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The Botanist at his Mother's Grave

... that first generation of Romantics ... had a deep distrust of science. Wordsworth said, memorably, that a scientist was someone who would botanise on his mother's grave. Ian McEwan

I visit every month
to argue with you a while
able to get my words out now
(you always had a sharp tongue -
often called me your first mistake).
I understood your humours
generated by genes and injustice
the well-painted iron gates
the London conference organisers
condescending to a woman of science

No need to bring you shop blooms in cellophane.
viola banksii, native violet, knots across
your rectangle
and on the headstone behind
lies witty lichen and mirthful moss

Who would have thought you could leave
such a mark on the world -
educated, bigoted, whimsical, loyal to a fault,
never a category
pinned down between stones in Dutton Park

There is a fig tree here you could observe
if propped up on your elbows,
and behind that a musky river.
That tree was raised and disciplined by language
but messily born of the senses.
You knew the difference.

The ground cover and its sly fragrance
wrestles with pigweed and thistle.
Don't get lost in the detail, you would have said
with your lopsided mouth.
So many figs to choose from,
so much warfare in that water.
You see how non-specific I can be?

I crush some petals between thumb and finger
and there is your dressing table with its potions,
or the day we rolled down a hill at Hampstead
clover flattened by frivolity.

I say your name aloud, as an experiment,
and am surprised at the gentleness.
But less real than when we lived
and bickered in the breakfast room,
too close to be careful.

I forgot to tell you,
I've read your Didion book
underlined with shaky pencil.
I know the grief traps, I know what this is.

Your face was rough with gardening and pain.
We sit and watch the river,
fingers entwined, listening under grey birds,
until I think of a witty answer
to your last sarcasm, and keep you here.