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THE RELUCTANT HEIRESS

It all started with the book from my ninety year old Aunt Beatrice, although I didn't know it at the time. The occasion seemed more of an ending than the beginning of anything. It was obvious that she was distributing her belongings to relatives and friends so she could be sure that who got what was done according to her wishes. Why she chose me as recipient of the Preston Family History I'll never know, I had never had the slightest interest in such tedious data and would have relegated it to limbo in the attic if my husband hadn't intervened.

My husband is a hunter, pilot, a man who likes to work with wood and metal in his spare time. In short, he is an even less likely devotee of genealogy. But his life-long passion for the Civil War caused him to take the Preston Family History to his favorite chair and begin searching for my predecessors who had lived during that period.

He turned up six brothers who soldiered in the War Between the States, one of whom was my great grandfather on my father's Side. His name was Stephen Smith Preston and his wife was Anastasia Keyes. Two of the brothers were killed in battle. "This says your great grandfather lived through the war but it cost him his health. He served as state representative for several years before he died in Memphis, Tennessee in 1905. Did you know all that?" my husband asked. "Did you know he moved away from Nashville?"

I confessed that I didn't. "I don't even know much about my grandfather, much less my great grandfather on Dad's side. His name was John Francis and he died when my dad was quite young. "

Vaguely I recall an oval-framed portrait over my grandmother's bed. The man was mustached, had heavy lids and deep-set eyes. He looked nothing like my father or uncles. I don't know who has the picture but some years ago I inherited a rosewood lap desk that my grandfather made. The joints are beautifully dovetailed and the apron is carved and scrolled. It was then I learned he had been a carpenter by trade and was fond of saying that the greatest man who ever lived had been a carpenter.

"This book is before his time but there's lots about the great-greats. You should read it." My husband's tone was insistent.

"Look, I don't have much time to spend with my best friends. I can't see poring over the history of ancestors I never saw or heard of." Then I felt a tinge of guilt as if I'd denied the people between those pages a place at my table, maybe even the simple courtesy of saying hello, After all, part of my blood came from them.

"You're right, I should read it. But I doubt if there's much on

any one individual, is there?"

"No, but there's enough to research further. Let's see what we can find out about the Civil War soldier first and then--"

"Why do I get the feeling you're looking for fungus on my family tree? What if you find an ax murderer or even a suffragette?"

He was grinning gleefully.

Time passed and I forgot about it. Then the mail began to bulge with fat envelopes from Washington, DC and others bearing state Seals, all addressed to my husband. For several Saturdays he disappeared right after breakfast and didn't return till afternoon.

"All right, who is she?" I said on the third Saturday in a row.

"Well, She's the daughter of a long line of officers and statesmen, Starting in Ireland and culminating in that noble breed, a Confederate captain. Unfortunately, there's a New England branch of Prestons who produced a Union general. But I think your genes are untainted." He went to the basement and came back with a large folder. "This is six months of research not counting today's."

This was my husband's gift—the carefully connected threads of my ancestry. I had no idea so much information was available nor did I dream that it had to be gathered in bits and pieces. He had written the National Archives in Washington many times. For each question, a specific form must be filled out. Marriages, deaths, military service records are not all kept the same place. He had queried the state archives of Tennessee and Virginia, state libraries, and the Nashville Masonic Lodge. Unknown to me he had read through old cemetery records and church files on our last trip south. The mysterious Saturdays had been spent at the Mormon Church library in Naperville, Illinois which keeps all U. S. census records dating from the mid-eighteen hundreds on microfiche. He had put together a history of my maternal and fraternal grandparents for 3 generations back. He discovered errors in the Preston book. Dates, places, even names were sometimes wrong. The book had also called my great grandfather Stephen Smith Preston, a colonel. But he was a captain of G Company, 45th Tennessee Infantry. I have his enlistment and discharge papers, even his widow's application for a pension in 1914, It was granted because of his service-related disability. It was interesting because many witnesses were called to attest to his character, his illness, his years in service, and these are hand written accounts.

Mostly they were from neighbors and men who served under his command. They lend a flavor of the era. It's from these notes that I learned most about my great-great grandfather John, for many of the writers had known him, too, and referred to his son as "true to his father's kind."

John was a blacksmith, gunsmith and grocer. He tutored all six sons in marksmanship and at least two of them earned Whitworth rifles. John had

also been a lay Methodist preacher. He was born in Virginia as were all the earlier lines. He had nine children who lived to adulthood.

But of all the information my husband gathered, and all the family he has introduced me to, it is Stephen S. who captures my fancy. I can imagine the six brothers deciding to enlist after talking with their wives, writing long letters to each other, thinking about the impending war every night before blowing out their lights. I can't appreciate their motives or their rationale today since my views are those of Lincoln. Back then I'd have been labeled a copperhead. However, had I actually lived then, it's likely I would have accepted the stand of my menfolk as other women did. It would be interesting to know their reasons for stepping into that awful war. None was a slave owner. All were Christians. They must have passionately believed in states' rights. There is evidence that Stephen and perhaps two others were acquainted with Robert E. Lee. Given their Virginia origins, they were probably all devoted to him.

While I was thinking about it, my husband came back into the room. "Well, how does it feel to have a Civil War hero in your background?"

"Hero?"

"You must not have read the hospital records yet," he said. "Look, Stephen was confined two weeks in early March, 1862, with fever and chills.

Then he was back again on April 4th. He requested release from the hospital on the morning of April 6th in order to lead his troops at Pittsburg Landing in the battle of Shiloh. This is a copy of the hospital register from the Confederate Archives in Mississippi. I think that's pretty gutsy to talk yourself out of sick bay and go take command of your company in one of the bloodiest clashes of the war. He was discharged from the army not long after that because he was so ill."

I began to see a lot of my own father in Stephen S. Stubborn, comp-ive, fiercely loyal. Dad's loyalty to a friend once cost him a job promotion. His stubbornness almost cost him his marriage. But there was nothing spectacular in his life. He just missed active duty in World War II because of his age. He was conservative, quiet, a devoted American. Being my father was what he did.

I ran my hand over the thick file. The inhabitants of those pages were just average men and women, too. Six of them and their families were caught in a terrifying and dramatic time, a period my husband knows more about in many ways than his own. If not for his interest, his patience, I'd never have met my people. They have given me a new perspective, a sense of continuity in my very transient life. Maybe a new sense of nationality says it better, for whether our ancestors came from Scotch or Irish peerage, Huguenot vineyards or Newgate prison, we all share certain qualities peculiar to Americans. For better or worse, we know we are special hybrids grown in a spectacular land and we're proud of it. Thanks to my husband, I've had the privilege of getting a closer look at my own deep roots.

The best genealogy is "The Reluctant Heiress," a delightful account of the author's experience of her husband's work in genealogy. This is a clever twist and very charming, to say the least. I like the humor that runs throughout the piece; it is genuine and unforced. It is wonderfully disarming for the writer to satirize herself and play herself down. This literary device works! And besides, she tells us quite a bit about her ancestors in the process. So her genealogy is a double-whammy. Good stuff!

SNOW HORSE

No one else saw it--
that shape in the dark of the pines--
speed of light and shadow streaking
between roadside trees on the parallax
of my outermost eye as I drove,
easily keeping pace with my synchronized 150 horses.
I stopped the car, got out and ran into the woods:
Armature of dead bushes
hung with frost-blackened kudzu
catching the first snowfall.

But I knew better. I heard
the quick muffled snort, the impatient hoof
she couldn't still. It was Ariel,
the white horse of my childhood--
gaited for mountain, bottomland and stream,
faster than a canter, smoother than a gallop,
arcing me through dustings of pale pollen,
blizzards of aspen fluff, lace curtains of snow.
I remember my tan legs pressing her whiteness,
her hide steaming in leaf-lit morning,
a fringed wraith in bias sun-shafts.

I can still see the ignis fatuus in her eye.
One day I dismounted and fell asleep
on the moss side of a hillock.
Thunder woke me. Brambles made me shield my eyes.
I called and called. The white mare was gone.
For awhile I tried to track her in the red clay,
forgetting
her hoofbeats never struck the ground.

THE WILDERNESS WAY

A loaf of bread, a jug of wine,
The perfect complements. For now
I have the secret scented pine,
The woods, a book of verse-- and thou.

What more could postponed lovers ask?
Today has waited in my heart
Like claret mellowed in the cask
To flow clear-bright from this old flask.
Is "heart" a passé word apart
From clinic terms? Oh, not in mine.
It's still the source of living's art,
Not cipherable as brain-waved chart.
Our brains won't think this fare divine,
A loaf of bread, a jug of wine.

The bread is cold, the wine too warm,
Our cultured taste should be offended.
My weather eye says it may storm;
My inner eye, another form
Of knowing, sees the rain has ended.
Beyond the mind, the fact-framed brow,
My wider center comprehended
Things in yours that touched and blended
With depths of mine, and shaped somehow,
The perfect complements for now.

Let sophists say that all is mental,
Let them call 'heart' mawkish and trite
Who never learned that love, though gentle,
Provides the strength for transcendental
Wings our heads would keep from flight.
Long growth has made deep roots-- woodbine
Of immortality, in spite
Of death's old weeds and ancient blight.
Above cerebral timberline
We share the secret-scented pine.

I brought you here beneath this tree
Because your green trail-blazing eyes
Made paths through browning time's debris,
Homed in the place we both agree
Is all my heart, both wild and wise.
Where verdure circles every bough
Just listen with your branches; rise
On shafts of sun and synthesize
The light. This heart attends my vow,
The woods, a book of verse-- and thou.

ON MAKING THE RIVER AN OLD MAN

This river was an athlete sprinting south,
A whistling boy with rhythmic summer stride.
The settlers drew cool sweetness from his mouth,
And made themselves spectators on his side.
Efficiently he handled rain and thaw;
He grew their wheat and cotton into fame.
His flanks became a city; all who saw
Made plans to say, and daily, others came.
Pure drinking-- mallards-- trout-- were not enough.
Machines re-routed him, they built a dam.
They stole his power, dumped their poison-stuff,
Then cursed him for the filth where once they swam.
Now reeking by, a progress refugee,
He seeks a nameless burial at sea.

ROUNDS OF ENCHANTMENT

"Possibly because of PCBs, fairy rings, circles of
luxuriant vegetation associated with pastureland fungi,
are becoming scarce in the south and midwest."
--Chicago Tribune

Remember how we fantasized the fairy rings?
Those greener circles sometimes made a summer field
Look polka-dotted from the peak of hilltop swings.
The giddy heights from rope-hung inner tubes appealed
To magic's possibilities beneath our gaze.
One day we thought an elf had startled our broodmare.
She broke into a gallop trailing high-pitched neighs
Then eyed the verdant spot and sidled back to where
The wheel-shape glowed and shimmered viridescently.
So we two dreamers visualized a pot of gold
Beneath the surface waiting there for you and me
But when we dug we found spadefuls of thready mold.

Too bad our learning interferes with legend's hold.
Somehow life thrives around a little mystery;
New knowledge seems to pave the way for growing old.
I miss the colored overviews from our own tree
When blues were skies and eyes and ribbons at the fair,
And reds were Pop's tomatoes, barns and autumn's blaze.
We hadn't heard pollution's threat; we weren't aware
Of certain chemicals or acid rain and haze.
We learned to drive the tractors once we learned to wield
A hoe-- plus all the skills between-- so many things--
And none of them can cope with man-made ills or shield
Us now. Still, I've found my smile. Look-- two fairy rings!

STILL REMEMBERING SYLVIA PLATH

I would never kill myself
but maybe I understand.
The first time I read her poems I saw
the fragments and shadows of my poems,
felt their flicking tongues, smelled
the earthworm soil that crumbled
where they furrowed. But I couldn't
hear them for her decibels.
And in the deafening, I couldn't
even hear my weeping.

Going somewhere from here is
learning to walk again,
learning foreign signs in Braille
and licking my scorched fingers.
My sight is keen but forever altered.
What I see is cold stored until I meet
someone who can transliterate cubic
and curvilinear and spectrum shards
and I wonder who helped sort and label
her crammed bee-box of images for her.

And if no one did
I know why
she died.

Compounding the Midas Touch

Twin boys in grass-stained britches, trading fun:
They're into land deals, studying the soil
by taste and feel and productivity.
They hoard all blue sky in passivity,
and test all puddles iridescent oil--
wise speculators, stocking up on sun.
While buying futures (tadpoles in the creek),
their long-term interests earn at rising rates.
Their growth, insistent as mosquito whine,
shows steady gains along the bottom line
despite the hungry canines at their gates.
Their profits multiply with their technique:
Two sharp investors wearing torn shirttails--
with summer banked beneath their fingernails.

WRITER'S WORKSHOP, 1985 for L. S.

Summer in Aspen: the namesaked trees
investing pale fluff in any opening--
stairwell, window, unguarded yawn--
hired hands sweeping it into hooped bags. (2 0\$2
James Dickey telling you and me to read
Dryden and Pope and to empty our heads , H
of metaphor. Slipping into elegant French S pati
rolling down from his heights as easy
as aspen fuzz, easy on his tongue
as old southern whiskey, he presided
over our premises, our poetic promises.
But he didn't believe in beautiful.

Evenings the local jazz was good,
and our Jewish roommate's cheeseless lasagna
at midnight. Afterward, at the dark
bedroom window, the mountain pressed closer,
posing, pleading for lyrics to its majesty.

In class the young Englishman wept
when Dickey began on his manuscript. Angrily
you said all our work had been aborted
and dissected to death. Dickey said
the poems were never conceived,
called them false pregnancies.
I said they'd been artificially inseminated
in glass outside the warm womb.
Laboratory entities. What did anyone expect
from altitude so dry and dreamless, swirling
with the white invective of seeds denied?

After all this time, each night beneath my lids
the mountain waits for poems to occupy that room.

Generation Gap

My memory banks are full of bias snippets
from distant winding/unwinding reels:
Buttons I counted on his gray vest,
its tailored points over matching trousers
in a wide-arm willow chair-- the view
from inside a lap. And glasses
clamping his nose. But I can't recall
the nose although people say I have it.
An oval place in my mind frames him
in gentle obscurities.

I can still see a doctor's hand pressing
a dome of white flesh on a brass bed.
That night I tried to say a new word--
appendix-- over and over
after strangers carried him out flat and slow.

But I don't remember him, my grandfather,
the he, the whole, the man.
Except as a haven, a goodness in my life.
A missing.
I strain to remember his face or something
he said. But my inside eyes rerun
a pale abstraction in a casket
on a curtained table-- with flowers all over
where only one vase of iris had ever been
in what my grandmother called
"the reading room" of her sprawling old house.

And a silent aunt who refastened the spring
high on the front screen door the next day
after everyone else and the flowers were gone.

LOOKING FOR

Somewhere along this upper road,
Dear Lord, I lost my way.
My hand slipped out of yours
Without premeditated plan
Or any secret wish to disobey.
Preoccupation took my mind,
I take each step by rote, propelled
By obligated night and thingful day.

This is a time of less and much.
Confusion and illusion sway
Me in their vagrancy like winds
Of March. I wander on, distraight
Till what seems sure and solid fails and falls.

Direction sense in disarray,
I ask again your guidance, God,
Your map is true, my reading flawed.
I'm like a stumbling emigre
From land to land, seeking my own.
Shine me your homing beacon, Lord, I pray.

Lily of the Field

Nothing beautiful is wasted;
beauty begets more beauty. Yet,
once being a lily
lovely enough for Y'shua to speak of,
what can you aspire to after death?
Not Solomon's silks. Not even
a white cloud after tasting gold.

Perfection needs practice.
How long did it take to become a lily?

When your day is over you won't see
your ruin. All you know is beauty,
your own, your nearby kind.
All I know of mine is a promise
of things to come when all is changed.

But wait--isn't that faith? And faith,
whatever the form, expresses
its own beauty. Not in transient passage
but in holding at the root.

Lily, I know your secret.

Contemplation

One summer, preoccupied with love poems,
blue silk and perfume, I didn't see the child go.
But I feel her absence in small ways. My hands
no longer twist my ring, my sash, my hair.
My feet (now accustomed to lotion, rosy lacquer
and three-inch heels) once pounced on distance
as something to be overcome impossibly fast
with no hint of grace or any kind of fetter.
My voice, used to bursting out, tumbling
in great tuneless relays, now makes soft bargains
with amusement as if a sudden loud arpeggio
were not allowed a woman.

Erato Brooding

She waits in one of Raphael's undiscovered glades
to be regaled with lyrics, and peach and purple shades.
Scrolls, and fifes and brushes wooed her other times,
set her on white unicorns, courted her with chimes.
Now no one speaks her language, and she longs
for Keats and Yeats and Shelley's lavish songs.
Her attendants languish, too-- fauns, Venetian
nymphs and oreads in the tones of Titian,
Rubens, Bosch. Once many poets' lilting lines
awakened her with rondeaus tied with trumpet vines.
She knows such Lire LY sounds are not restricted to the past.
And yet she can't remember where she heard them last.

TO JOHN SINGER SARGENT'S MADAM X

Ah, your lavender ladyship, Sargent's star
in his collection of canvassed beauties--
you alone almost ruined your painter.
Not by word or deed, but that you sat for him.

I see nothing scandalous about you.
We look a lot alike.

Your nose is praised, pronounced magnificent;
mine, identical, is appraised as too generous
and pointy, especially by me. We share
much else-- even the decollete dress,
the little black imperative of all generations.

The gallery of followers, assorted artists
and adoring pilgrims, lingers before your wall,
fondling their chosen words, hushing down
their lavender murmurs with wine Sips. Gazing.

My skin is flawless without mauve powder.
(Is that all that makes you daring, dazzling?)
My hair is prettier. But no one toasts me
with French champagne. No one stands agape
Send dream fodder or speaks huskily
of secret assignations. (Not that I'd accept
but I'd relish saying no to the presumptuous.)

I shrug back my coat, offering the same profile,
ripely incarnate, unhampered by a rigid frame.
A man comes up and says,
"Don't I know you from somewhere?" His fingers
Snap and point. "Oh yeah, CPR class at the Y."

It's like being jealous of purple.

Besides the pastel dusting,
I notice you have one more trick, madam
(yours or Sargent's?)
--Maybe if I rouge my ear--?

TO GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS on his PRAISING CHRIST OUR LORD

Master of soul-sounds and symbols, you
Who translated worn words into exploding experience,
Tongue-tasted, every nerve nicked with knowing,
Showing each timid cell small glimpses
Into fissures of forever-- you who managed
The majesty of alliteration between man and Maker,
Always making rhyme with, keeping rhythm with heaven:
No other psalmist has come
To snatch swatches of sea and sun and things unknown,
To patch raveled reverence, or touch those of us erring
In arrant night, pulling down day, drowning in darkness.

How seldom man has the power to praise the All-Powerful.
How often can there be a David-kind who transforms
Tarnished tones, warped wonder, the litter of letters,
Turning it all into music, lithe as wreathing liana?

You forced jaded mortals to look aloft
While you cut jewels on jagged Alps, and polished
Paling passion into prisms of lightning light
Reaching the core of everything carnal,
Prying open the spirit-seed, the kestrel-winged kernel.
You strung a lyre of divine idiom with strumming strength,
Allowing human ears to hear the reverberation
Of His Allness.

ON MAKING THE RIVER AN OLD MAN

The river was an athlete sprinting south,
A whistling boy with rhythmic summer stride,
The settlers drew cool sweetness from his mouth,
And made themselves spectators on his side:
Efficiently he handled rain and thaw;
He grew their wheat and cotton into fame.
His flanks became a city all who saw
Made plans to say, and daily, others came.
Pure drinking-- mallards-- trout-- were not enough.
Machines re-routed him, they built a dam.
They stole his power, dumped their poison-stuff,
Then cursed him for the filth where once they swam.
Now reeking past the newest factory,
He seeks a nameless burial at sea.

VILLANELLE IN VIRIDESCENT GRAYS

The line between neap tide and sky
Has disappeared like rubbed pastels,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They draw their graphic pattern high
Across mixed hues; it parallels
The line between neap tide and sky.

Light's changing moods intensify
The foreground textures, sheen and shells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

The pier shades truth while colors lie;
Imagination's stroke compels
The line between neap tide and sky.

Winged calls begin to prophesy
The storm this palette's blend foretells,
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

They pose on pilings, preening dry
Before their stippled rising swells
The line between neap tide and sky
The canvas primed for terns to fly.

MAINE FLOOR

Ground-pine runs green gaclands down the aisles
like the premature Christmas decorations
of overzealous merchants before Halloween.
Earlier, the tios of its fronds blew out puffs
of minuscule spores, seasonal smoke signals
alerting local customers milling around
the upper and lower level of the mall.
Other practiced runners pitch their products
among last year's picked-over litter.
Wild blueberries and cranberries push up
vivid hyperbole, their own neon ads
for the long-awaited autumn rummage sale.

Tireless ants of every persuasion
are the most numerous and frequent shoppers.
Unorganized beetles are the most selective,
mice and squirrels the most hasty.
But it's the bargain-hunting black bear,
indiscriminate, impatient, rude,
that makes me abandon my squatting rights
of having spied the best wares first.

BEAR AND BEE HIVE BY NIGHT

My honey mills wind down in aftercool
of late September sunlight's rapid plunge.
All day, productive order was the rule,
now workers rest before their first waves lunge
at morning sweetness waiting in the clover.
Moon-time awakens hulking stealth with claws--
just like a Choctaw spirit passing over
Sleep-dark weeds and logs on brazen paws.
Old Bruin knows the dynamo is dormant;
he knows he needn't fear sting-barbs or shot.
He raids as if he's cued by an informant,
then wanders off to some deep woodland spot,
my precious topaz beaded on his chin:
His tongue will find it, tell him where he's been.

So he'll be back. He needs no workers' dance
to point him toward his coveted reward.
Once found, his black brain memorized each chance
he took and won. He's proved himself the lord
of night, of fields and salmon streams, wild bees
besides. Now mine, compared, make easy prey.
Each raid, he's also seen my apple trees;
he'll soon gorge twice at my expense. By day
I don't believe old tribal kin return
as bears. By sun I count compounded loss
and load my double-barreled vengeance, burn
with educated scorn for tale
the years. Through hunter's
against the moon, my aim. H

TO THOSE DOCTORS AND OTHERS IT MAY CONCERN: LAST NOTES FROM THE RESEARCH LAB

My jar of reprieves is empty.
I have entered the complex process called death.
And my dear sworn-by-Apollo colleagues
(who labeled me loner, prima donna, bastard),
despite all the times we've seen death, heard it,
caused it, we don't know much about it, do we?

If all my calculations are correct, my time
will run out near midnight. Till then, I write
my thoughts as a poem: No more late hours to haul
my heaviness up the ladder to inhale library dust,
mine the only fingerprints claiming those heights
Since my old professor's. No more mornings
to peer through the lighted shaft probing
mindless obscenities feeding on healthy tissue,
nor afternoons to breed and stalk
the seething child-killers in glass cages.
Having defeated one of them once, I am driven
to destroy others. But now my demon, destructive
as any virus, has come again with the fuel bill.
Unpaid, he's evicting me, shutting my shop.

No time left to isolate the mutant entity
I suspect lay each day, enlarged beneath my eye,
imitating innocence. My life's goal--to expose it
to world attack, to unlock doors, to stand
at the portals and throw Messianic lightning
down the corridors of science. I would deal
with the devil to do it. But the dream, begot
by sleeplessness, nursed by my sulphuric tongue,
must be delivered by someone else.

Almost midnight. Even the devil is disinterested.
I move away from my cells, from magnification
and atomic rhythms to culture my notebook
in starlight. What do I know of poetry? Yet
the minutes allow for nothing else. My molecules
must restructure to pass through ancient walls.
Now is opaque sediment, in vivo failure,
sealing my siphons with unanswers. And no life
will be better for an eleventh hour poem.

The clock parts slow. Faint ticking. Heavy hands.
If only my other theories were as flawless
as this forte for human horology.

So much waste. Great strides to standstills.
Unless-- that one! That wire-drawn student
who yesterday challenged the godsmith.
And turning to dispute me in the flush of discovery,

incised and laid open a moment-- gave me a glimpse
of the bright burning edge of a demon I know.
To that damned and holy host, that one pupil,
I leave all I have:
The harsh shine of my keys-- and my only poem.

GENERATION GAP

My memory banks are full of bias snippets
from distant winding/unwinding reels:
Buttons I counted on his gray vest,
its tailored points over matching trousseurs
in a wide-arm willow chair-- the view
from inside a lap. And glasses
clamping his nose. But I can't recall
the nose although people say I have it.
An oval place in my mind frames him
in gentle obscurities.

I can still see a doctor's hand pressing
a dome of white flesh on a brass bed.
That night I tried to say a new word--
appendicitis-- over and over
after strangers carried my impressions out,
all my wonderings and fears out,
flat and slow.

But I don't remember him, my grandfather,
the person, the man,
except as a haven, a goodness in my life.
A missing.
I strain to remember his face or something
he said. But then my inside eyes rerun
a pale abstraction in a casket
On a curtained table. With flowers all over
where only one vase of iris had ever been
in what my grandmother called
"the reading room" of her sprawling old house.

And a silent aunt who refastened the spring
high on the front screen door the next day
after everyone else and the flowers were gone.

STAYING

This is a never before time and place,
yet it's old. A rickety settling under a weight
like permanence. Not somewhere I could live,
nor you. Especially you. The houses look
stricken, sidewalks abscessed, roads humpbacked.
No recurring dream ever taught me this dirt smell
of zigzag crevices familiar as my own voice
cleaving the night with your name.

How long has it been? Away from the fir-lined
hills we wound to music. Bordeaux and tulips
on our table... I remember how we were expelled
from a Silver express train, booted off
as if we didn't have the fare or some VIPs
claimed our compartment. Do you recall watching
whitetails in velvet as they browsed the moonlight
out our window? Their does and fawns raced us beside
the rails, swift as good dreams, albino as stars.

Sometimes I think I've heard about here
in rattling prologues to winter.
Or from spider tracks behind the furnace.
These alleys are ruckled with flickering eyes,
fever warps these rooftops. The walls tremble
with seizures.

And yet you stay, not knowing if my pale feet
can make it back to the station. Knowing only
that no one else knows about the deer.

THERE WAS A WOMAN WHO USED TO GIVE ME FLOWERS

When I was ten I heard her called a whore,
the sentence fletched with barbs that stung my spine.
I'd followed her through years of phlox before
that word bored itching in my brain. Define
the user of a hoe: But that could not
explain the rancid tone of voice that fell
like spattered ale-foam on my father's hot
hearthstones. Unfitting with her bouquet smell.
I later learned the meaning of the slur,
through tears watched trembling sun refract with lies.
Then wicked moons mimed coins, men's grins and her;
I raged, not knowing what I should despise.
My childhood, white phlox petals, all my prayers--
quicksilver dropped on hard-as-granite stairs.

Long months uncoiled the ancient codes within,
preparing me as resident temptation.
IT saw the pausing eyes my next of kin
imposed on me, their sullen fascination
with hip and thigh, my budding breasts. Were they
designs of sin? Oh, for an older friend!
The one I'd cherished so had moved away
when father "had a word with her".... "You tend
your lessons, girl, forget that piece of trash,"
he growled when I inquired. I missed her more
that season, watched her garden's slow backlash
of weeds where beauty used to rise and pour
against our wall. By summer's end, I knew:
What my father called her wasn't true.

But why did he degrade her? Why such hate
a child could feel its pulse? The evening fire
hissed and cracked like a rabbit gun, a spate
of sparks gnawed on the rug. He cursed the spire
of smoke that rose like one ghost finger prodding,
examining its host. He drained his glass;
he started teasing, yellow-smiling, nodding.
I never learned effective ways to pass
nim off. A choking feeling, hot and brittle,
abashed excuses trailed me to my room
attended by his grinding "Surly little--"
My door closed on the rest. The quiet gloom
encased my mind till sleep brought amnesty.
I woke, my father reeking over me.

THE IGNIS FATUUS

I

Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,
the color of a waning winter moon,
for she is strange and wild, a child of night
who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.
I followed her until she disappeared
through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;
she always raced ahead where ravens jeered,
past dying pines and past the diamondback.
She led me faster, luminous and lithe,
through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire.
Behind me came another-- with a scythe--
but still I stalked her in footprintless mire.
Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame.
I must embrace her once, must learn her name!

II

Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp.
Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees
and wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp
to wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.
Here, latent night seduces natural time
though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns
while strangler figs and chokeweed greenly mime
your myths and struggling gods, your snarled concerns.
Again illusion spreads elusive light--
a solar trick, not worth your risk to see.
Stay braced for total dark and call it right:
the ignis fatuus, lure's apogee, <or~
Hold fast to scientific explanation '
as lambent flares ignite mind's conflagration.

OLD PLOWMEN

The big oil painting was eloquent with humanity
in bib overalls and ladder-back chairs.
Country store barrels complemented the four
practiced sitters like family ghosts in the background.
On the left, Thadeus Ock idled his thick sole
against the obligatory pot-bellied stove so life-like
I could smell the scorch and hear the talk: "Hunh,
that's just as likely if you spell sole with a 'u',"
Clayburn Gilmer chided from the foreground, sniffing.
And Thad replied, "Naw, I'll make it to heaven, all right.
Doin' nothin', stayin' outa mischief, that's how."

A sensitive brush caught sly turns of lip,
leprechaun eyes, impudent toothpick, poised Barlow knife.
"What about sins of omission, Thad?" Doc Benson drawled.
(He wasn't a real doctor but folks gave him the last word
on aches and male maladies till they forgot
he was just a farmer too. For one thing,
everything of his still worked at the time; for another,
he recommended "a modicum of sour-mash bourbon"
for a multitude of misfortunes).
Thad and Jerry Holman addressed sinning by default
with square-boned shrugs. Jerry, haloed
in Kaywoodie smoke, added, "Reckon that's better
than actin' like a Pharisee makin' a big to-do."
A tobacco juice exclamation point seconded the comment.

The composition was sufficiently humble with grays
and blues mixed on a muted palette of ochers and umbers,
Suspecting the subjects of things
their own left hands hardly knew-- filled silo
for an injured neighbor, prize calf to a new widow,
kidney to a cousin, ready hammers and lumber
for the storm-damaged church belltower.

The artist's knowing stroke unstilled life
and sound. The faces defied canvas and time
that tried to reduce them all to sameness
contained in dark stained wood with mitered corners.

The gavel banged on my attention from the front
of the hall. The bidding was over. Afterward,
the auctioneer came over, wondering aloud
why I outbid the collectors. Had I known the artist?

"No, but I watched him once. Bothered him probably."
I went over to the picture painted decades ago.
"I always wondered what happened to this work.
That man on the left--the one peeling the apple--
he was my grandfather. The apple was for me."