

Clay  
by Camilla Johnson

They speak to me of tranquility, they tell me it is a garden.  
I don't think that they've ever worked a garden before.

Sweat trickles, becoming mud. I know that my neck will burn.  
In the kitchen, my mother presses one cool finger to flushed skin,  
grimacing at the white thumbprint left behind. I rip weeds from the soil.  
The earth is warm as a body. They resist. The crabgrass crouching into the dirt,  
the pigweed tearing free like hair from a scalp. It is vicious in its will to remain.  
From nothing springing up—5 inches, 2 feet—after just one summer thunderstorm.  
My mother notices the drizzle first, I pull windows closed in every room  
before the drops get in. The dandelions refuse to die. The earth is lush and barren.  
The lambsquarters roots go deeper than the tomato seedlings;  
it feels as though they have more of a claim to the soil  
than what my mother has grown. If she was here,  
she might tell me which weeds are edible. Or maybe she wouldn't.  
I stand in a church full of lilies. I wish her fingerprint had stayed on me.  
I wish any memory of her was inherent in me.  
I leave the stems uprooted, a mass to scorch in the sun.  
The area around the tomato cages is clear now. I don't even like tomatoes.  
My mother does, though she can no longer pick them. It is vicious in its will to remain.  
It has grown deep roots—ovaries, colon, intestine, liver. It refuses to die.  
She praises me for tending to her garden, I repeat that I'm doing it for myself,  
not for her. I don't even like tomatoes.

They speak to me of tranquility, they don't say that life requires violence.  
They tell me it is a garden. I don't work that garden anymore.