

I STILL BUY SOAP THAT SMELLS LIKE LILACS

by Makayla Wamboldt

I.

I have a photograph of you smiling over orchids
in the Gaiser Conservatory. Your eyes are closed,

and even now, holding the photo, looking at you,
I know it must have smelled like a Japanese summer.

Among the tropical plants we are telling each other
stories with plucked petals, *she loves me, she loves me,*

she loves me. Your lungs fill with flowers,
red laceleaf, breathing beautiful refusals

of becoming anything less than in love. Outside
the arboretum they are uprooting plants for winter,

turning soil, saving seed to be sown in spring.
Still believing you were smiling because of me.

II.

The texture of our love will always be imperfect
like the summer we spent apart or the weekend together.

Late August in the perennial garden I pack a picnic lunch
of roasted fig salad and brie, with a dry Riesling I hide

in a metal jar because I'm just nineteen and trying hard
to be romantic. Your touch has notes of apricot and black

licorice. We're lounging among the chrysanthemums,
tangling our bodies behind purple and blue hydrangeas.

For months I've forgotten your lips taste like sunshine,
endlessly happy until this grows again in April.

III.

All winter it hurt to look at you, trying to explain how
peonies survive the cold: cut back the foliage, mulch

the base with shredded bark once the ground freezes.
God, are they beautiful. And then snow shadows

like a dream subduing memory of light stained walks
of last December around the pond, trying to explain

how two bodies can lie side by side and not feel reassured.
Trying to explain how we washed burgundy from

wineglasses, blew out the candle with the wooden
wick, and tried again and again to walk out into the cold.

IV.

The spring before you left for good we sat among
lilacs one last time when I found myself thinking

what a simple man you always were – your pleasure in honest
conversation, philosophy, feeling the turn of the earth,

your hands on my body. Longing. Moving away, leaving
Spokane. I'm alone breathing in lilacs, turning photographs

in circles, you board a plane to somewhere
without seasons. Petals falling in the conservatory.