

DEBORAH BURNHAM

Potting Shed

How could she dig all day? Bent like a twig, her hair
Wisping to her black shoes, she was old and layered like an onion
In prickling serge. I bent with her, saw her shoebuttons gleam
Like licorice, tried to lick them, then leaned my cheek
On her soft hip, watched birds skim the pond
That I could not touch or drink. I hid under her black straw hat;
The world split into hot chunks of sun, dark bars across my eyes.
The noon sun made her shadow short and black. I dug it up,
Filled my shoes with mud, swayed in her footprints
While she trained rough vines to pierce the air,
Shaped round patches with her stern hoe.
Her husband was a great white bear. His muddy thumbs
Punched his tobacco down and I smelled earth and cherries
In the smoke when he bent to tug my braids. I sifted peat,
Loam and sand; he taught roots their rough separations,
Loved them more than the wide blooms.
In the shed's moist dark, they stopped, touched clean rotting,
All thin greens. Warm in love's rooting place,
They kissed each other's hair while, crouched with the bags of peat,
I held my breath, smelled the wet clay,
And we heard a bird splash in the pond.