

## Tulips

For my birthday you've brought me tulips.  
I want them to fan from a low vase.  
This green and white one with a cracked glaze  
almost the shape of a bulb looks right.

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Tulips were bursting from that same pot  
on the same day in New York ... maybe 1958.  
Twenty-five tulips instead of twenty-five candles,  
and we dined by tulip light.

\*

There is always another war, but  
these tall disciplined redcoats  
have lost the battle.  
Cut down, shipped alive into exile,  
for nearly a week they bleed upright.

\*

Two artists: this one, who catches  
the incendiary character of tulips  
with daring panache.  
Now this one, who uses his brush  
like hawks' eyesight.

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When Nerys in her wheelchair painted tulips  
they were strawberry-coloured, like her hair.  
She gave them a life far longer  
than the one life gave her.  
When 'nature imitates art', nature  
sometimes loses the fight.

\*

Old tulips, getting ready to die,  
swan on their wondering necks away  
from their source in mother water,  
obsessed with an airy faith in light.

\*

These sad women in mauve – making up for  
painted wrinkles with pinker hair –  
drunkenly spill themselves over the bar.  
Lips, lips, without love or appetite.

\*

But look. At the core of each flower,  
a black star,  
a hope-pod, a love-seed  
the seminal colour of night.

*(Remembering Nerys Johnson, painter)*

Anne Stevenson, *Astonishment* (Bloodaxe Books, 2012), with permission of the publisher on behalf of the author; [www.bloodaxebooks.com](http://www.bloodaxebooks.com)