

Maggie Harris

TO THE LADY'S SLIPPER ORCHID, A DAUGHTER

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To the Lady's Slipper Orchid, a daughter,
but this time she breathes in glass jars
teased into life by gloved hands
foster fingers fragile with the memory of plunder

in this special propagation
her small seeds settle
fighting for their every breath ...
eleven years, they say, she took to flower.

*And I remember Lorraine, and all those babies lost
regardless of the prayers, whole Benedictions,
the small bodies wrapped in cotton wool ...*

*did her ears too, press low into the snow
on a lonely hillside
listening to small murmurs of approaching feet?*

This is a strange love
propelled by the urge to possess and protect
re-position in time and place;
Victorian gardens, foster homes, cold frames.

Eleven years, they say, she took to flower.

Could that reluctance be some memory
of sisters, aunts, mothers
dancing on a hillside,
such flaunting and proliferation of beauty
direly paid for,
a lady's slipper cupped into the palm of a protector?

To the Lady's Slipper Orchid, a daughter.
Eleven years, they say, she took to flower.

(The Independent, 18th September, 2000.
'After 50 years alone, Britain's rarest wildflower has a daughter.)