

THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS

When I was ten I heard her called a whore,  
the sentence fletched with barbs that stung my spine.  
I'd followed her through years of phlox before  
that word bored itching in my brain. Define  
the user of a hoe: But that could not  
explain the rancid tone of voice that fell  
like spattered ale-foam on my father's hot  
hearthstones. Unfitting with her bouquet smell.  
I later learned the meaning of the slur,  
through tears watched trembling sun refract with lies.  
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her;  
I raged, not knowing what I should despise.  
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers--  
quicksilver dropped on hard-as-granite stairs.

Long months uncoiled the ancient codes within,  
preparing me as resident temptation.  
I saw the pausing eyes my next of kin  
imposed on me, their sullen fascination  
with hip and thigh, my budding breasts. Were they  
designs of sin? Oh, for an older friend!  
The one I'd cherished so had moved away  
when father "had a word with her".... "You tend  
your lessons, girl, forget that piece of trash,"  
he growled when I inquired. I missed her more  
that season, watched her garden's slow backlash  
of weeds where beauty used to rise and pour  
against our wall. By summer's end, I knew:  
What my father called her wasn't true.

But why did he degrade her? Why such hate  
a child could feel its pulse? The evening fire  
hissed and cracked like a rabbit gun, a spate  
of sparks gnawed on the rug. He cursed the spire  
of smoke that rose like one ghost finger prodding,  
examining its host. He drained his glass;  
he started teasing, yellow-smiling, nodding.  
I never learned effective ways to pass  
him off. A choking feeling, hot and brittle,  
abashed excuses trailed me to my room  
attended by his grinding "Surly little--"  
My door closed on the rest. The quiet gloom  
encased my mind till sleep brought amnesty.  
I woke, my father reeking over me.

--Glenna Holloway

ICON, Hart Crane Memorial Award, Kent State U., 1987