

Mount Auburn Cemetery

Gwen L. Nagel

I have come to photograph
Close up, the blooms that glimmer
Lucent on black branches
White, pink, gold freight
Of flowering plums, magnolias, tulip trees
Some past their prime, the earth beneath them
Littered with fallen petals,
Some, like the lilacs, just coming into their own.

I am surprised to see I have companions
In these acres of the dead
An old couple walks hand in hand
A girl pushes a child in a stroller
A man, recording names in a notebook,
Stands before ornamental trees, the labeled specimens.
Workmen ride by,
The bed of their truck loaded with shovels
And the shrubs to be planted this morning.
A pair of ducks fly over,
Land in a pool banked with jonquils,
And six turtles sunning themselves
Slip into the dark
Pond that reflects, with the gold of the willows,
The edifice of someone no one remembers anymore.

Everything here seems quickened, in bloom:
Blue faces of petunias, freshly set,
Red tulips, from bulbs buried in an earlier time,
Yellow sprays of forsythia and
A dogwood, its airy white blossoms
Floating unwedded to each other,
Each a discrete flower
That I view singly
Like the words handwritten by a girl I know
Which separate until you lose all sense of matter and see
Only fragments on the page.
When I step back to see the tree whole
I set my lens on infinity
And the assemblage of stones
Once a blur, intrude.
All the old ghosts, ungrieved by me
Now in focus.
I try other angles but finally concede
To the four white lettered stones
Inseparable from the flowering tree,
And I shoot.

"Have you seen anything?"
An old woman with binoculars asks.
I could tell her about the ducks
Or the frightened turtles
Or how there is something to be divined
In the dogwoods
Some testimony, inescapable, worth hearing
But I point to my camera
And shake my head.
She acknowledges her error and moves past,
Stalking the birdlife of this place.