

Cuckoo

Linda Lyons

The first hardcover book I loved was *Heidi*. Peter, Grandfather, invalid Klara, even the goats, were my “only-child” playmates. Switzerland was a magic place with alps and chocolate and chalets and cuckoo clocks.

My great-grandparents lived on the second floor of my grandparents’ house. Sunday visits meant I had to spend some time in the tiny upstairs parlor, slipping and sliding on the horsehair settee, fidgeting until my mother released me from duty and let me run downstairs to play.

My great-grandmother would rise from her rocker and shuffle to the dark oak sideboard. She would fuss for a minute and then ceremoniously set out a cut glass dish on the low table.

“I got some Humbugs,” she would say, pointing a crooked, trembling finger at the poop-brown nuggets with faint white stripes. “Eat a Humbug,” she would command.

I learned to prepare myself by breathing through my mouth to dry my tongue and palette as thoroughly as possible. I hated Humbugs; the strong mint was fire in my mouth.

If my mouth were dry enough, I could use my tongue to poke the Humbug between cheek and gum. I looked like a lopsided squirrel, but I could wait until the cuckoo popped out of his house which signaled that my time was up and I was free to run down the stairs and spit out the candy. Week after week, I stared so intently at the cuckoo clock that my great-grandmother

“My grandmother told me to be nice to everyone and always think

mistook my interest. She didn't realize I was marking the minutes. She believed I loved the clock.

"Some day that clock will be yours," she said.

Now I had a vested interest in the clock. Someday it would hang on my wall and I could curl up with Heidi and Peter and Klara in my own little Switzerland.

Anticipated ownership made the forced marches up the stairs not so forced. I timed my visits to the later hours of the afternoon when the cuckoo's song was longer and more melodious.

The Humbug was not so much a tribulation as a ticket to a one-act play when the gears would grind, the double doors open and the cuckoo took center stage.

My great-grandmother died when I was 16. She left no money, just a few inexpensive knickknacks, a lace collar and her cuckoo clock.

Now on my dresser, next to my well-worn copy of *Heidi*, sits the cut glass Humbug dish.

Feed Sack Majesty

Carla Martin-Wood

*He only wears Armani now,
my sister says of our brother,
as we watch the children skate
in an icy Central Park.*

*Her voice drones on,
mingles with traffic noise,*

about how you would feel if you were in their shoes. It's really good ad-

and I am drawn away
by a remembered song of cicadas,
far off, starting soft,
then building to a crescendo,
the way they do.

*On trips to the feed store, fall and winter,
Mama-Teen would take us girls
to pick up flour and feed
in printed muslin sacks.
We'd pick the ones with pretty sprigged patterns,
while she hoped for something boyish
for my brother.*

*Chanel never searched so diligently for fabric,
nor stitched with such pride,
sundresses and shirts to last all summer.*

I recall the four of us —
three girls, one boy, running barefoot
through the long singing meadows of our childhood,
garbed in feed sack splendor,
real lilies of the field, and none were so arrayed.

We knew ourselves the undisputed owners
of the sun, the broad-faced moon,
and the oceanic waves of timothy grass
below the far hill where we played
through those green and shining seasons of forever.

I don't recall exactly when it was we learned
the price of things.

I only know I choose to keep, safe in my pocket,
the coins of honeysuckle summers,
the moon's wide smile,
and feed sack majesty.

vice." ~ Unknown ~§~ "Soon I will be an old, white-haired lady, into

Stopping By

Mary Belardi Erickson

for Bob Moe, Sr.

He is a tall, older man with a new hip
and quizzical eyes always searching for story.
He notices the elderly shuffle on the grass;
this is something to wonder about.
It amazes him how when standing still, he sways
like a small fishing boat adrift on gentle waves.
The gear he carries is just that, something to tackle
with his somewhat comical regard —
the same notion as why fish don't bite in his small lake
where for years Sunnies, as if blessed, were plentiful.
The clear, deep gem of water keeps it secret.
No bother since fishing can bore him now
though a practice he did crave.
He does not feel sorry for having aged
when his meditative eyes
can see Sand Hill Cranes on his road
or many Canada goslings following, almost merrily,
the line of their mother.
He welcomes sightings like these, he says
and the time now to gaze.
He says this with a twinkle, when he stops
and wobbles some while telling.

whose lap someone places a baby, saying, 'Smile, Grandma!' I, who

The Faith Healer

Barbara B. Rollins

The McCarley Reunion was my project, start to finish. I'd researched the family line, gathered kinfolk from California and all over Texas for the weekend in June, 1991, written a family history, booked the hotel, recruited equipment and my sons for videotaping, and worried. Besides the appreciation and admiration I garnered, other bonanzas included finding my grandmother's cousin had extant photographs of my great-great-grandparents McCarley.

The successful weekend wound down about the same time I did, exhausted. I pulled up a chair near my dad, Sam Breedlove, and his cousin, Richard Elliott. Shoes off and no pen and pad in sight, I collapsed. And listened.

I'd learned long before not to ask Daddy family history questions – Mother knew more about his kinfolk than he did. Then again, Daddy's maternal aunt, five years his senior, had a passion and memory beyond belief, and on his father's side, I had the writings of my family-history-buff grandfather. Richard's demeanor was similar – two reticent men, sitting down and remembering.

Soon I dug for pen and paper, writing down funny tales of their grandfather's mules and his harnessing them in reverse position and scolding them for not moving properly, then apologizing when he discovered his error. Daddy told of going to the country and running from the field to the outhouse to the

myself so recently was photographed on my grandmother's lap." Liv

chagrin of his country kin. Then with casual conversation about the man they loved, Daddy and Richard blew my world apart so when the pieces settled and were reconstructed, the arrangement would never again be the same. In talking about the man, they spoke as easily of his healing men and mules as they did of his leading singing at church and trying to steer a car by telling it, “Gee!”

I should have known. Richard’s sister Catherine Elliott Cook had written a piece for the family history about their mother:

During her childhood, Lora was climbing off the roof of the barn at her Uncle Jim’s, stepped on broken glass, and cut her little toe off. The skin at the top was the only thing holding it on. Her father put the toe back where it belonged and bandaged it. Using a saying from the Bible, he stopped the bleeding, and with time the toe grew back. This was done long before doctors had attempted it.

As my interest grew, Daddy, Richard and I sought out Richard and Catherine’s brother, Ray, a preacher, who knew the prayers his grandfather used. We grabbed our videographers for the moment to save my scribbling rapidly. Ray said,

Our grandfather, Sam Richards, was a man of great faith and he could take fire from a burn if any one was burned and also he could stop bleeding. He could stop bleeding in animals and in human beings and used passages of Scripture from the Old Testament. Now to take fire from burns he would recite this (hope I can remember it):

“Fire, I beseech thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost to come out.”

and he’d say it again:

“Fire, I beseech thee in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost to come out.”

and the third time he’d change it just a little:

“Fire, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost I beseech thee to come out.”

Now to stop bleeding he would use this incantation I guess you’d call it:

“As I walked by thee and saw thee polluted in thy own blood yea I said unto them let thee in thine own blood live.”

And he said this three times.

“As I walked by thee and saw thee polluted in thy own blood yea I said unto them let thee in thine own blood live. As I walked by thee and saw thee polluted in thy own blood yea I said unto them let thee in thine own blood live.”

and the bleeding would stop.

At that point on the tape Daddy chimed in, “That’s true!”

The cousins told of a time their grandfather received a telephone call from a neighbor who lived quite some distance away. His mule had run into a barbed-wire fence, cutting his shoulder severely. The mule was bleeding to death. Ray said,

They called our granddaddy and told him where the wound was and he made this incantation and the bleeding stopped almost at the moment. They had their watches on either end and by the time our grandfather had finished saying these words, the people at the place where the mule was said that the bleeding stopped.

By 1991 I had a masters degree in Christian Education, had been church staff for three churches, taught Sunday school – and Sunday school teachers. I knew of miracles, thought I believed in them. But healings in the Bible I could dismiss as from a different age and time, television evangelists were easy to disregard, and occasional unexplained events – yeah, God did that. This? This was different. This was family. This was real. I’ve never healed by faith. I don’t doubt I could, though. Not that *I* could, but that I could be the vehicle. But since that day, I’ve never had a good excuse for not getting out of the way and

letting it happen through me. I'm the great-granddaughter of a faith healer. It's in my blood. God help me.

A Modicum of Faith

Barbara B. Rollins

Newborn as Shiloh roiled, Sam modeled wisdom, grace —
an unpretentious man. They trekked to Arkansas then on,
set up a church and scattered seed; a place
in Texas dawned a home, a farm from faith and brawn.
Sam served and sowed from youth through eighty years of
love, attuned to all of life, revered for prayers he spoke.
His unobtrusive faith invoked response above
the ken of prouder men while healing hurting folk.
Sam melded foot and severed toe, stanching blood with words
and healed a distant mule by speaking through a phone.
Example etched in children trust that undergirds,
and evenings he would sing, a radiant baritone.
A simple righteous man, a man I never knew —
Pacific battles raged as Sam progressed in peace,
a saint. And now Sam's grandson's daughter finds it true
that mountain moving faith exists and shall not cease.

time a woman thinks her work is done, she becomes a grandmother.”

The Mexican Skirt

Teresa Tumminello Brader

I asked to wear the skirt, a souvenir of a long-ago trip to Mexico, every time I visited Grandma. She tied its wraparound strings tightly around my waist and fastened the excess material with a big safety pin at the hip. “Frankie and Johnny were lovers...” Grandma’s voice wavered when she hit the high notes. I lifted the heavy fabric up from the floor and spun around the den. Grandma clapped her hands together as she sang.

The likeness of a peasant woman adorned the front of the skirt. She wore a white chemise and an indigo blue skirt. A tanned arm curved gracefully around a terra cotta jug. Her black eyes stared outward and her crimson lips held a secret smile. Around the rest of the skirt was a village scene of muddy browns and deep greens.

One day Grandma gave me the skirt. I hugged her hard, luxuriating in the circle of her soft arms. I put the skirt on when she came to our house for Sunday dinner. She sang and clapped while I twirled around the family room.

Donning the skirt in the privacy of my bedroom, I became the Little Match Girl dying on the streets of Denmark. I was Bernadette gazing up at the Lady of Lourdes. I turned into Little Nell trudging through the English countryside with her grandfather, fleeing the evil Quilp.

One Halloween I dared to wear the skirt out of the house. A white sleeveless blouse with a ruffle across the bust and gold

hoop rings in my newly pierced ears completed my gypsy masquerade. Mama dropped me off at the house of a friend, the leader of our group. Though the friend had proclaimed us too old for trick-or-treating, she commanded us to costume for her party. Sprawled on the sidewalk in the dark, we listened to “Seasons in the Sun” and “Billy, Don’t Be a Hero” on a tape recorder. We chattered about the boys at school, secretly wishing they’d come strolling down the street, dreading it at the same time. I draped the skirt over my knees, finally feeling sophisticated enough to join in the perpetual gossip.

Even when alone, I started to feel silly wearing the now-fraying skirt. I placed it, neatly folded, on a shelf in my closet. High school yearbooks eventually filled the space next to it. Grandma stopped coming over for Sunday dinners, preferring to stay home. I visited her during my college breaks, noting the same plastic figurines of Mary and Joseph that I’d played with as a child still standing on the small *étagère*. After my daughter was born, we called on her great-grandmother every Sunday. From the comfort of her armchair, Grandma sang and clapped while the baby bounced on my lap.

In the hospital hallway the doctor told me Grandma was ready to go. At her request I propped her arms on the pillows, the search for a more restful position proving futile. I found an accessible spot on her cheek above the breathing tubes and kissed her goodbye. Remembering the skirt stowed away years ago, I retrieved its box from the attic. I pulled out the dry-rotted garment and buried my face in its faded colors.

miles a day when she was sixty. She's ninety-seven now, and we don't

The Soldier's Picture

Peg Russell

In Grandmother Jones's leather photograph album, along with formal photographs of her parents and brother and her own family, there is a portrait of a solemn young man. He holds a rifle, and wears a Union uniform, complete with the cap. Underneath the picture is written "Mother's Beau."

Why would Grandmother have a picture of her mother's former boyfriend in a family album?

Her mother was Susan Maria Knox, born in New York, where both sides of her family had lived for three generations.

Susan had fallen in love and was engaged to be married when her fiance joined the Union Army. When he was killed in battle, the young teacher was devastated. She grieved so much that her parents decided that a change of scenery might help her, and so Susan was sent to Sheffield, Ohio. There she met Sumner Burrell Day.

Ironically, he also had worn the uniform of the Union Army. An officer in the local guard, Sumner marched his men around the courthouse on Sunday afternoons. But, when it came time for the unit to go to war, his father paid a substitute \$250 to go in his place. The substitute was killed.

Two years after the war was over Susan and Sumner were married in her home town of Russell, New York. They returned to Ohio where Sumner prospered, first in the lumber and timber business and then in real estate and constructing homes. He

helped found the bank and brought electricity to the area. Later generations would say, "Everything he touched turned to gold." About Susan, they said, "She had the brains in the family."

Now, over 88 years after Susan died, one of her great, great-granddaughters has her carved oak rocking chair and the unnamed first love, "Mother's Beau," still looks out from his place in the leather album.

Grandpa's Days

Mary Belardi Erickson

Opening a puzzle marked one-thousand
of a muted-red farmstead having seen better days,
I let pieces fall through my fingers like the ripened grain
we shoveled and elevated into Grandpa's old granary.

Sometimes, while I watched from below,

Grandpa and my brother
climbed with tar bucket to patch roof, over filled
compartments beneath.

When the price was right, from storage Grandpa
filled his wagon

and hauled oats to be weighed and shipped by train.

Other days, I rode along in our farm Army jeep.

Across the railroad from the town's elevator, Grandpa drove.

In the creamery's cooler, we tasted a paring of aged cheese
before leaving with a chunk wrapped in white paper.

Then just two blocks west on Main Street,

Frederick's Supervalu had boughten cookies Grandpa liked
for mid-afternoon lunches to last a farmer 'til supper.

If we needed some thingamajig from the hardware store,
my striped-bib-wearing Grandpa talked farming
before buying.

When he needed his hair cut, we said hello at the barbershop
and waited on long, green vinyl benches.

At least once, proud to be Grandpa's girl
I got an unstyled bob and a bright red lollipop.

Out of town we rumbled in our breezy jeep.

We drove south a few miles on tar, before we turned
back on gravel.

No rush – swerve and slow and stop and stare at corn —
maybe Grandpa was plotting his next harvest
and maybe looking hard did make the corn grow better, faster

I must have thought, I really can't remember all
back when I was going on ten and Grandpa
was going on eighty
but still going strong.

Painted Nylon Seams

Megan Engelhardt

There are age spots on their hands
and they have gotten shorter,
or I have gotten taller.

But these are the girls who painted nylon seams
on their legs, during the war, to go dancing:
who outlived their husbands,
and who rearrange their daughters' kitchens
every time they come to visit.

The grandmas always bring treats
— chocolate stars for me, cinnamon bears for my husband —
and sing hymns like they wrote them.

Some Things I Want My Granddaughters To Know

Renie Burghardt

I live in a beautiful rural area, and when my three city girl granddaughters come for a visit, I want them to learn more about the natural world.

I tell my granddaughters about the wild creatures that inhabit my woods, fields and pond.

I tell them the names of the birds that frequent the feeders in the summer, or winter. I show them the great blue heron that visits the pond in hopes of catching a frog dinner.

They think he is “cool” looking. And so he is!

Later, we watch a red-tailed hawk soar gracefully above the field, and land on a limb of the dead oak, eyeing the chickens in my yard.

“Shoo!” I yell at the hawk, while my granddaughters giggle.

I show my granddaughters the beautiful raccoons and homely opossums that visit my yard at night. Sometimes we see an armadillo, too.

“He is strange looking,” says Hannah.

I want my granddaughters to see the deer grazing in the field, especially the rare albino doe that is so beautiful it takes one’s breath away. And early mornings, I want them to hear the wild turkeys gobbling. If we’re lucky, we can catch a glimpse of them, too.

She buried three husbands and two of them were just napping.” Rita

I tell my granddaughters about some of the scarier creatures that live around here. Like the huge blacksnake that sometimes finds his way into the chicken coop. I want them to know that although I may threaten the blacksnake with my broom, to discourage him from getting the eggs, I would never harm him. I tell them that the blacksnake, like all the other wild creatures, has a right to his existence, too.

In the woods, I teach them the names of the trees; so they know the difference between an oak and a hickory, an elm and a maple. We look up the names of wildflowers as well, and when we see butterflies alighting on them, we look them up, too.

I want my granddaughters to go outside with me on a clear, starry-night, and learn the names of the constellations. If we are lucky enough to see a shooting star, they can make a secret wish on it. Summer nights, I open the windows so they can hear the chorus of a country night, while fireflies flash their perfect lights.

I want my granddaughters to hear the eerie howl of the coyotes, and be glad there is still enough wildness left, where coyotes and other wild creatures can live their lives. I remind them often that the Creator of all this beauty would be pleased, if they worked toward preserving His beautiful creations, so their own grandchildren could someday enjoy it as well.

The Road to Chatham

Dixon Harne

Grandfather Hearne died when I was four, and family members say I can't remember that. But I do – and even before that, before he fell to heart problems. I can see plain as day that last Thanksgiving morning he came to the screen porch with his razor strap to warn us kids about all the racket – for the third time. He looked tall and stern when he shook that strap at us, and we scattered like field crows when Mimmaw Hearne banged her wash bucket with a wood paddle. And I can see the hospital room where he lay dying, the glucose bottle and I.V. hanging by his bed, the room fragrant with fresh cut flowers – chrysanthemums and roses, the same smells that followed us to his gravesite. I can see the deep hole, the mound of fresh-turned dirt, the crowd gathered round to watch the coffin being lowered to its final rest, the sobs and moans and awkward hugs – and everything awash with a black patina to my mind's eye.

Mimmaw was left all alone now and miles away from her family, but she would not leave her home of over fifty years, the only way of life she'd known. Her roots grew too deep in the rich Louisiana farmland to ever be transplanted. She had buried a good man, a good husband and father, a partner with whom she'd weathered the miseries of drought and crop failure, two world wars and the Great Depression. And hard work had earned them the respect of townspeople and neighbors. The Hearnese were, in fact, the very first settlers to make their way

woman she is an ornament to society and a treasure to the world. As

through the rugged hills and forests and against great adversity to plow the virgin soil of Jackson Parish. Mimmaw's forebears, the Loflins of Alabama, would soon make their way to Jackson Parish as well, a settlement as yet still unnamed.

Lula Mae – that was her name – was a big woman, clean and tidy in every conceivable way. There would be no foolishness in the parlor, no arguing, and meals were served on time. I rarely saw her smile or laugh. She was a serious Christian woman who took her time on earth as an opportunity to prove her worthiness for the life hereafter. I know she loved her family, even visited us on occasion, when her gardens could be left to a neighbor's care. She raised most everything she needed, all tilled and sown by her own hands – corn, tomatoes, greens, potatoes, melons, cucumbers, apricots, plums, even pecan trees that shaded the front and side porches from the summer heat. To everything a season, she might say. I can remember how we kids would secretly comb the rows in the heat of summer for “tommytoes” – what we now call cherry tomatoes – and devour them like sweet plums under the porch. If she ever knew, she never said so. Even her attire materialized from her own hands – calico and gingham dresses fashioned from cornmeal and flour sacks and Spiegel patterns. And oh the lace doilies on the divan and dressers and table tops, and the beautiful quilts and pillows stitched from the scraps.

So much of my memory of Mimmaw Hearne centers around food, for she was such a wonderful cook. No one has been able to match her collards and mustard greens or the chicken pie my dad – her only son – loved so much. No matter the occasion, when we visited there would be a big golden-crust chicken pie just for my dad. Aunts, uncles, and cousins joined us for celebration every Thanksgiving at Mimmaw's house. That is, till the year she married the preacher man – a Methodist who went by the name Brother Garrett. From there forward, our

a sweetheart, she has few equals and no superiors; as a cousin, she is

Thanksgiving celebrations would alternate with the Garrett clan. The preacher was a genial soul, a life-long man of the Cross bringing The Word to congregants old and young at his small-town church. For a while they lived in the parsonage, a white frame house Mimmaw tidied up fit to entertain the mayor or the governor. She saw to the preacher's every need and dutifully sat in the Amen section every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock and six P.M. and every Wednesday for prayer meetings – rain or shine. She lived her faith and prayed we'd all do the same.

Mimmaw insisted on keeping her own home when she remarried, just in case or for sentimental reasons – I know not – but when the preacher retired and gave up the parsonage, they had a place to go home to. Mimmaw was always happiest there at the old home place, where she spent her remaining years in her garden, puttering in her kitchen, or knitting away at a colorful throw or rug or Christmas shawl. Brother Garrett, though older, outlived her by several years and remained in the home till he passed on to his reward. The house and land eventually made its way to my dad and his two sisters – then to my dad alone. In the 1980s, he rented it to a nice young family who struggled at first but eventually managed to purchase the place outright, having no clue as to its history – that it was built by the very hands of my grandfather and his brothers on a choice section of rising ground owned by the Hearne family since the 1860's.

So much of our history still resides in the community of Chatham, Louisiana, that it will – for at least another generation – remain the heart center of the Hearne family. And though I was city-born-and-raised, I loved the countryside as a child and wish with all my heart that I could spend one more Thanksgiving at Grady and Lula Hearne's old home place. I can still feel the thrill of my tummy flutter as our car flew over the hilltops on the road to Chatham.

convenient; as a wealthy grandmother with an incurable distemper,

Finding Tangled Roots...

Ginny Greene

Grandpa: gifted navigator – and a skilled rum-runner! The best, they say. Ignoble claim! Wonder what he'd have been had his Papa not left the coast of France, waking that next morning, tricked aboard, unwilling crew mate who rounded Cape Horn, (or inched through a new Panama canal?), cruised the West Coast, jumped ship at Victoria, wed Lena of the Swinomish. Still in south France? Still a fisherman? Altered history. But, then — what of me? And mine? Just one answer echoes: Grandpa was a rum-runner. One of the best.

she is precious; as a wet-nurse, she has no equal among men. What, sir,

At Long Last, Love

Curtis C. Chen

Herman Hodges was a bit actor who played Uncle Kemble in three episodes of the popular television series *The Five Gables*. When he auditioned for the part, he was seventy-five years old, a widower, and dying from a degenerative heart condition. He didn't tell the casting director any of that. She laughed when he said he was a very mature twenty-nine, but she didn't turn him away.

Herman had always wanted to be an actor. He never forgot the joy of his first speaking role, as a magical pumpkin in his fifth grade Thanksgiving pageant. He had always looked forward to Halloween, but he'd never thought to build a whole character and not just a shell. His Halloween costumes became more elaborate all through high school, complete with backstory, motivation, and even a little skit he would perform while trick-or-treating.

But as Herman grew older, he found fewer and fewer opportunities to act. His parents and friends and wife and children always dismissed his interest as frivolous. Their doubts undermined his passion, and he gave up that dream and focused on making a home and raising a family. He never regretted that decision.

Years later, after his children had moved away and his wife had died, the now-retired Herman sold his house and relocated to a nursing home. Without anything or anyone to care for but

would the people of the earth be without woman? They would be scarce,

himself, he drifted through his days, going where the staff directed him and doing what they suggested. It was better than nothing.

One night, Herman's nursing home organized a Shakespeare reading – *The Merchant of Venice* – and the participants drew straws for parts. Herman got Shylock and stage fright. He forced the unfamiliar words through his trembling mouth, hoping he wouldn't faint before they got through the whole play. Had he ever felt this nervous in his life? Not when he proposed to Edith, not even when he had the “birds and bees” talk with their son Brian.

But partway through the reading, Herman stopped feeling nervous. In the play, Shylock's daughter Jessica eloped, and Herman remembered when his own daughter, Abigail, had married her first husband. She had been adamant about wanting to be with him, and her father's disapproval had only hardened her resolve. Herman understood how Shylock must have felt, and he knew how wrong both he and Shylock had been. Herman was angrier with himself than he had ever been with Abigail.

He let his anger pour out in his performance. Everyone had applauded at the end of the reading, and Herman felt something he hadn't felt in a long time.

He had always thought he enjoyed acting because it allowed him to be a different person. Now he realized that he had discovered himself in those characters. Even when he had played a pumpkin – trapped in one place, unable to move, always subject to the will of others – he had found the truth of it in his own fifth grade existence. Herman had allowed himself to feel more deeply on stage than he ever had in daily life.

Herman's first television role was in a thirty-second commercial for a local hardware store, playing the grumpy old neighbor who complains about his inadequate gardening tools. It took him a little while to adjust to acting for the camera, doing

the same lines over and over again, but it wasn't difficult. Herman only needed a few seconds before each take to summon the memory of Saturdays spent in his family vegetable garden. If he closed his eyes, he could imagine that the heat of the stage lights was the afternoon sun, and he almost expected to hear Edith calling him in for supper.

The casting call for a recurring character in *The Five Gables'* second season premiere came out just before Herman's seventy-sixth birthday. He had done several commercials by then, and played bit parts in a couple of sitcoms. He had earned a reputation for taking direction well. One of the nurses from the home drove Herman to the *Gables* audition in her own car. Herman didn't mind that she wandered off, hoping to catch sight of some movie stars on the studio lot, while he waited in a hallway. He didn't even care if he got the part or not. He just liked acting.

Nobody was prepared for the immediate popularity of Herman's character, Uncle Kemble. The day after the season premiere aired, the nursing home phone lines were jammed with calls for Mr. Herman Hodges. After his second episode, reporters from three different local newspapers and two wire services came to interview him. They were all turned away.

"One hit and he's already a prima donna," one reporter muttered while leaving.

"Give him a break," another reporter said. "The guy's old. I hear he's got a weak heart."

Herman was, at that very moment, fighting to inhale oxygen from a face mask and wondering how much longer he would be able to continue acting. He could feel his insides giving up a little more every day, but he still remembered how it felt to be Healthy Herman Hodges, and he could play that part very well. Nobody needed to know how bad it really was.

family very much. . . . However, my grandmother's attic was full of old,

“It isn’t fair,” he whispered to himself late one night, unable to sleep. “I shouldn’t be dying when I feel so alive.”

Herman felt it happening the next day, on set. They were shooting the last scene of his third episode, a mid-season script titled “At Long Last Love.” The show had originally featured a guest character, an old family friend who came to visit the Gable sisters and discovered that his childhood sweetheart lived right next door. After Uncle Kemble made such a splash with critics and audiences, the writers had changed the script so that it was Uncle Kemble who discovered the Gables’ new next-door neighbor was the girl he had almost married fifty years ago.

Several of the cast and crew members had shed tears at the table read the week before, and many of them had congratulated Herman on scoring such a plum part so early in his acting career. He had gone home that night and listened to a recording of the Cole Porter song from which the episode took its title. Herman could remember hearing Frank Sinatra sing it, on the radio in his car, during one of his first dates with the girl named Edith who would later become his wife. She had died seven years ago in a car wreck, blindsided by a drunk driver. Herman hadn’t been with her. He hadn’t gotten to the hospital in time to see her before she went into surgery. He had never said good-bye.

The final day of shooting ran long. It was easy to lose track of time inside the soundstage, with huge lamps producing artificial sunlight. Herman was amazing that day. He didn’t flub a single line, and they never had to ask him for a second take unless it was to try something different or fix a technical issue.

The last scene took place on the Gables’ front porch, where Uncle Kemble and his childhood sweetheart, Gwen, said good-bye to each other. They had spent the entire episode getting reacquainted, and the TV audience would see their romance flowering again over the course of the hour, only to find that Gwen had a terminal illness. The director shot five takes before

he got the scene in the can. He had to keep cutting because the camera operator's sobbing was stepping on the actors' dialogue.

Herman didn't mind waiting while they reset and did the scene over and over again. Angela, the actress playing Gwen, was quite attractive. He didn't mind looking into her eyes and begging her to stay with him. Her eyes were a bright, pale blue – the same as Edith's. He enjoyed the memories that came flooding back as he looked into those eyes.

"I can't stay," Angela said five times. "I'm going to get worse. I don't want you to see me at the end."

"I love you," Herman said five times, with the face of a man at a loss for words.

"It isn't fair," Angela said. "I shouldn't be dying when I feel so alive."

Herman reached out and took Angela's hand. She looked down, then up, and nodded. He smiled at her for the fifth and last time.

"Print that!" the director cried, once. "That's it! We're wrapped!"

Everyone applauded. Herman closed his eyes.

Herman Hodges, a bit actor who played Uncle Kemble in three episodes of the popular television series *The Five Gables*, passed away while doing something he loved. He was seventy-six years old. He lived before he died.

Welcome

Madeleine McDonald

I can't believe it's 10 years since we met
You haven't changed at all
And this is your husband and daughter
Welcome, all of you, welcome to my new home
Come on in
Shoes off, please
My carpet says thank you

Let me get a towel
To wipe that chocolate off her face
My new sofa says thank you
No smoking indoors
Not in my apartment
Go and smoke on the terrace, if you insist
My lungs say thank you

I see you're looking at the quilt
It was handsewn by my great-grandmother
I must have told you about my great-grandmother
She travelled all the way from Latvia in 1898
And she was pregnant, just imagine!
I wouldn't be here otherwise
Please don't touch the quilt, it's fragile

when the passion started. I was maybe eight or nine." ~ William H.

I hung it on the wall to keep it safe
My great-grandmother says thank you

You're not going already?
I'll call the elevator
It's so good to welcome old friends
Hospitality is an old Latvian tradition
Goodbye

Vespers at Mama-Teen's *Carla Martin-Wood*

Safe beneath quilted coverlets,
sweet with lavender and sun,
I sink to slumber
in a world of summer lullabies,
see the moon,
naked and caught like a pearl
in the net of a sycamore tree,
while somewhere
an owl hoots low, frogs croak, crickets hum,
and her voice, cracked with age,
sings from the old piano,
peace, be still,
as a gathering storm

Antique Clock

Al Carty

Her antique clock, tick-tock, without the
hickory-dickory mouse that munched on
drapes and baby-grand and made Grandma
so nervous. Grandpa got that bastard.

Her clock, tick-tock, polished and petted
with Old English, the blood-scent
of this house, coursing through the clock's
works, pendulum-syncopation is the pulse.

Grandpa sets his morning watch, and smiles
and runs a grizzled hand along the fine
old wood, sipping from his ancient cup,
remembering this first gift from him to her.

And now her clock, tick-tock, museum waiting,
Grandpa sips and smiles, he also waits, marking
time for his destiny, awaiting Grandma's smile.

Gramma Might Have Told Me *Madonna Dries Christensen*

Gramma lived in a one-room shanty that sat along a graveled road at the edge of town. The ceiling hung so low that medium sized adults needed to stoop when inside. As a child in the 1940s, the cottage seemed perfect; I felt like a doll in a dollhouse.

When I visited Gramma on summer afternoons, I sometimes found her on the front screened porch, sewing aprons or nightgowns from feed sacks. She hummed as her head bobbed up and down over the sewing machine; up when the material glided along smoothly, down to inspect a seam or tear a thread with her teeth. I sat on the floor watching the treadle dance under her foot, staring boldly at the bunions protruding from holes cut in her felt slippers.

The pedaling stopped, and Gramma muttered, “Darn bobbin’s empty again.”

She leaned back and tugged combs and hairpins from her hair. At seventy her hair was still mostly dark. She pulled back the locks, damp with perspiration, and refastened a knot at the back of her head. Rising from her chair, she said, “Fetch a pail of fresh water and I’ll make nectar.”

Off I jogged to the pump in the neighbor’s yard. I lugged back the enamelware pail using both hands, sloshing water on my bare feet and on the worn linoleum floor.

flower they themselves never hoped to see -- or like a sealed letter they

Gramma filled a clear glass pitcher with water and added a dollop of cherry syrup. As I watched the water swirl red and white like a barber's pole Gramma tossed in sugar; stirred, tasted, added sugar, stirred and tasted again. When satisfied, she used a long-handled dipper to fill two glasses.

I took both drinks while she reached into the cupboard and brought out a handful of sugar cookies, lightly browned around the edges. We went to the porch, where, seated in rocking chairs, we nibbled our cookies and sipped our drinks. Outside, honey bees buzzed among the morning glories and four o'clocks, seeking sweet nectar of their own.

Gramma pointed a finger across the road. "Look at that big kid galloping around on a mop, pretending he's Gene Autry."

I knew the boy from school. He was my age, ten, and I saw nothing wrong with playing Gene Autry. He was my favorite movie cowboy, too. But I laughed along with Gramma because she thought he was funny.

A pickup truck rattled by, stirring up dust that filtered through the screen on a gust of the ever-present Iowa wind. A fat housefly circled our heads, droning like a fighter plane. Gramma picked up the mesh swatter, but laid it down when the fly collided with the sticky paper strip dangling above our heads.

The boy across the street called, "Whoa, Champion," and dismounted his horse and went inside.

"Gene's going into the saloon to have a drink with the other buckaroos," Gramma said, and we laughed again.

I remember only that one conversation with my maternal grandmother, the only grandparent I knew. I took her name, Agnes, for my Confirmation name. She died when I was twenty, but we'd lost her years before to dementia. I often wonder what else we discussed, and I imagine a conversation something like this.

"Tell me about the olden days." I said.

could not plainly read." Alice Walker ~§~ "And the matches gave such

“How olden?”

“When you were a little girl.”

She might have begun with her grandparents, the McLaughlins, who fled Ireland during the potato famine and eked out a living in the Boston area before moving to a farm in Wisconsin. Then came the wagon journey when Gramma’s grandparents and her parents moved to Iowa, in 1879, when Gramma was six. She talked about dust storms, grass fires, and tornadoes that swept across the nearly treeless prairie.

“Lightnin’, though, that’s the worst. Papa and my sister were killed by lightnin’.”

“Really? At the same time?”

“No; that’s what makes it remarkable.” Rubbing her eyes, Gramma retrieved the memory. “Essie in eighteen ninety-two; she was only twelve, and Papa in nineteen aught nine, in the harvest field. My brother Linford was there. He was stunned by the jolt, but he brought Papa home in the wagon. ‘Hurled from this earth to eternity,’ is what the paper said about Papa.”

“Who was he to me?”

“He’d be your great-grandfather, Henry O’Brien. A kindly man.” She went inside for her photo album and found his picture, with his wife. “Bridget was Mama’s name. She died four years later, a painful death from cancer. But she never complained. She was buried with her rosary and crucifix and a white lily.”

“Who’s that baby picture?”

“Hester. We called her Essie. She was a bright little girl; everyone liked her.”

“The one who got killed? Were you a little girl when she died?”

“I was eighteen. A year later, I married Ed.”

I had no memory of him. He died when I was four. In pictures, he is handsome, French-Canadian, he was. My brother

a brilliant light that it was brighter than at noon-day; never formerly

said he'd sometimes run into Grandpa coming out of a saloon. He'd dig in his pocket and offer my brother a piece of peppermint candy with lint on it. The treat was a bribe for silence; he was not to mention where he'd seen Grandpa. He sucked on the candies, too, a feeble attempt to cover his breath when he'd had a snootful. I wouldn't have asked Gramma about that, though.

“What was my mother like when she was little?”

“Oh, Maybelle was shy, quiet, like you. She had lots of friends and she loved babies. Goodness, she'd walk miles to see a new baby on a neighboring farm. Now she has a houseful of her own.”

She showed me pictures of her brothers, whose band played at barn dances where she and her sisters and friends gathered. And her cousins, four Jones sisters, members of a popular all-girl band in the 1930s, who later gave up show business to enter the convent with their widowed mother. “All five at the same time,” Gramma said. “Imagine that.”

That led to a story about a McLaughlin cousin who disappeared in the 1920s. “Married with three daughters. Folks say he ran off with a young girl. She disappeared the same day. Clem borrowed his brother's car and called him the next day to say the car was at the Fargo depot. They must've got on the train and went somewhere. Nobody heard from them again.”

After a while, I suppose I grew bored, as children do when old folks reminisce about people whose names children quickly forget.

Forgotten until years later, when my parents were deceased and I began searching for my ancestors. Forgotten until I began to study old photographs and read old obituaries, wishing I could recall what I'd heard about these people; details that would bring life to the names on my genealogy charts.

had the grandmother been so beautiful and so tall. She took the little

In questioning relatives, I learned things that neither Gramma nor anyone else would have told me when I was a child. My older sister revealed that Aunt Arlowene was not our aunt, but our first cousin. Gramma and Grandpa raised her after their daughter, Gladius, gave birth out of wedlock. If my grandparents knew who the father was, no one else in the family ever learned his identity, not to this day.

Grandpa's family supposedly figured in a horse thief tale in Canada. But no one knew, or was willing to relate details. The story remains unverified. That family skeleton grows dusty in the closet.

I asked Uncle Jack if it was true he'd been a bootlegger. Grinning, he said, "I might've done some of that during the Depression. A fella had to make a living one way or another."

I found information about the Jones sisters of the all-girl band, and contacted them. They provided me with details about their career, as well as pictures. I learned from them that their uncle Clem had never been found. Not until 2008 did we learn the full story.

To Aunt Goldie I said, "I remember hearing about someone who worked as a housekeeper for Mark Twain."

She laughed. "In our family? That's a new one on me."

If Aunt Goldie didn't know, no one would.

"Who was the girl who died just before her wedding and was buried in her bridal gown?"

Aunt Goldie thought for a moment. "Oh, yes, that was on your dad's side. She was to marry your dad's younger brother. Her name was Emma... someone. Or was it Elsie? That doesn't sound right either. Hmm, what was her name?"

Aunt Goldie couldn't remember.

But Gramma might have told me on one of those quiet, humid afternoons when we drank nectar and nibbled cookies and visited on her screened porch.

maiden, on her arm, and both flew in brightness and in joy so high, so

Ode to Her Portrait

Carl Palmer

Her permanent is just that,
not a hair out of place, ever.

Smiling her same small smile
from this cracked glossy photo

in its heavy oval pewter frame.
Her best green dress and pale

jade necklace both enhance her
rusty red hair remembered from

that day in this faded black and
white print. I trace her face, long

for her embrace, smell the familiar
aroma of Irish lavender, close my

eyes and sway, as the radio plays,
“The Tennessee Waltz”.

very high, and then above was neither cold, nor hunger, nor anxiety-

Most Beautiful of All

Sally Clark

When my granddaughter Sophie was five years old, she loved kindergarten – most of the time. But one rainy day when I picked her up from school, her face looked like the drizzle falling all around us.

“What’s the matter, baby?” I asked her as she climbed into the car. “Did you have a bad day?”

“Don’t ask me that, Grandma, I don’t want to talk about it!” she thundered. “You always ask me that! Don’t ask me anymore!” She scowled and tried to turn away so I could not see her face.

“I see,” I replied, driving away from the school. I didn’t ask her anything else.

While the lighting flashed around our car, she exploded, “My daddy says that I’m the most beautiful little girl in the whole world! No one is more beautiful than me, not even Hannah. Hannah’s daddy said that she’s the most beautiful little girl in the whole world, but he’s wrong!”

“Well,” I said, “all daddies think that their little girls are the most beautiful little girls in the whole world because they love them so much. You and Hannah are both beautiful little girls and both your daddies love you.”

I could tell that was not what she wanted to hear. When we got to the house, we sat in the car, waiting for the rain to stop. I

tried to talk to her some more. She hung her head so that I could not see her eyes begin to puddle.

“Honey, why is it so important to you to be the most beautiful?” I asked.

She didn’t want to answer me. She hugged her door handle and picked at something she thought she saw there.

I reached across the seat to touch her arm and asked again, “Why is it so important to you to be more beautiful than Hannah? What happened today when you and Hannah were playing at school?”

Sophie answered softly, “When I was talking to Hannah on the playground, she just turned away from me. I didn’t even get to finish what I was saying. That’s because Hannah is more beautiful than me.” Two big tear drops fell into her lap.

After a few moments, I said, “I know how that feels. People do that to me sometimes, too, and it always hurts my feeling. It makes me feel like I’m not as important as they are.”

She raised her head, surprised that I understood how she felt. Climbing across the car to the shelter of my lap, we watched the rain splash against the windshield.

“Sophie, you are always important to me, and to your mommy and to your daddy,” I whispered.

I didn’t give her any answers that day and I didn’t fix her problem. But resting her head on my shoulder, she knew that someone who loved her understood her feelings. It was enough to give her peace.

Violet

Karen Kelsay

Husband, I want to ripen into
a woman like your mother,
one who wiggles an arm
into the nook of a son's elbow,
feet twisting obscure angles
across frosty streets, refusing a cane.
Whose only hope from tipping
over in the lane with a dizzy spell,
is not a bottle of pills, but a bag
of boiled sweets.

A stiff-upper-lip kinda lady,
who jeers at heart attacks
and broken hips, and raises hell
when trapped in a ward with old people.
One who still makes tea each
morning over the burner, even though
she catches her sleeves on fire.
A woman with no riches, but a few
baubles of costume jewelry
and collection of miniature brass
animals, given her one mother's day,
that glint in sun like a row
of diamonds.

in my dreams. And I can't wait to go to sleep tonight because we have

In Her Grandmother's Room

Weslea Sidon

The last thing she found was an apron
balled tight and stuffed behind the stove,
pitiful strings crinkled,
a weight of sooty grease welding
the fabric to the floor.

This meticulous kitchen —
each drawer relined each year,
each bit of linen refolded to ward off
the curse of crease —
where no one dared to spill,
or sigh as a cup of bitter tea
followed a stifled tale of heart break
down the drain. A drop of honey, a drop of anger
both invited vermin.

No one would have seen her yank the perfect bow,
wrench some crushing pain from kitchen sanctuary
and stuff it in a winding sheet of flowering percale.
She saw her now, but only rising afterward
turning to select another apron from a scented drawer.
She saw her smooth the apron front, and one or two
bold strands of hair, then let the kitchen door swing
shut behind her, silent on its gleaming hinge.

a lot to talk about. I love you.” Jamie Foxx ~S~ “The simplest toy, one

Imagining My Great-Grandmother *Suzanne C. Cole*

Amelia Groskinsky, born 1873, died September 1883

Sarah Groskinsky, born 1875, died September 1883

William Groskinsky, born 1877, died September 1883

Lara Groskinsky, born 1881, died September 1883

Three daughters and a son, ages ten, eight, six, and two – born, nourished, clothed, educated, sheltered from winter frost and summer swelter in Trenton, Iowa, until suddenly, in one month’s time, all four died. I sit here trying to imagine what September 1883 must have been like for their mother, my great-grandmother.

I never knew Christina Hoelzel Groskinsky, born in Baden, Germany, April 25, 1849, because she died four years before my birth. I have a picture of her, though, a solid dowager in a velvet dress and a coronet of braids, leaning forward without a smile, as though imposing her will on the photographer. My mother says that as a child she feared this grandmother and her regular visits, for she was a grim, cheerless woman who refused to speak English or play with her five grandchildren. And when the four granddaughters became teenagers, she fought bitterly with them over trifles of deportment and dress.

But as I examine the genealogy pedigrees my mother’s sister, a Mormon, has sent me, my heart aches for this unknown great-grandmother. What could it have been like to lose four children

which even the youngest child can operate, is called a grandparent.”

to diphtheria in one dreadful month, your world narrowed to their beds, dripping water down their slowly closing throats, watching them struggle for breath? Did she have friends or neighbors, anyone to share the nursing, pray with her, hope for miraculous recoveries? What of Carl William, their father? September in Iowa, grueling labor for a farmer from first light to last, scant time to relieve or comfort one's wife, time only to fuel up with food and return to the fields.

A family story says he did drive the buggy into town for medicine at last, but while he was gone, two of the children died. So Christina would have witnessed their death agonies alone. Did she weep then, wrapping those cherished bodies in quilts to be carried to the graves their father dug? She would not have had the luxury of long mourning, for she would have hurried back from graveside to the bedsides of the surviving children until there was another small death – and then another.

Finally only one living child remained whose fever broke at last. Perhaps he sat up and asked for soup or water. She might have staggered to the door then and realized that the harvest had passed, the barns were full, but the house was empty. What would a home, once filled with the noise of five active children, sound like with only one? How was the unspeakable sorrow borne?

I know only what the genealogy records. Four years after the epidemic, Christina and Carl gave Albert, the lone survivor, a brother, my grandfather, Elmer Charley. But Albert could not give his heart to another sibling, and he and Elmer were never close. So both Christina, bereft of daughters for so long, and her youngest son must have been delighted when, five years later, at forty-three (Carl was fifty-nine), she safely delivered her last child, Carrie.

What then would have happened to this mother's heart when diphtheria also appropriated this belated, beloved child when

she was eight – old enough to help with the house, old enough to share secrets, old enough to laugh with her mother at the ways of men while darning their socks and patching their overalls.

My mother says the grandmother she knew was cold and harsh and unloving. Perhaps Christina was strangled by jealousy of her daughter-in-law's five tow-headed children. Perhaps it was impossible for her to take joy in the health and beauty of her own grandchildren, knowing how transient the life of a child could be. Perhaps she simply could not open her heart again.

And Elmer? My grandmother often told me I was his favorite because I reminded him of that lost little sister; only now do I realize the pet name he called me – Coeeyanne – combined “Carrie” and “SuzAnne.” I never talked to him about Carrie, or the siblings he never knew, or Carl, or Christina. I wish I had. Now I have only black and white photos and data – names and dates, births and birthplaces, marriages, deaths, and gravesites. And a mother and grandmother's imagination.

Patchwork

Madeleine McDonald

Objects are all I can touch of you now
A silver ring
A pocket watch
A newspaper clipping yellowed with age
Dog-eared black and white photos
Of wartime uniforms and jaunty smiles

My grandparents

You never talked of the war years
I never asked
Until it was too late
I was too young to understand
You too entrenched in denial

I failed to know you

Yet you each gave me
One quarter of myself
Your genes sleep within me
Biding their time
I have no choice but to pass you on

body can do for little children what grandparents do. Grandparents
