

The Smell of Figs

by Torre A. DeVito

Fruit-laden branches begin to bend beneath
bulbous figs early this summer, the taut,
green pendulums blushing pink and purple,
many bursting through their skin,
over-ripe and bleeding from
almond-shaped wasp wounds.

The sweet and sickly scent
a cloying perfume that transports me
to a summer long ago, to Texas
and the house on Huffman Hill:
the house where my great grandfather
awoke in flames one night,
a careless cigarette slipping
from his mouth into his bed.

Perhaps the mattress blushed
as pink and purple as a fig
just before flames burst through its skin
to wake the old man from tortured sleep,
as he struggled with the death of a child
whom he had struck with his truck
on a trip to pick up cigarettes.
Not his fault, the child had run into the road,
and yet he never could assuage the guilt.

He longed for death, and died
in the hospital two days later.
I was only ten-months old, and so
I never knew him.

But I knew my great grandma's house,
That same house where my great grandpa died
where his wife, a tiny wasp of a woman
frail, thin and straight
with a wild white tuft of hair—
a "Q-Tip" slip of a woman
that I knew as "Little Momma,"
had lived until I was five.

It was there that the
sweet stench of figs took me
back to Texas and Seventy-Two,
back when I turned eleven
back when summer was long and
full of freedom and joy.

I had run up the hill
to Little Momma's house:
now, empty, and beginning to run down.
The yard had gone to grass burrs
and ant hills and doodle-bug holes,
wood bees and fig wasps hung
lazily buzzing in hot thick air
and the figs grew wild.

Figs ripened, fermented, spoiled, fell
no-one to eat them but the wasps
no one to pick them.
Even Little Momma was gone,
the sound of her laughter
as juicy as the figs she would
pop into her mouth as we picked,
absent.

Suddenly the thought of that empty house
filled me with an inexplicable sadness:
an awareness of thing lost,
things that might have been,
the knowledge that things end.

A profound emptiness and longing filled me.
In an instant I knew it all:
the end of seasons, days, and summers—
the ends of places, people and relationships—
and the impending end of childhood,
the knowledge of joy and sorrow,
life and death, pleasure and pain,
the knowledge of good and evil,
a knowledge that has slept within me
some forty-odd years to awaken here and now
at the smell of figs.

And here and now I feel exposed
and I have a strange desire to cower:
to dive under broad fig leaves;
to hide from God, the sky, and time.