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Then I Am The Garden

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Then I Am The Garden

Under the needle my skin jerks
in lightning spasms I can't will away.
I stare hard at the tattooer's chart—
dragons, eagles, coiled snakes.
He coaches me to try a unicorn or dove
while I still have room, but knows
I'll take only flowers and vines.

The last time I let a man have his way,
he set two lamps by the unmade bed
and would not take his eyes from my skin.
I closed mine, watching red seep inside my lids.
He entered me as if he parted
the stems of some fragile bouquet.

I dream of babies.
In these dreams I don't see myself.
It's cold there, and only what lives
on my skin can thrive in such cold.
A baby reaches toward me, teeth
spaced apart in its pink gums,
skin so tender I can see
a branch of veins on one temple.
Its breath enters the air
like the pale uncurling of a fern.

Nights when my skin seems to swell,
and even the lightest cloth is too much,
I walk my darkened room,
unaware of mirrors.
Then there's no mistake, then I am
the naked garden, orchid of ink,
a winding tendril of painted blood.

Paulann Whitman Petersen