

the parasite

floating yet fixed
to the narrow futon
since the weight of his body
could no longer keep him down
nor pull him up
atop a seamless sea of gray
blue peeking through
wall-to-wall carpet
covering his council flat
Richard lay
burnt brown with fever
as calmly he spoke
of his weed collection
accumulated
on his last trip home

I flipped through the photos
of each plant's leaves
unimpressed
at the similar shapes
unable to share
their owner's enthusiasm
as he chatted on
in the presence of a newcomer
who sat in the corner
on arrival
and absorbed
our fleeting conversation

we spoke
about the seeds
of fruits and flowers -
their fragile, if fetal
life-bearing forms -
while I examined
the friend
as he eyed us
and decided I did not like him
or the fact he was sharing
one last afternoon
that I had with Richard
that anyone had
this man an unknown
insignificant by his name alone
a name that had never

been mentioned
before

I did not like the way he
slumped there
spine slinked with gravity
and lecherous intent
his languorous limbs
enveloping the already
poisoned air
I had meant to say leadened
but poison presented itself
and then I knew
this man had given Richard
his illness
though he
was not visibly ill

I imagined
that evening in Soho when
this ungracious guest
attached himself to his host
infiltrating his nose
with cigarette smoke
his skin with saliva spittles
as he did now when he said,
shall I fetch some water
like this were his own home
roles reversed, guest as host
hosting guests, rising
to empty the ashtray

Richard coughed
and within the collar
of his flannel shirt
I saw a bruise
and when he coughed again
I saw his mottled chest
where his buttons separated
my stomach aches, he whispered
between the hacks
that threatened
to tear out his throat
but instead tied knots
in his sunken abdomen

please knead them out for me

he pleaded
but I was afraid
afraid of his frailty
his proximity to death
and the ever-present partner
from the past
who did not hesitate
to take my place
to massage away the pain
his sly smile slipping into
a cat-who-got-the-canary grin
in getting his hands
on Richard (again)

intimate time passes slowly
so I turn to the leaves
and examine their outline
each crispy intact silhouette
enclosing a green-shaded surface
and still no sign of disengaging
the fingers devouring those aches
so I express my growing
delight in the leaves
Richard becoming more listless
friend ignoring
the knots now gone like
a lover lost in a last afternoon

a photo
of an orange-colored vine
tenacious tendril
encircling, embracing
exerting a stranglehold
on its host - love bush, we call it
as we tear the seemingly insipid
foliage from a depleted shrub
since like love
it can consume and
like a lover it will

I am sorry
we couldn't play cribbage
my uncle apologizes
since I had lugged the board
across London
another day perhaps
but I knew there would be no

other days and as I sat there
focused on a shade
of faded yellow he said
I am so so glad to see you
even if I cannot show it

sapped of strength
straining to sit upright
eyes glazed
gazing out the prefab window
framing the bitter bark
outline of an English tree
greeting the coming spring
with frozen faith
withered hope
a brittle leaf clinging
to a broken branch
anchored by the spindly twig
that had sucked it dry

it is quiet in the room
the rain skies descend
evening falls
the phone rings
the parasite answers
announcing
the imminent arrival
of other friends
and in the dying light
of a gray, gray day
the parasite remains
to feed in the forest
of unwitting men
I did not see either again