

Family Viewing: Father

And sometimes he would torture our
dog, clamping
Tecky's muzzle in one big hand,
twisting
till Tecky's head was upside down
like a black mass, the dog moaning
prayers through its teeth, my sister and I
screaming alongside, his other big hand
holding us off, his giggling crackling
around the room, his eyes, coals
under his charcoal hair, our tears
burning
in his smoking breath.

His fingers were branding tools
on my breasts,
my developing body.
These, and other assaults
we never forgave.
When he died, only then
did we believe in a merciful God
who answered prayers.

He never spoke of his childhood.
For us, he was only the Great Fire
consuming his daughters
for twenty-six years. His name
was Tom: synonym
for our hate.

Years after his death, Mother told me
his red-headed father never called him
by name, only "black bastard"
because of his black hair, and that
when Tom was five, Grandfather
suddenly rose
from the farm table and silently
flung him into the big fire, hoisted
the hearth blazer, and up Tom roared.

It took six men
to pull Grandfather off. A miracle
you didn't die, they said
when they pulled Tom out, flesh
melting
living torch
in his father's auto-da-fé.

And now I know he never left
that place, and that his soul
revolved endlessly about a stake,
finding no way out through those
grown-up faces
and that he never stopped shrieking
his aloneness in those flames,
so he tried to pull
his children in.

And now at last I can call you
by your name, oh my father, and let go
my own burning.
When old hatreds kindle,
I shall stand beside you
in your father's fire, hand in hand,
our flesh unravelling, eyes bubbling
in our heads,
till our streaming tears
put our mutual hell out.

Jancis M. Andrews

To My Father, On Valentine's Day

My love is like a red red rose
A single rose
Stem snapped
Petals pulled off one by one
Leaving small round rose hips
Naked and exposed
To light and probing hands
Peeling back the fingers
Crashing into warm dark child's world
Of pictures without words
To tell of desecration,
Broken boundaries
Stormed by old flesh
Ripping open stolen secrets
Leaving nothing
Sacred
Anymore.

My love is like a white rose
Stained red, torn
By jagged fragments
Of the past.

Night Time in the Nursery

Three blind mice
three blind mice
wondering where to run
from the farmer's wife
smiling in the kitchen
with a carving knife
hidden behind her face
saying, come to Mummy
and they do, sometimes
eat the apple with the blade
buried in the flesh
put there deliberately
for one of them to cut themselves
to ribbons on the inside
where no one can see and say
how on earth did that happen?
the witch said I had to,
so I did when she smiled at me
like honey, but it hurt
and the apples on her face
shriveled up before my eyes
when I blinked

I heard her laughter
crazy flung into my face stinging
so I ran away
stayed cradled in the tree top
singing rockabye baby
holding onto daylight tightly
knowing when it tips over into darkness
I come crashing down always
feel her breathing heavy down my neck
fingers tightening
trying to wring me dry of sounds
stored in silence
just in case they seep out
by mistake one day while I'm singing
ba ba black sheep
knowing that the Master and the Dame
will be coming for me
soon
as I sit
wrapping songs around me
like an old shawl,
waiting for the night
to get colder.

Jane Acworth-New