

Pilgrimage

Joanna Brooks

After ten hours of driving, out of the old station wagon.
My mother, roadworn, care poor,
steps over the fallen gate.

Weeds up and reclaimed the place—
grasses dry and whispering,
ropey oaks thick with witches' hair.

Mother feels the walls,
bricks turn her hands red, old newspapers
brittle under her feet.

This was great grandfather's house.
Before that, great-great.
Can you feel our ancestors here? she says.

Truth is, no. We sit out in the yard,
squinting, picking grass,
the bad laughing daughters we have always been.
Glad to be out of the car for the first time since Beaver.

We love our laughing more than any house.
Who needs them? Blocks and blocks, forgotten,
burn and fall. The flowers keep coming up
and the animals keep coming in.

This is the history of that ruin:
Great-great Grandpa got gored by a bull
walking back from work on the Salt Lake temple.
Grandpa built temples and Grandma kept garden

and some people's hearts turn to their fathers,
but let me tell you—us bad daughters—
our hearts are turning to our mothers
and it is no easy task

to love again these small gardens,
hedged up stubborn against winter sky, summer sky,
enough somehow—miracle on miracle—
increasing long after she's gone.

Mom and Dad pick through the rocks.
I find what's holy in your face, sister,
golden grass, blue sky, your blue eyes same
as years ago, as children, Sunbeams.

Since then we learned that
telling the truth brings the bricks down sometimes.
Not that we don't love great-great grandfather,
his ribs sunpicked in the rubble of the house.
God's own grasses seem to violate his holy frame,
all white and arches. Grandmother (we guess)
lies under these fields, tossed out like a lost rib,
taken back, blooming again, sure as sage, as sun.

If all houses are like this one.
If all houses are like this one. Hush, sister,
let me tell you a secret (cupped hands):
the garden will grow up and up, overcome it.

Returning to the place
to find it ruined—
does this make you disappointed
or a discoverer?

If life has done something for me
(and I'm grateful for this opportunity)
it has constantly disappointed me.

All the right things fall apart and
we laugh at all the wrong places,
my sisters and I so bad
we could walk all the way there,
barefoot, if the reasons were right.

And wild and barefoot is the way we go
'cause someone else's reasons fit like someone else's shoes.
Their memories fit wrong too.
Too small for our young heads.

We have a photograph of this day.
Melissa stands in mustard weed breast high.
She is blonde, wearing her blue cardigan,
blessed. The house is behind her.
She's laughing.