
And looking at the pebbled, fallen fruit
that she mourned you even then.

The construction paper roses on the dresser
(where you left them)
gather dust and, when I pick them up,
leave their imprint on the clean black wood.
I have come to unfold them, and learn
How they were made.
Instead, I just look at the absent space in the dust,
And at the red tops of the flowers,
Open like wounds.