

SHEILA STEWART

Two Chairs

I'm putting down words trying
to edge closer to her trying
to pull up two chairs
side by side
my side by her side
she's telling me about Glen Farm
about the Miss Hutchinsons coming for tea
they were seated with their backs to the fire
a row of wee Ward girls, Mum and her sisters
opposite them when Annie Hutchinson slurped
her tea
the girls got a case of the giggles
couldn't get out of their chairs
too close to each other
Mother in the middle
I'm trying to edge closer if only I could be one
of the Ward girls getting ready for a party
making scones, pavlovas, Victorian sandwiches
Mary doing the sweet
Evelyn the savory
when they brought home Catholic boys,
they changed their surnames

Mum's boyfriend Leonard, a soldier from Wales
sang to her
but her parents said he was from far away
so she wrote to him calling it off
the next day while trying on a royal blue dress
she met the young minister who took her away
to Canada
her friend Maureen McKinney arrived with a
carload
of ministers
knowing Mum was partial to men
in suits or uniforms
Dad took her first to the Presbyterian manse at
Ahoghill,
County Antrim where the accents ring of Scot-
land planted there
with the confiscation or plantation
Catholics and Protestants have different words
and memories
a huge empty manse they had to try to furnish
on £300 a year

what did she say when he first talked about
leaving Ireland?
she didn't want to go
her father cried as he stood at the doorway
when they went past
in the morning on the way to the boat
most of all she missed the weddings and the
funerals

I'm putting down words because when I
showed her a poem
I'd written about her, she said with delight
ach, it's about me
there just wasn't enough about her
a wedding and a funeral

writing down putting down like planting bulbs
one after the other
putting down a garden or cutting out scones on
a floured board
putting them down on the baking sheet placing
them
close to each other
thickest ones at the edges so they won't burn

her last spring she saw the tulips
pushing up through the ground she said,
I hope I'll be here to see them bloom
now we wait for tulips not for her
knowing that whatever happens
we can't tell her
can't call her up to tell her
anything at all
but she would say don't grieve for me

I'm putting down words trying to get closer to
her to sit with
her or lie down beside her on the bed piled high
with pillows
putting down words because I don't have a
place to visit
though of course it was right
to take her ashes to Ireland

Sheila Stewart's poetry has appeared in Tessera, Contemporary Verse 2, WRIT, and The Antigonish Review. Her poetry is also forthcoming in A Room at the Heart of Things, edited by Elisabeth Harvor (Véhicule Press). She is currently a literacy worker living in Toronto.