

In Miss Sally's Garden

by Llewellyn McKernan

I'm holding someone's hand,
my mother's
I think. I am small. Giant branches climb over
my head, spill their rich Guernsey-white flowers onto
the path,
where we walk slowly.

The hand I hold clings to mine,
heavy as sleep, the feet
weary the ground with their ponderous steps,
little puffs rise from the sand and
powder the shine
of my shoes. O, but

the sound of Miss Sally's voice,
exotic as zebras, the
tinkling chimes of her kind jewelry, the light that
darts from link and chain and earbob
dazzles like stars.
And her hands, the fluttering wings

of her peacock-blue sleeves
fly akimbo
as she pulls close to my nose the ambrosial crush,
the nirvana cream of peony, hibiscus, lily, rose,
even a shower of lilac
from the tree, whose deep

purple shade hallows the space
where Dr. Davison
loves to sit, the fragrant garden the only place
where he does not gasp for breath.
We keep on walking,
and the other voice (yes, it is my mother's)

worries the air, but says nothing,
too much gone that's too much
with her still for syllables to find and refine
into speech—but Miss Sally—her words
distill her spearmint breath,
plumb depths, and climbs
up climbing roses, their ginger-bright
faces, the blue hearts of morning
glories facing up to the hour they must close
until a new day dawns.

I smell baked earth
in my nostrils, real as the old
old story: the miracle of modern science,
and Dr. Davison's commitment to it.
How the good doctor ordered a new drug

that got there just as my mother
went into labor, and this time
her tight cervix squeaked open, and I tumbled
out—alive—kicking and squalling,
not strangled to death
like my older brother.

And still we keep walking, my mother
silent now, withdrawn, armed
with the family myth that holds me
like a charm, the whole heavy length of it pools
in my blood—Oh! It was my dead
brother they loved. If I'd been born first, they'd be happy

now . . .

All the while, Miss Sally keeps up
her peaches and cream commentary, and the snip
snip-snipping of her scissors as she
gathers up a bouquet of delights
for Dr. Davison, her
stroke-stilled husband.