

MARGO BUTTON

Family Tree

1

All those names

Caleb Bartlett arrives
in Waweig, New Brunswick in 1808
His wife Molly bears Caleb and Leonard
whose wife Anna bears Moses and Jesse and John J.

In 1821 Anna loses
twenty-year-old John J. on January 5
ten-year-old Moses J on January 26
She has another son the same year and
names him John J.

whose wife Susannah bears
Adith Ada Seth Persha Angilette
Persha dies at twenty-four
in childbirth Adith at three
Alpheus John and Ottiwell Jewett
AJ and OJ go to California
and never return
Edward Hitchings who marries

Fannie my great-grandmother who loses
her daughter Fannie May
at sixteen during an appendectomy
performed at home

Helen my grandmother loses her son Roger
at twenty-six when he plunges over a cliff
one night in a car I know him,
the forever-young Mountie,
from the photograph that takes his place
A grandson replaces him

You women churn out babies every year or two
to fill the godforsaken void
You birth in the beds you conceive in
Loss is the daily bread you bake
You who know the presence of children
and their absence

2

In the summer of '92 I return to the family home
Only stumps remain of the four old elms that
framed the white farmhouse Tall grasses still buzz and
blow
sweet in the summer sun where Dad ran with his brothers
and sister Anna they say I resemble Here is the barnyard
where I made mud pies with pee when I was two
In the woods nearby I find a stream I never knew

Only Dad his brother and two brothers' wives remain
of all the Bartletts whose photos once covered the wall
We eat lobster sandwiches at Grandpa's oak table
Uncle talks about the folks down the road who
had a son the only son they had whom
they locked in the barn for days when he had a crazy spell

I imagine the fists that slammed the big barn door
The fists that beat the splintery wood until they
bled in the black where the voices were
I feel them in my chest as I choke
at the name I must name but I must

*My son Randall John I tell them
is mentally ill The cause
is probably genetic The prognosis
is not good*

*I want to add I regret
I cannot replace him but
I will not let him disappear*

Dad twists his mouth and scowls at the sideboard
Uncle studies the crusts on his plate
This family of men know only the touch of
handshakes talk easily about
the price of shingles at the sawmill or
the deer whose soft white bellies they slit in the fall
Pain they pour down their gullets and piss out in the drain

*Margo Button has been writing for three years. She has been
published in Dalhousie Review, and Contemporary Verse2.*