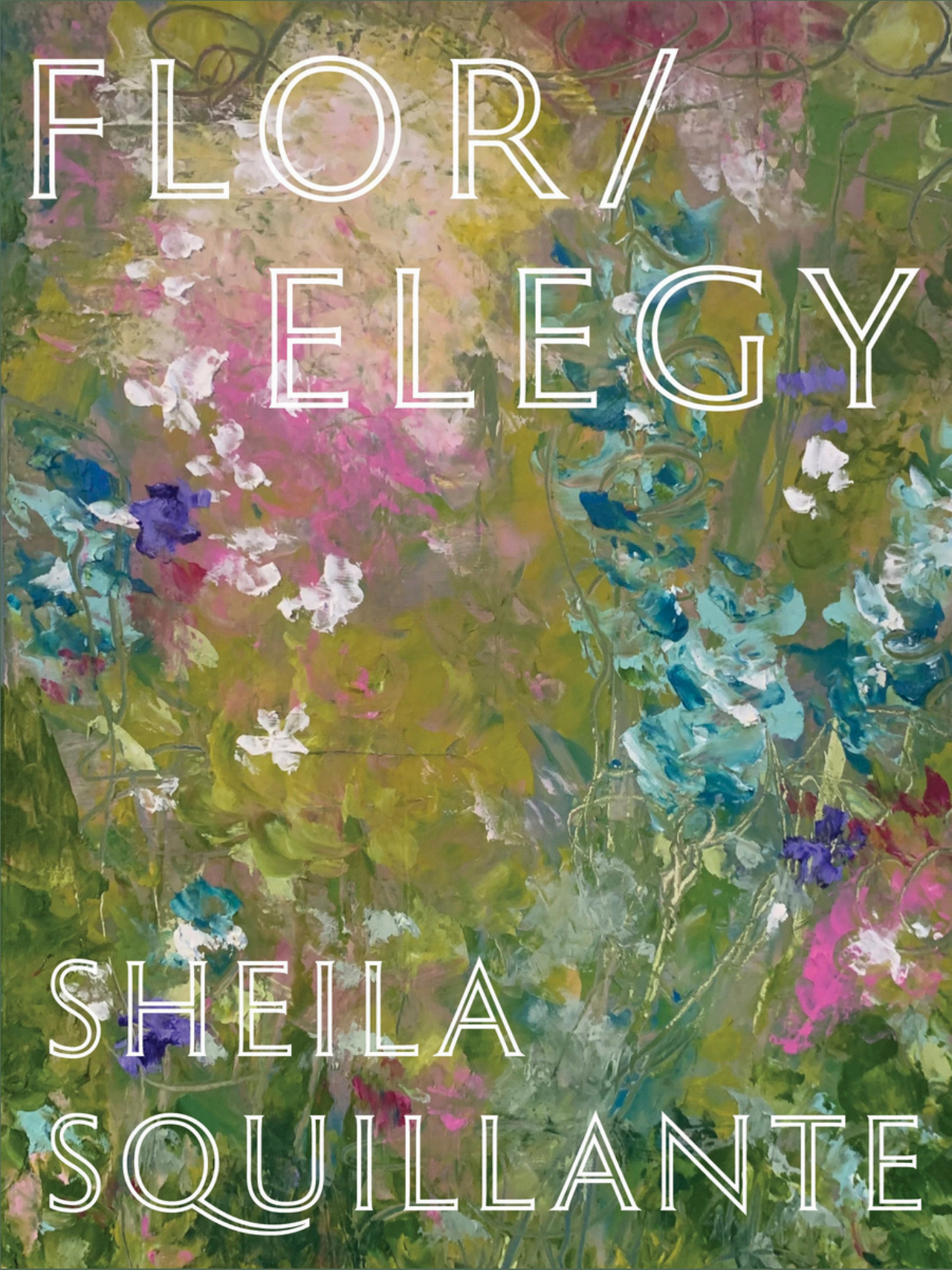


An abstract painting of flowers in various colors including pink, blue, purple, and white, set against a background of green and yellow foliage. The style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

FLOR/ ELEGY

SHEILA
SQUILLANTE

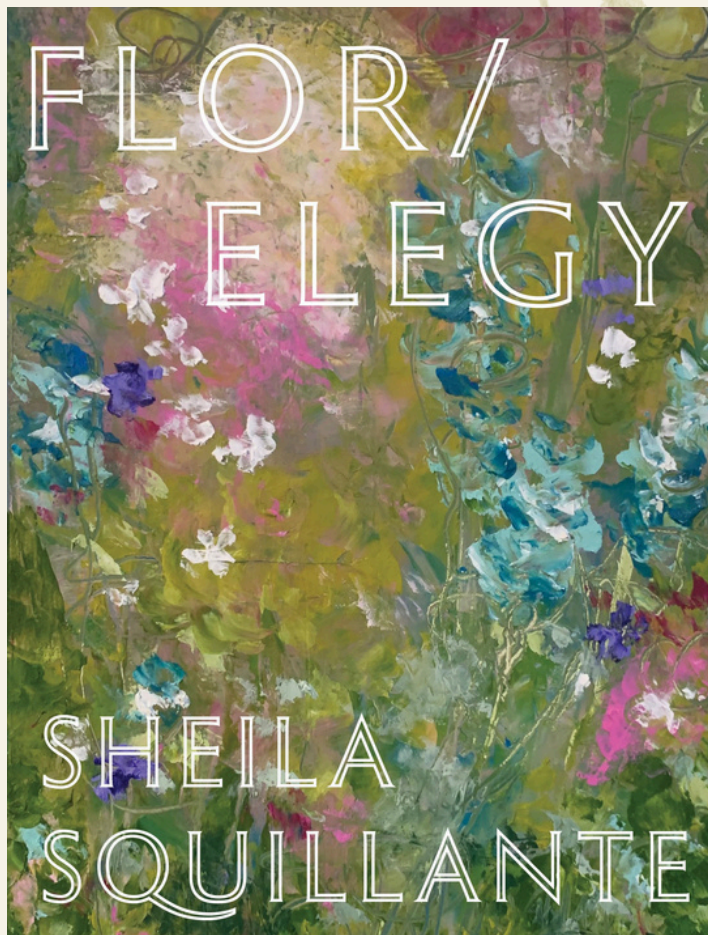


Carnegie Mellon University Press
Poetry Series
February, 2027

about the book

A collection of poetry that confronts grief both personal and global as the speaker faces middle age.

Flor/elegy confronts midlife grief and responsibility in a world shaped by loss, violence, and environmental precarity. Written after the death of both parents, the collection explores motherhood and long marriage, as well as our relationship to self, memory, and the natural world. Tender and unsparing, these poems ask us to pay attention, to love fiercely, to hold fast, and to endure.



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about the poet

SHEILA SQUILLANTE is a writer and visual artist living in Pittsburgh. She is the author of the essay collection, *All Things Edible, Random and Odd: Essays on Grief, Love and Food* (Clash Books); the poetry collections, *Mostly Human*, winner of the 2020 Wicked Woman Book Prize from Brick House Books, and *Beautiful Nerve*, as well as four chapbooks of poetry: *Dear Sunder*, *In This Dream of My Father*, *Women Who Pawn Their Jewelry* and *A Woman Traces the Shoreline*. She is also co-author, along with Sandra L. Faulkner, of the writing craft book, *Writing the Personal: Getting Your Stories onto the Page*. *Flor/elegy*, her third collection of poems, will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2027.

She is program director and professor of creative writing for the MFA program at Chatham University where she serves as executive editor of *The Fourth River*, a journal of nature and place-based writing. In 2025, she founded the groundbreaking Fallingwater Residency in Nature and Place-Based Writing for Chatham MFA.

Her visual art has been featured in numerous literary journals, including *Brevity*, *Asterales*, *Zocalo Public Square* and *A-Minor*, and as the cover art for *Mid-American Review*, *Boudin* and *Dogwood: A Journal of Poetry and Prose*. She is a member of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh and created the oil and cold wax painting you can find on the cover of this book.



early praise

The source of metaphor in Sheila Squillante's *Flor/elegy* is the garden of the real, situated in midlife, midway between celebration and the unendurable, teetering between florescence and the bottom line, offering up reliquaries of flowers and bones, within a "dazed and anxious radiance." The grief and mischief of these poems is housed in the bodies of forms—litanies, meditations, crown-like sequences, and prose poems whose sturdiness fortifies the terror and resistance that hums through these lines. This book opens out. It expels. Its ragged blooms sing.

—Diane Seuss, author of *frank: sonnets and Modern Poetry*; winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Here is a fervent voice at midlife wrestling with the past and present, the personal and political: "You can resist and resist and yet still terror sings." In "Winter, Break"—a ten-part tour de force—"green things/ ache toward ice-glazed glass." We are those green things, and through her tender yet unflinching gaze, Sheila Squillante offers us hope that we can "thrive in the worst of soils."

—Erin Murphy, author of *Human Resources* and *Fluent in Blue*



Flor/elegy is a book of both delight and lament. Sheila Squillante offers what Emily Dickinson imagined when she wrote of “a brighter garden.” Here, plants and flowers bloom, die, then thrive, as a daughter mourns beloved parents. As the book’s title illustrates, with its reference to the Medieval Florilegium, this collection is a gorgeous gathering. Above all, it’s a radiant book, a hopeful book, because, as Squillante writes, “Beauty, it would seem, insists.”

—Nicole Cooley, author of *Mother Water Ash*

Line by line, Sheila Squillante dismantles our expectations and constructs a new world anchored in her willingness to explore the past’s crucible and our natural world’s precariousness. These are powerful poems brimming with grace and joy and sadness and love. *Flor/elegy* serves to us a full complement of moods, sorrows, hopes, and, perhaps most importantly a particular and stunning vision of what makes a life.

—Margot Schilpp, author of *Markers and Shrines*

Flowering out of season, flowering into insect infestation, flowering into a world of guns and predation and suffering and adults who fail children, Sheila Squillante’s *Flor/elegy* explores midlife’s “blooms and bruises” in vibrant hues.

—Lesley Wheeler, author of *Mycocosmic*

sample poems

Petunias

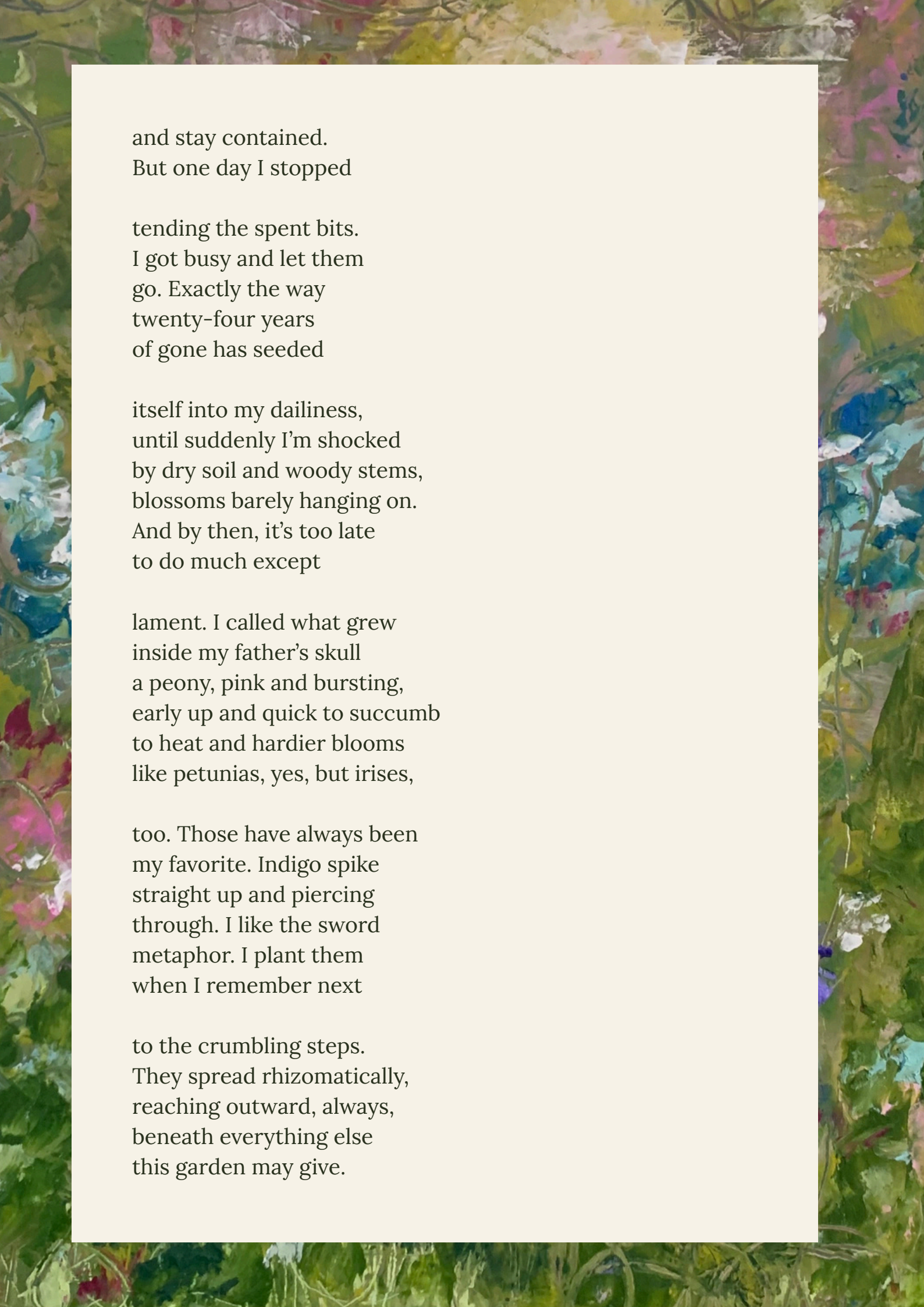
My father loved petunias,
my mother tells me.
I don't recall him enjoying
them but I'm not saying
I doubt her, either.
There are so many things
I will never know.

My father loved peonies,
my mother doesn't need
to remind me. I remember
the black ants pouring
thick off sweet pink petals,

how I called what happened
to his brain a tumor
because it was easier
than explaining how
the mind can swirl
and swell.

My father's petunias,
purple this year, spill
over their own green bodies.
My mother taught me
to dead-head, pinch
and pluck just below

the bud so they grow
stronger, reserve
their strength



and stay contained.
But one day I stopped

tending the spent bits.
I got busy and let them
go. Exactly the way
twenty-four years
of gone has seeded

itself into my dailiness,
until suddenly I'm shocked
by dry soil and woody stems,
blossoms barely hanging on.
And by then, it's too late
to do much except

lament. I called what grew
inside my father's skull
a peony, pink and bursting,
early up and quick to succumb
to heat and hardier blooms
like petunias, yes, but irises,

too. Those have always been
my favorite. Indigo spike
straight up and piercing
through. I like the sword
metaphor. I plant them
when I remember next

to the crumbling steps.
They spread rhizomatically,
reaching outward, always,
beneath everything else
this garden may give.

Our Animal

At one point I might have said Canada
geese or the fat bright mallard. Surly wolf spider

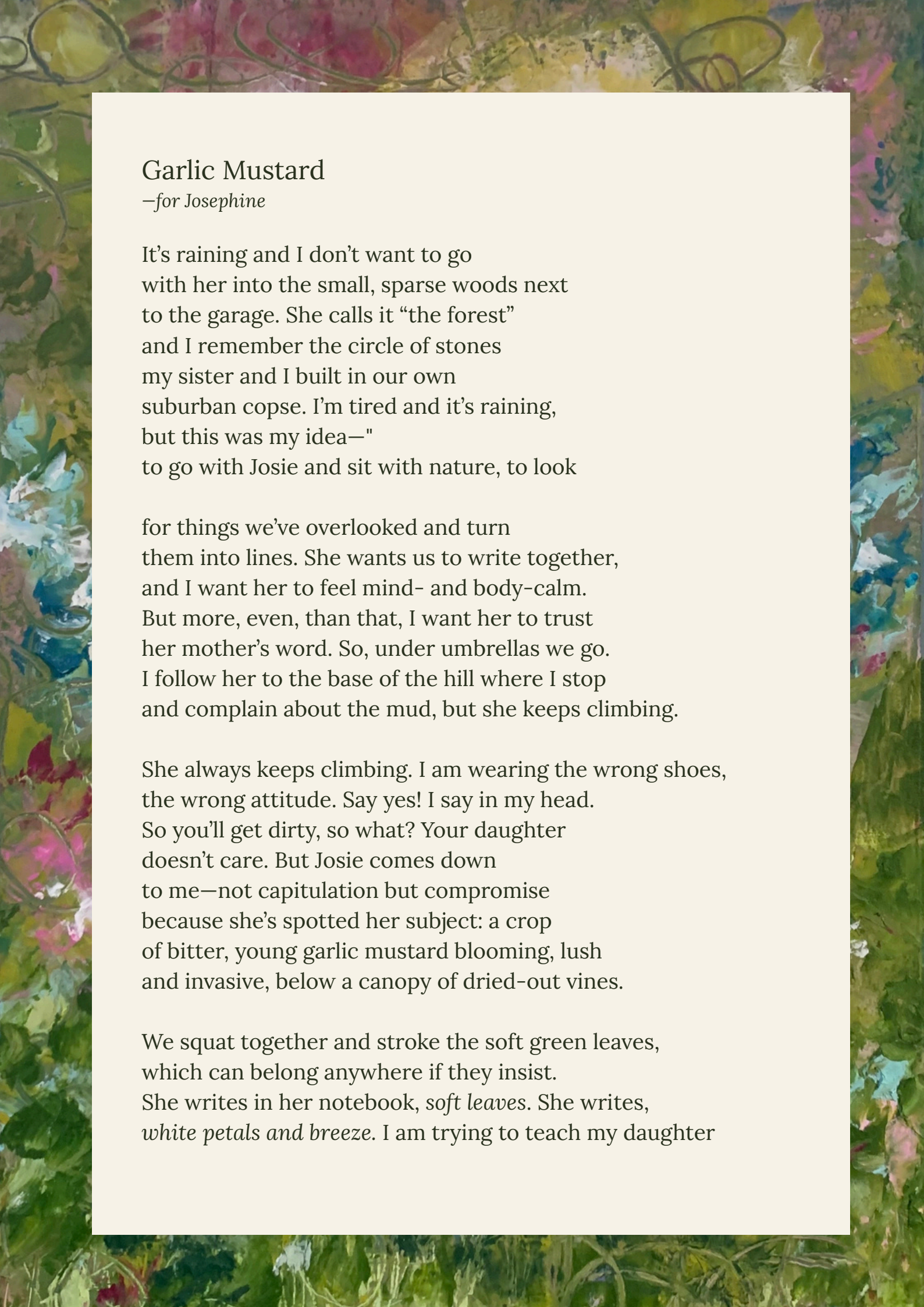
lurking behind the basement water heater
you teased out to terrify my boyfriend.

Our family dog, the feral cat you flung
from the back deck when I was seven.

No one creature follows me
faithfully. Peregrine falcons

on our Hudson River bridge,
red-tailed hawk in the thorny locust trees

behind my shabby house in Pittsburgh—
a place you will never be.



Garlic Mustard

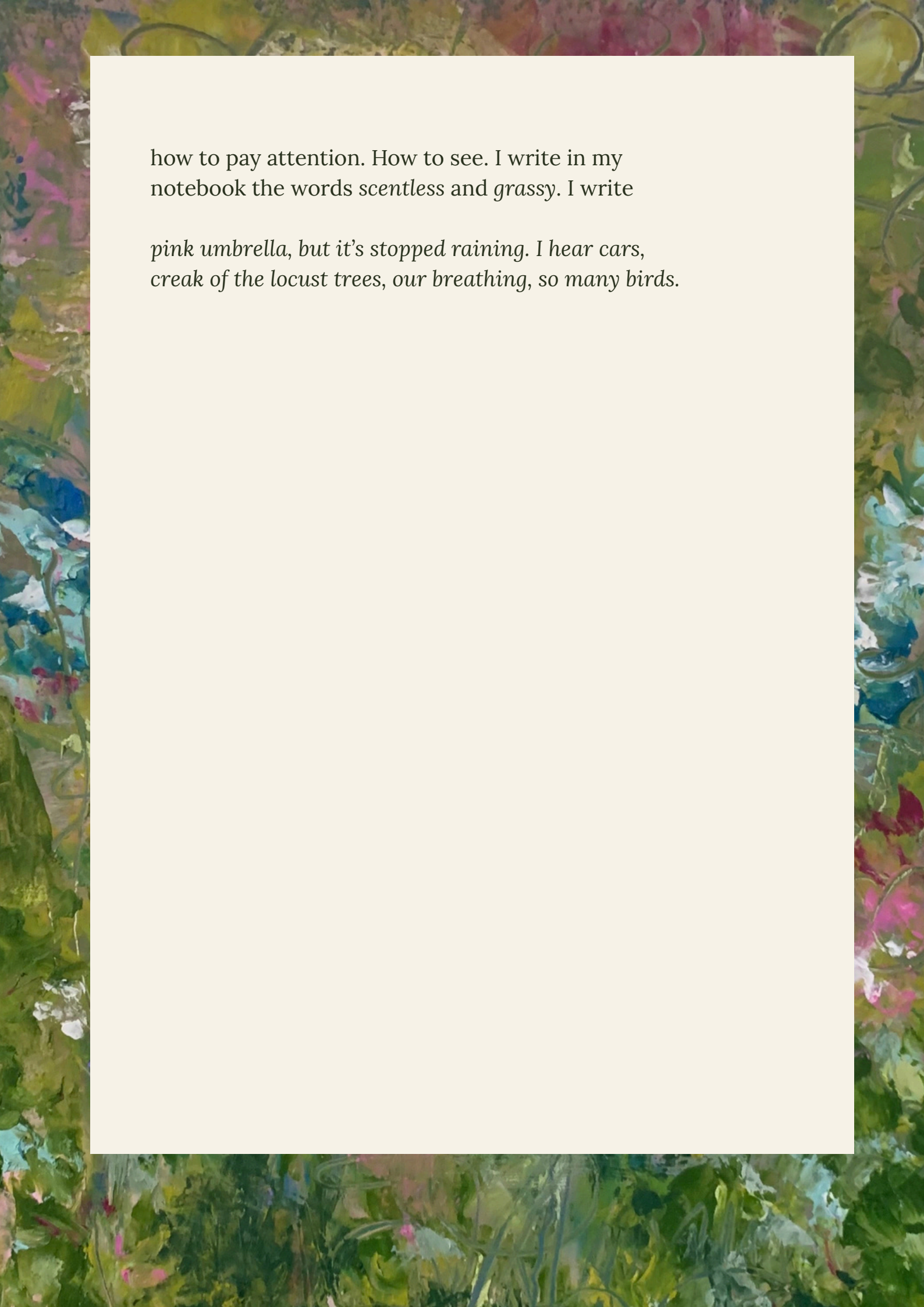
—for Josephine

It's raining and I don't want to go
with her into the small, sparse woods next
to the garage. She calls it "the forest"
and I remember the circle of stones
my sister and I built in our own
suburban copse. I'm tired and it's raining,
but this was my idea—"
to go with Josie and sit with nature, to look

for things we've overlooked and turn
them into lines. She wants us to write together,
and I want her to feel mind- and body-calm.
But more, even, than that, I want her to trust
her mother's word. So, under umbrellas we go.
I follow her to the base of the hill where I stop
and complain about the mud, but she keeps climbing.

She always keeps climbing. I am wearing the wrong shoes,
the wrong attitude. Say yes! I say in my head.
So you'll get dirty, so what? Your daughter
doesn't care. But Josie comes down
to me—not capitulation but compromise
because she's spotted her subject: a crop
of bitter, young garlic mustard blooming, lush
and invasive, below a canopy of dried-out vines.

We squat together and stroke the soft green leaves,
which can belong anywhere if they insist.
She writes in her notebook, *soft leaves*. She writes,
white petals and breeze. I am trying to teach my daughter

An abstract painting with thick, textured brushstrokes in shades of green, pink, and blue, framing a central white rectangular area.

how to pay attention. How to see. I write in my
notebook the words scentless and grassy. I write

*pink umbrella, but it's stopped raining. I hear cars,
creak of the locust trees, our breathing, so many birds.*

--excerpts from Summer, Storm

/

Night has taken up house in the walls. Night with no stars, just streaming T.V. and a regular moon. Night starts comically soon, our children tease, as we tuck ourselves in under sunlight. Night never lasts long enough. Thunder booms above, waking the bulldog from the snoring deep, thus waking us from the sweaty humidity of a someplace else dream. Doesn't it seem like we should know how to make the bed with cooler sheets? Bamboo or muslin. Something eco-luxe. One intrepid foot stuck outside the down duvet. Let's go back to Lowes and grab that fan—the one that blew a fine chilled mist over everything.

/

A fine chilled mist blows over everything we've saved from the dead rack at Lowes. We each take a side of the garden and spend the hour after dinner drenching perennials we pray will bounce back with our care. Usually they do. We let the lawn grow too high and the grass fills with ticks, balds in yellow patches where the dogs piss. But look at the apple trees heavy with fruit after last year's empty branches. They weren't our choice, we just found them here. We've done nothing to help them. They just grow as they do in their time and we let them.

/

They just grow as they do in their time and we let them know we are here. Like yesterday when she locked herself out of the house and we had to cut short the workday to help her. How our irritation swelled on the drive home. *Where is your lanyard? How can you leave the house without your keys?* Yesterday in Texas a river overspilled its banks in a flash, flooded out acres of land in the dark. Dozens of camp girls washed away in their sleep. And their parents... No. Go back and fit our daughter in, make the sentence say *how can we watch you leave the house when fear forces, as water, into every parched and swollen cell?*

/

Every parched and swollen cell fears water, its knife edge, its rushing overwhelm. You can truly do too much. Like the mother who died from drinking so many ounces, trying to win a video game system for her kids. These days we practice temperance, resist purchase, divide and spread what's already here. Still, we sit in awe of abundance—star jelly colonizing the gravel near the shed, knotweed that seeded itself haughtily into the hellstrip. Our neighbors hate the weeds we pile on the driveway. When will you clean this mess? they ask, their arms encompassing every leaf, bud and stem. Under the guardrail we answer them: *cosmos, zinnia, nasturtium.*