

Great Aunt Ethel

It has been several years now
Since Ethel retired to the big house,
Ladies' aids and church bazaars.

The crisp sixth grade school spinster
Is only slightly faded,
The mental corners are smoother,
The heel not so firmly square.
But mostly the smile has found autumn
In a life whose first light frost has been long overdue.

It is a sour dew whose drops sound the rattle of gourds,
Feed the numbing, not the tingling of cheeks.

Inside the boiler fires a continual thaw
To dissolve the ice dust,
But the frost line of the coming winter
Runs too deep.

The dead hang in limbo on the bedroom walls,
Six brothers growing up, growing old.
All suspended in life with the last picture,
Six trains with no caboose.

Alice's apple pies savor only in the kitchen of memory.
Linford no longer listens, "Yes Maw,"
Twirling his grayed forelock to Alice's lectures.

Now, there is only Ethel each Monday
To wind the grandfather chimes,
The ticking of a generation,
The mellow monotone
Of a pensioned butler waiting on life.

In a life of spare time, a caller of time spared.

It is a collage of movements that attend Ethel
As the carnival moves slowly out of town
Without the last performer.

So many pine cones, mushrooms, ferns
All shellacked and captured in baskets,
Guests at the dining room table
Waiting for the bazaar.

The electric organ in the African violet room,
Perpetual pots with palm tinted flowers,
Difficult blooms that flourish maybe in spite
To silence "Camptown Races, Do-Da."

A side table of city crested tourist spoons,
Silver plated souvenirs
To feed the "I was there" appetites,
The flavors of the world in spoonfuls.

A night at a friend's
When the elm Linford planted in the front yard
Comes down.
After a day in surgery,
The patient is carted away.
Only the flat yellowed gravestone remains,
In Spring, it is weathered gray
With an epitaph of circling geraniums.

Around the center staircase, four bedrooms.
The vigilant master sergeant
Moves round about,
Week to week bedding the clean sheets.

The evening long since silenced
Its daydream whispers of romance.
The night no longer holds its breath
For the cry of a needy child.
Now between the masculine wrinkles
There are the eyes of the stern moralist.
Only a faint murmur of disquiet
Greet a childless life.

In the rail-yard the switchman searches
For the caboose to complete the trains going west.
It doesn't matter where or when she is found,
Only that it be for a silver streak express

Racing on ripples.

Not a slow freight,
Sidetracked
And left
Piecemeal
At each
Town.

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