Jacob’s Ladder

Judith Anne Skillman

I see several plants in astigmatism--
points of phlox and star.
I have phobias of height and closed-in places.

There will be no reprieve for my mother,
the bearded woman,
and none for my father,

who wore a bell-shaped petal on his sleeve.
He was only counting to supplant
his older brother, Jake. His numbers,

infinitesimally small, return each August
as Jacob’s Ladder draws in
its browns, whispers like chimes

whose music has its own way of dying--
pulling back, pining for dominance, or closure.
The burning bush turns bright

even if red is due to drought.
Each autumn brings its own peculiar
complications. No asphodel

will be left alive,
no son seized by the heel,
determined to sacrifice his son as proof of loyalty.

Only the elements remain—iron, sulphur, tin.
Slightly blued under the alchemy of dawn,
the last radicals left on earth.

Leaves gone wooden,
they steel themselves for another climb
away from and toward.