



*Kathy Mangan*

# Taproot

## Planting Tulip Bulbs

Why do we wait so long, by-  
passing October's spangled days  
until, always one raw November

Sunday we're on our knees in damp  
dirt, racing twilight, hacking the chilled,  
resisting ground with trowels, a bag of Red

Emperors torn open between us? Perhaps  
it's our reluctance to tempt the gods:  
to plant presumes, come April,

we'll witness the pinkish tops  
break through, the fiery goblets  
unfurl and sway on green stems. Past sixty,

we've endured friends felled  
by accident, illness: the jogger sheared  
from the road as he turned for home,

the philosopher's brain spidered  
by tumors. Survivors so far, we know faith  
accretes in cold, in darkness. We insert



the white nubs six inches down, following  
the sack's instructions, crumble broken clods,  
then into each dank opening sprinkle bone

meal. Our joints crack when we stand to tamp  
the earth over the bulbs we've buried,  
life's minor apprentices.

## Literary Criticism

A continent between us, the grandson and I  
have each finished reading the novel  
he was assigned in sophomore English.  
His week's ago assessment, was "most everybody  
dies – what's the freaking point?" forsaking  
my more nuanced perspective of mortality. Today  
I'm on speakerphone with his mom, and I hear  
him talking in the background, in their kitchen –  
the bass notes of his lowered voice still surprising  
me with adult authority – "Hey William,"  
I call out, "didn't you love the book's multiple  
points of view? The way those different narrators  
made it difficult to discern the truth?" I think  
I hear him opening the fridge, probably ransacking  
a pre-dinner snack. "Yeah, I guess," he assents,  
from a distance. I imagine him unwrapping  
a frozen burrito to heat. I'm hungry to chew  
on moral ambiguity, the perplexity  
of human motivation, though I resist tossing in  
my hero, Huck Finn, who (I teach) prevaricates  
to protect others. I picture William punching  
buttons on the microwave, but still I push:  
"the paralyzed girl in the wheelchair –  
she lied in court and sacrificed the school bus  
driver, right?" Cutlery jangles. "That



was for the greater good, right?”

Silence still. Is he pondering? Distracted?

“Right? William?” At last he asserts, “Yeah, but it was a dick move,” and the microwave beeps twice, as if to announce the question settled.

PT

*We can find no scar,  
But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are –  
– Emily Dickinson*

Staggered, we arrive for rehab – lame,  
or braced, or be-slunged – clothed  
in baggy sweats and tees like inflated  
toddlers waddling into an enormous playroom:

its big green balls and bright red and yellow  
mats, the graduated hand weights stacked  
in rainbow pyramid. Multi-hued cords, electrodes,  
and pullies dangle in what could be the colorful Hell

of a cartoon torturer. We who enter are broken,  
but we adopt cheerful poses in impairment.  
We wince and bear it, trying to become un-hurt,  
submit to the stretching and kneading of our aching

parts. Prompted, we paddle and pedal and row,  
urged by our therapists (Michelle & Dawn, & Louise),  
who hand us blue putty to squash and squeeze,  
who line up marbles to pick up with our toes.

Today brings a ponytailed goalie with her twisted knee  
and the plumber with his pipe-crushed shoulder,  
come to enlist in our troop of the Perpetually Wounded.  
We veterans grasp what the newly enfeebled

cannot perceive: that the fate of our kind  
is betrayal. Neither heat nor ice  
can cure. We know that the practice brass  
lock opens to nothing, the three training steps lead

nowhere. The pretend steering wheel I spin  
only drives me further: within.



## Taproot

The morning after  
the night  
I hear  
of your death  
I go outside  
and kneel  
lower myself  
to weed  
the flower garden  
its profusion  
of pink impatiens  
trailing petunias  
coral geraniums  
it feels good  
to yank  
fibrous bladder leaves  
of purslane  
to stab at  
hard dirt  
with pointed trowel

to dig up  
thickened taproot  
and to tear  
thistles crowding  
my hibiscus stems  
to pinch  
and pluck out  
the invasive  
to grab chickweed  
and tug  
to clip nodes  
of masses  
of choking ivy  
even though  
I'm certain that  
the weeds will  
come back.  
And I know  
for sure you  
will not.



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In *Taproot*, Kathy Mangan masterfully writes about the 'big' and the 'small' moments that constitute a life with grace, force, courage, and humor. Whether her subject is a child's bad dream or a mother's death, an old love or an enduring marriage, Mangan acknowledges both the darkness and light, the joy and the sorrow inherent in human experience. In these poems, Mangan is grateful witness to her own life and the lives of those around her. This is a memorable, finely wrought collection where HOPE underscores all.

ELIZABETH SPIRES

