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## The Tulip-Tree

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## *The Tulip-tree*

—For Michael Odom

Relationships have all these prepositional  
departures; I walk toward the tulip-tree  
imagining a heart attack  
explains the seizing in my chest which really is my lover  
making a fist as she swims  
in a hotel pool. Real life is miles away. I am too young;  
people meant to die almost never do  
reach the clinic door, mostly they don't understand  
what the matter is. I've seen it, ambulance attendants  
fighting off the corpse's refusals, begging him  
to be still, as I am still, inhabiting  
this garden outside the student-clinic door. Oh, tulip-tree,  
to address you, like my life, is to imagine  
you my own. By little increments  
openings possess themselves by giving  
obsolete postures away. I prefer the Australian crawl,  
sex with a man on my back, sex with a woman  
sitting in a teak chair on a balcony overlooking  
any terrifying stretch of sea. When the heart beats faster,  
the muscle pales in drifts.  
Conceptions of the self blow away like gull feathers  
and litter. Without my glasses, ruined condoms  
look like petals, especially pretty ones.  
I've never made love to someone I could see any better  
than a swimmer calling  
from the fog. Should I go inside whispering, "Save me,"  
the nurses would panic and flutter, each white hat  
threatened in the wind each pale hand  
would fan up, reaching  
for my arm. The breeze outside at least is natural  
and the violet petals  
heady, rich  
as I imagine the elixir is the doctor  
might have given me.  
"Imagine;"  
"Might have given me":  
the lilting half-predictions run the way a lover's  
quirks become predictable, necessary,  
and my own  
personality,  
to leave it behind like just another old

collection of commemorative spoons, this,  
I think,  
is what dying does, or infidelity, or laying back on this lawn  
beneath a tulip-tree brightening when sunlight  
grades finally through the gauzy cloud mesh  
and believes—oh, never mind. Sunlight  
never believes anything. I hate the pathetic fallacy, though I  
turn to it again and again, with myself, saying “he  
loves that girl,” “he  
likes that salesman’s hands  
drawing the brush in question  
through his hair.” “He has memories.”  
The sun, too, has memories.  
The light will carry them,  
images, like movies, interstellar eyes can never  
interrupt, only  
witness. Life passing before my own, brown, dilating  
screens. I think I may never relax enough  
to let my death inside me. I pretend the branch  
must give away a lot  
of hate, of distancing,  
to let the parting cup of tulip-which-is-not-tulip  
just fall. Why must I always imagine death  
forever as a passing out of gardens with no hope  
of bringing, nor entirely abandoning,  
the wetness  
of a body? My cheek  
rests now on the grass.  
The petals light as sparrows do  
imitations, one of another,  
over and over, repeated  
like beats gently laid  
into lovers, like strokes  
which plumb the fragile heart. I am not,  
I am not  
dying today. It is just  
the need now and then to speak of it; often, before sleeping,  
I’ve been known  
to murmur foolishness, “I loved  
the refrigerator,” “Help me  
slate among the trees,” “Anarchy  
heart.” In France they call  
whatever an orgasm is

the little death. I say why try to give sensations  
Linate names,  
to type them like trees, the branching  
ways a life may end  
without resembling  
another? Incarnation  
by incarnation,  
my falsish death  
advances and retreats. The petalled waves  
fall many at a time  
in this variegated breeze. I hardly remember  
walking here, excusing myself  
from whomever  
cared so little (that is it,  
what I hated about pain), cared so little  
and would not come.

*Craig Gingrich-Philbrook*