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Late July

Jeri Schelhaas
Dordt College

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Late July

Jeri Schelhaas

When the brightest dahlias,
Happy in yellow, proudly twelve inches across,
Faced the sun on strong stems
And pronounced each day “glory, hallelujah!”

And when the liveliest impatiens
Snapped red petal fingers at my toes,
And marigolds perched orange as harvest moons at my knees,
And when purple salvias marched
In straight rows, pointing up
Like hands in church,
It was, my mother, your time to die.

And when tomatoes, oh, you were some tomato,
Grew quarter pound heavy,
Full of juice and flavor, neither sweet nor bitter,
Bright red among so much garden green,
Perfect for salsa spices
And good color on the plate,
And when beets, burgundy beets, pretty but tasteless until
You mixed them with the right blend
Of sugar and vinegar,
Caught color like wine in a jar,
That’s when you died.

And when the pass of a bluejay seared
A bright blue onto memory,
And the finch at your feeder
Popped yellow flashbulbs in our eyes,
And the orange breast of an oriole surprised us from the treetop,
That, mother, was your time to die.

And in that awful hospital room
Without light of day, nor star of night,
Without color to dazzle your still bright eyes,
Nor pattern to liven your still bright thoughts,
With no sound of bird or breeze,
You faded to a small, pale old woman
Who eventually just quit breathing,
Shut your eyes and set your mouth
In a little “oh.”

And your color left our lives.

It is dim at 2:00 in the morning.
And there's too much white in sheets
And cold chrome in machines
And way too much vague antique pale blue wallpaper
In a hospital room with no you present.
And we hear but don't want to listen:
"We fade and die like flowers that grow in beauty."

Now your bright-splasy-snappy self
Lives within Color itself.
And though salvias and marigolds and dahlias
And orioles and finches
And tomatoes and beets will always
Mark the time of your dying,
They will shout out to me
The flash and spice and song of your life.