



LILACS

THERE IS A SWALE on my place where cold air collects, and where lilac bushes grow happily. In April I cut flowering branches and take them to the farmers' market. I unload my van, setting out my buckets of lilacs, buckets of irises, buckets of ranunculus, some late tulips, a few late anemones yet.

By sunrise the early customers are striding through the market. Here comes one now, fiftyish, gray pixie haircut, glasses, basket under the arm, purposeful stride. She looks over, then stops. "Lilacs!" It is at once a question, an answer, an exclamation. She approaches my stand, picks up a bunch of lilacs, holds it to her face, closes her eyes, inhales deeply, holds her breath for a count of three, exhales, and then begins to talk.

"The spring I was seven years old, my mother was in the hospital. I went to live with my grandmother on her farm in Illinois. Outside the back door was an enormous lilac bush, with a hollow space under it like a cave. My cousin and I spent hours sitting under that bush, talking and catching bees."

"Were you ever stung?"

"No."

"Those must have been gentle bees, or maybe you were gentle children. Would you

like a bunch of lilacs? They're four dollars."

"Do they last?"

"Not too well. They're undependable. Maybe three days. Cut the stems under hot water when you get them home."

"Yes, I'll take a bunch."

Rumpled academic type, tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, long curls of gray hair stylishly hanging over his collar. "Lilacs!" Eyebrows raised dramatically. Picks up a bunch. Deep inhale, eyes closed, count of three. Drops them back into the bucket. "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd . . ." he begins, and makes an expansive gesture to encompass the row of etceteras needed to finish the quote. This is the main variant of the monologues of reminiscence—the first line of Whitman's poem. I hear it a dozen times in the course of the morning. It is a rare bird who gets past the first line, however.

Paunchy businessman, gray hair, bald spot, reading glasses in his shirt pocket and attached to a cord around his neck. "Are these lilacs?!" The deep inhale, eyes closed, count of three, exhale, eyes still closed. "Wellesley, Massachusetts, May of '67, Theresa. Sweet Theresa of the short, short skirts." He inhales greedily.

"She sounds delightful. Would you like to buy a bunch? They're four bucks."

"Yes, yes, good idea." He hums happily while I wrap his flowers in newspaper.

An old lady, eighty-five at least, stepping carefully through the market, hair white, dark-green beret askew, transfixed by a silver pin, green overcoat, eyes of Ming dynasty blue-and-white porcelain. "Lilacs!" She raises a bunch of flowers to her face. Molecules of lilac scent tumble upward in the airstream, alight in her nasal passages, find the chemoreceptors on nerve endings into which they fit like a key into a lock. Antique neural circuits hum to life. I wait expectantly.

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd, and the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night, I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring. Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring, lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, and thought of him I love. . . ." By the time she begins the third stanza in her quavering voice, eyes closed, I realize she knows it all, the whole poem, and will recite it all. The clatter and swirl of the marketplace fall away. We are enclosed in an intimate bubble, just the three of us: the dusty farmer with his buckets of flowers; the porcelain-eyed narrator, clutching her stem of lilac; and the mournful, whiskery Whitman. 🐝