

Three Poems for My Mother

Philip White

For Your Birthday: Planting in the Rain

Halfway through, a dogged rain
sluiced down, skin-slapping
and unseasonably cold, slopping the soil
at our shoes, filling the holes
with brown puddles showing plashed

glimpses of the sky's broken gray.
Then he pitched in, fell
to his knees in the slick mud,
splayed roots and sickened color
of his own hands in the holes so we,

sinking, too, in the slime and shivering,
could press soil around them and pour
in root starter he'd mixed in one of his womb-
shaped flasks. All this, near the end
of his five years' tenure in hell,

an existence in which every breath and move
meant suffering. And you stood by,
nervous at his exertion, suffering it,
the way a child must suffer forever
the mystery of his mother's love

and pain — suffering it,
because it was for you.

Fall Canker

In October, rose blight
overran the roots and stems,
flecks infecting the skin
like scabs or tiny cancers.
Still, the night he died,

your crimson-tipped buds,
pronged the vitiated light.
You hovered in the dark hush
of a room filled with flowers
and the presence of the dead,

and everyone marveled.
But, young, at odds with life,
and bewildered by such easy
grace, how could I accept
your faith, unless I'd seen

your pain, your terror?
Two years now. Mother,
the canker this fall
has taken the rose buds.
Only so much corrupt life

can be cropped away by cold,
well-meaning shears.

A Place for Roses

The spring moon sheds
its bloodless gray tonight,
and the pruned thorns spread
their dead stick shadows
like a hand of blessing

across the prints
from your canvas shoes.
All day you spent digging
about the roots, loosening
the soil, turning in

bone meal and nutrients.
Tonight, something in me
stirs at the memory
of the ruddy leaf shoots,
furled and tender skinned,

that now are horned
and liverspotted and stiff.
After your day of labor
I can almost believe
these lopped, ill limbs

will rise up
and bear life.

