

Hollyhocks

(for my mother)

Ballerinas

Unflinching,
chaste
the hollyhocks
stand stock-
still.

Unnoticed, they
execute
again and again
the most exacting
pirouettes

flawlessly.

Cloister

A bed of hollyhocks
towers
– a garden
like a convent,

sisters whose
hard-driven
purity
is like a nail

or an Angus Dei
rising
a cappella
toward
the Redeemer.

In the garden
dwells
another –
the one giving
voice
to the vast
silence
through which
they reach.

Maidens

the hollyhocks
exhibit
their ruffled
flowers
like young girls
who, stripped
to their petticoats,
stand blushing but
do not
sacrifice
their chastity.

Maiden Aunts

the stern
extravagance
of these
spinsters,

their hawklike
faces
lit
with the sharp love

of old maids,
widows,
maiden aunts

(who like the
hollyhock
have

no perfume,
uncompromising
chastity)

belies
their severity;
their ruffled
petticoats

bloom out
from under
starched
dresses.

Picking Hollyhocks

The sticky crepe
hollyhock flower
comes off
in my hand

like a ballerina
who sits down
suddenly and
weeps

or a bride who
on her wedding night
lets fall
her gown.

The Memory of Hollyhocks

The crumpled pink hollyhock flower
like a sachet at the bottom of a cedar box
brings back numberless girlhood hours
and the memory of hollyhocks.

Their pale pink ruffles, like an entire ball
of corsages crowded on a single stalk
seem stiff, like maiden aunts, tall
among a row of stock-still hollyhocks.

The cool authoritative beauty
with which they sway and fade unlocks
the memory of older women you once knew
and the memory of hollyhocks.