

### My Father Sells the Homeplace in the Sandhills

My grandmother calls crying and he's gruff.  
She has no right to make him feel  
so bad. He tells me she's been bad  
each time she's called. Bad,  
the way she was when Grand-dad died  
and she wouldn't be consoled for anything.

An old house is an old house after all.  
His past belongs to him now,  
not to her or to that house.  
It's likely any day now to fall down.  
Why is she behaving like a child?

He thinks if he does not tell it  
I will forget his story:  
how each day in summer, hearing  
the train whistle, he jumped  
into the saddle duded up,  
climbed the hill across the track  
to wave passengers west by cowboy hat.

Having offered himself as symbol  
standing on that hill, he thinks  
now he can just take himself back,  
dissolve his image in the eyes  
of children who tugged at mothers' sleeves:  
Look, a real cowboy. He waved at me.

Suppose that cowboy is the only thing  
to stand up to the hills and plains  
along a flat day's ride through memory.  
And suppose it is the only way I have  
of seeing him besides suited and tied,  
driving away each day of my childhood.

Returned from the last visit,  
the closing on the house,  
he waves away my mentioning it.  
His hand like the hand of a boy  
leaving the saddle horn  
to brush away a fly buzzing his face,  
while the other holds on lightly to the reins,  
it forgets that it is holding anything.

—Judith Sornberger

### Visit

Now is the time for coyotes  
to stop crying in our ears;  
to sell the Sandhills home  
and lose the town: its cattle  
history, the hills, the hills.

Grandmother leads me to the quilts  
folded on her mother's bed.  
One for each grandchild, our births  
predicted in the heavy winters  
of her mother's labor. Choose,  
she says, and there are no surprises,  
no new patterns: stars,  
the wedding ring, log cabin.

Sure, you remember Great-grandmother,  
my mother insists. I don't, and try  
reading her face in the yellowed newspaper.  
Obituary calls her face a china doll's.  
Mom says no, she was tough.  
Killed a rattlesnake trespassing  
in her garden with the cane  
they all believed she leaned on.

Just as they supposed her husband her support  
before her cuthroat suicide in their front yard.  
And she had gone on folding down the quilt  
from her small body each day before dawn.  
Gone on feeding children  
and chickens given children's names,  
gathering eggs.

I try tracing the hand that struck the snake,  
its knuckles coarsened against wind and burrs,  
the grit under her nails from garden work,  
in the only map I have of her,  
the quilt I choose: star pattern.  
Here to trace her veins in tiny stitches,  
here to find her hands in five-point stars.

My last night in the Sandhills  
the stars come out in patterns I look for  
standing knee-deep in wet pasture.  
Star chart against the sky, I turn  
until I'm sure north points to north,  
try piecing stars into stories I hold.  
But it won't work. Stars out there  
are close together as quilt stitches,  
close in their vast distances as relatives.  
The patterns I brought with me do not fit.

Perhaps she knew those myths,  
their foreign names, but chose  
to give the stars an order  
she inherited from women's hands,  
one closer to home. Now I squint  
to see them through her needle's eye,  
and looking must be sharper,  
less detached. It is chilly here  
at night even in summer, and I fold  
around myself what she has left,  
knowing its warmth was not meant for me.  
But in the code of stitches  
my fingers read her will  
to cover all she loved, and I am covered.

—Judith Sornberger

David Creamer/The Sower

### My Grandmother's Dolls

Now that I am grown  
and can do no further harm,  
Grandma brings them out  
one by one, telling me their names.  
I tell Grandma I am pregnant.  
She holds out her china baby doll to me.  
I touch the doll's porcelain curls,  
its long white muslin gown,  
the lace along the hem. I bring  
its cool cheek up to my own.

My mother told me once  
that Grandma took care of four  
younger children on the farm  
until she married Grandpa.  
Now, she thought, life will finally begin.  
Six months later she was pregnant.

I hand Grandma back her doll.  
For a long time she is still,  
holding it against her bosom.  
Then she begins rocking in her chair,  
rocking and patting the doll's back.

Her eyes are pressed shut and her tears  
drop onto the china baby's back.  
The creak of her chair is a voice  
reciting the names of the living,  
the names of the dead, and they are  
the same name over and over again.

—Judith Sornberger

### Harvest

