Susie Johnston

1885-1966

Grandma

You taught me all there was to know
In your day: how to
write kind words on pillowslips,
how key lime pie and butter tarts are made,
how seams are measured, darts are cut,
how women must endure “the curse.”

You were grain while I was yeast,
a feastful metaphor.
My idiom was fantasy,
yours was spare, prose straight
tidy, non-discursive,
a recipe of practicality and care,
small emoluments of a life
well-measured, sifted.

Elderly, but never old
I thought you indestructible,
sturdy as the Victorian stock
from which you sprang,
ineluctable
as seasons, perennial
as the hollyhocks
that reigned by your garden wall.

Until that day
when, arriving in Toronto to bring
 my infant daughter
for your blessing, I found you
lying on your day bed,
wan and wasted,
cancer had made a
a cardboard copy of yourself.

~Sheila Collins

European Snapshots

There I am, on the deck of the *Isle de France*
a 1950s star
in a calf-length skirt and a frizzled Toni
my new found waist pinched like an hour glass
pony tail bobbing in the wind
waving goodbye.

You are next to me, beaming,
a winter sun.
I am the favorite grandchild, the first of sixteen,
a plump, young moon
glowing in your reflection.

It was a choice between braces or Europe
that summer I turned sixteen.
Decades have passed
and my lips still part
to crooked teeth,
the EU now a bitter dream
but I retain images of moonlight in St. Marks Square

a sudden turn in the road on a Scottish moor
and a piper in full regalia.

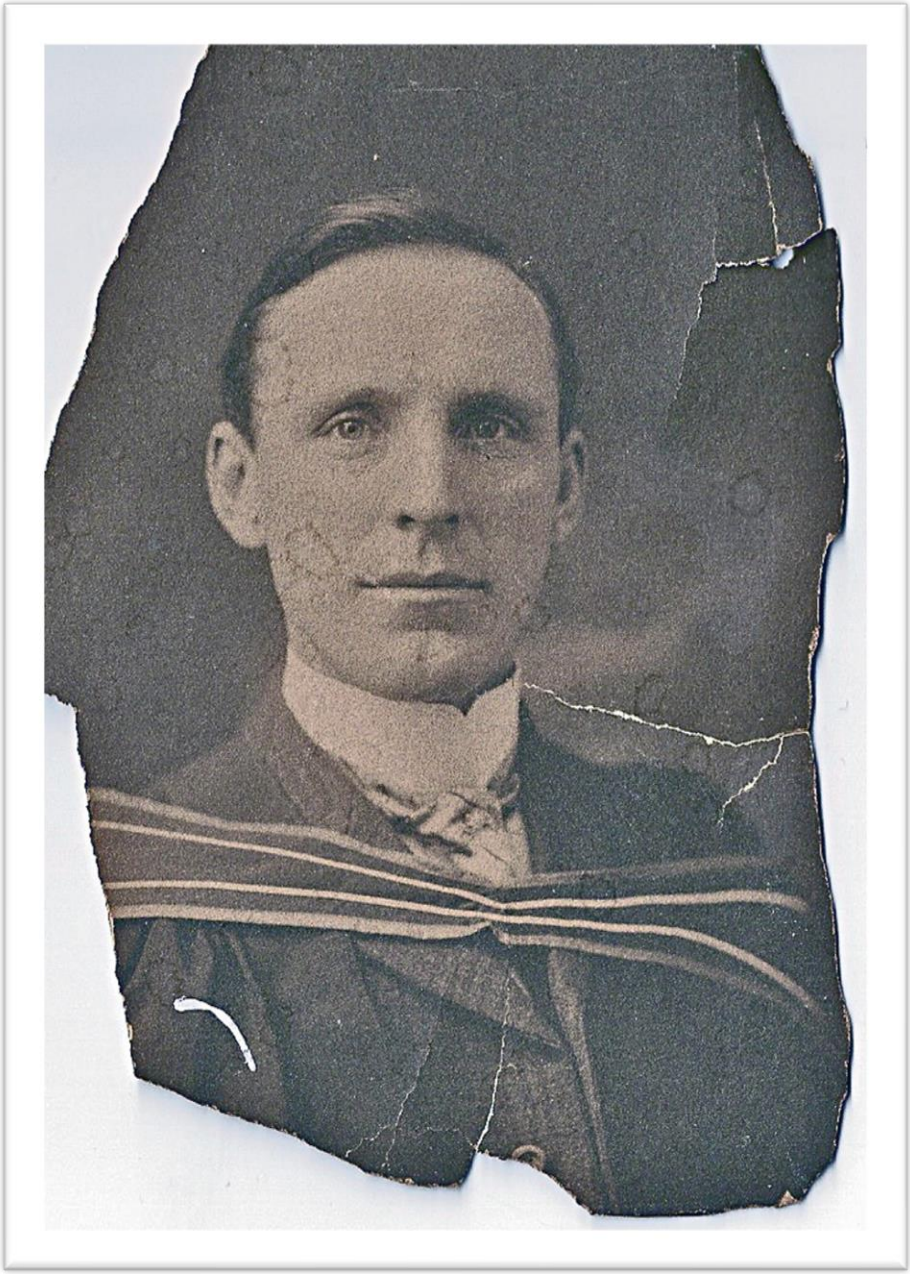
All over the continent you chased me that summer
while I tugged at your leash
like a young dog in heat,
chased romance in every piazza,
wore the proverbial pinch like a purple heart,
and imagined the thrill of a sneak kiss
after dark
in the Grande Hotel Bar
with Rudolfo.

There we are again,
posing amid the tragic glory of Pompeii:
a city instantly embalmed
in the act of living--
a snapshot, like this
memory of you.

It is winter now.
My children who were once
young moons now have children of their own,
and I have become the winter sun.
The bedspread you crocheted
in expectation of my marriage,
my only souvenir of you, has
long since gone. I kept mending it,
but it insisted on tearing.

~Sheila Collins

Frederick Johnston
1869-1944



Spirit Guide

I knew my grandfather only once,
or, rather, he was a presence.
The way lay through dappled woods,
a cascade of shadows.
His walking stick, the measure

of rocks, roots, resilient
earth, ears tuned to the direction
of muffled chirps,
the rustle of slight scamperings,
a caution of cliff where far below
Lake Simcoe, a shaft of light,
burned through a lattice of deep,
dark green.

I don't remember him speaking,
at least in words that reach
the ear, but farther in.

It seemed we walked for hours
in silence, yet full of sound,
emerging on a field of seeding
wheat and wild lupine.

Months later, when I was ushered
into that grey, hushed
room where sorrowing adults sat,
I could not find him anywhere

but somewhere
farther in.

~Sheila Collins

E. Joseph (Joe) Dreany

1908-1961

Dad

He was a quiet man,
gentle and private,
“with a heart that was big
and warm and Irish,” his Lone Scout
pal wrote at his death.

Sloping shoulders and concave
chest, a modest
paunch around the middle
betrayed a sedentary calling,
a man "who always worked harder
than the average man thinks necessary,"
his best friend said.

Even in his twenties,
rimless glasses, hairline receding,
he wore the anatomy
of middle age.
Growing up poor,
a widow's only son,
placed burdens on a young man
to deep to bear.

I remember him anxious,
always about money.
A free-lance illustrator's work
was never done. Often he'd come
home, crestfallen, dispirited,
after submitted his drawings
to some supercilious editor
with nothing to show
and the next month's mortgage
to pay.

He wasn't always this melancholy.
A puckish humor displayed
in Depression era sketches of Huck Finn
boys and whimsical rabbits,
fish poles dangling on the cover of
Canadian Youth, "official organ of the
Totem Club," a publication
for lonely, rural boys like him;
and even while courting,
the tiny cartoon figures penned
in India ink on the envelopes of
love notes to the stunning,
willful woman
he finally won.

Reluctant, she had already given
her heart away when he met her
to another who had moved
to a distant city and didn't reply.
Their marriage, a conjunction of careers,
shared interests and sketching trips
artists' parties and children to raise.

The one thing missing was intimacy.
It ate at him like a gnawing hunger
that couldn't be slaked.

The formulaic illustrations that sold
Pulp magazines, his first job,
were dreams of men like him:
adoring women and macho men
in poses of alarm and grit
and daring do,
as snakes and bears and bandits
threatened.
Graduating later to children's books
his subjects were Indians in war paint,
bucking broncos,
cowboys around a campfire
strumming guitars and eating
chuck wagon stew.

But his heart was rather in those
paintings he did for himself,
on sketching trips in the wild north
of his youth: sawmills deep
in the Ontario boreal;
men hauling canoes across portages,
families snowshoeing
through deep December drifts
toward glowing miner's shacks,
the bellowing smokestacks and smelters,
of Sudbury and Copper Cliff,
primordial contest of man
with nature.

Died of a broken heart
at 53, too young.
I saw him when he first collapsed,
ran to him on the lawn, terrified.
Told him to get to a doctor
but he never would.

His children's books now
collectors' items,
are sold on the Internet.
But his real legacy to us,
a world of astonishing
power and beauty
now disappeared
except in the pictures
he left.

~Sheila Collins

Freda Mae Dreany

1913-2006

Portrait of the Artist at Her Studio Window

Freda, looking out her studio window,
saw wild things:
a squirrel ravaging an acorn,
the spider devouring her prey
caught in the web

that swayed from the drainpipe;
the matronly mourning dove
stalked by Oscar, the cat,
as she waddled
among plantain,
stinging nettle and witch grass
that passed for lawn
in that suburban bend in the road,
that bohemian grove tucked
among plumbers' homes,
machine tool men,
stay-at-home moms
in checkered aprons,
aroma of oatmeal and chocolate cookies
wafting from Westinghouse kitchens.

Freda, looking out her studio window
saw wild things:
a caravan of ants
lugging its cargo through thistle forests
and curly dock;
beetles lumbering
among chickweed;
a hornets' nest lurking
in the eaves;
a swarm of yellow jackets
hovering.
My brother, Freddy and I
mud-brown in spring,
green in summer,
red/gold in autumn,
indistinguishable
from the unruly mass
of maple, beech and sassafras
on that hill that passed
for badlands,
giddyupping our stallions
in hot pursuit of gunslingers.

The praying mantis splayed
across the picture window,
looking in
saw wild things:
paint-smeared carts,
tin cans of brushes,
frames jumbled in bins,
a skelter of books tumbling
from shelves,
a toddler-sized doll rigor mortised
in red velvet and white lace,

a card table, its thrift shop cloth
stained
with forty years of conversations:
confessions of infidelities,
husbands who never came home,
a son without genitals,
a daughter dead from anorexia,
obligations unfulfilled,
loves unrequited,
all poured out
with cups of tea,
and stale Hob Nobs,
aroma of linseed oil and turpentine.

In the middle of it all
a woman,
mall stick between thumb and forefinger,
one end
resting against the easel,
squinting to catch the shape
of her model's arm,
the grayed
shadow in the curve
of a neck,
the underarm
resting in green satin.
An antique table draped
in toile,
suggestion of a potted
plant,
seen through a bell époque mirror,
something Sargent would have painted.

~Sheila Collins

For Freda, the Artist

(with irritation and love)

What can you do with a woman who doesn't care about money
keeps linseed oil in her freezer
forgets the money she is owed
(but always remembers her debts)

refuses to stick up for herself
lets people take advantage of her
and not only loves them, but *believes* in them
forgets who she invited to dinner
but remembers every line and shade of a beautiful face
neglects her appearance,
but usually looks stunning anyway
has plenty of reason to worry,
but is stubbornly happy and ridiculously enthusiastic
seems to neglect her children
yet they stick to her like glue.

What *can* you do with such a woman?

In some societies she would be made to change diapers
and do laundry twelve hours a day.
Or considered subversive and kept under surveillance.
In others she would be considered mentally ill.
In a capitalist society she would be pitied and condescended to.
In a patriarchal theocracy she would be burned at the stake.

But I tell you, the only thing that makes sense to do with such a woman
is to give her canvas, paint and a brush
and learn from her.

~John Collins

Waiting for Winter

Mornings on the wide gray verandah
her mother dressed them,
the air redolent with lilac and cedar.
Around the beer-dark rain barrel
from which they washed,

tiny helicopters hovered,
iridescent.
The water from its amber depths
was ice cold
and iron scented.

Mornings on the wide gray verandah
the pupas slept in their wombs,
while the arachnid spun silvery threads.
In the jar on the ledge
polliwogs pirouetted
in briney foam.
Round speckled stones,
a bird's blue egg,
dry moss, a milkweed pod
gathered sun on a teatop table.

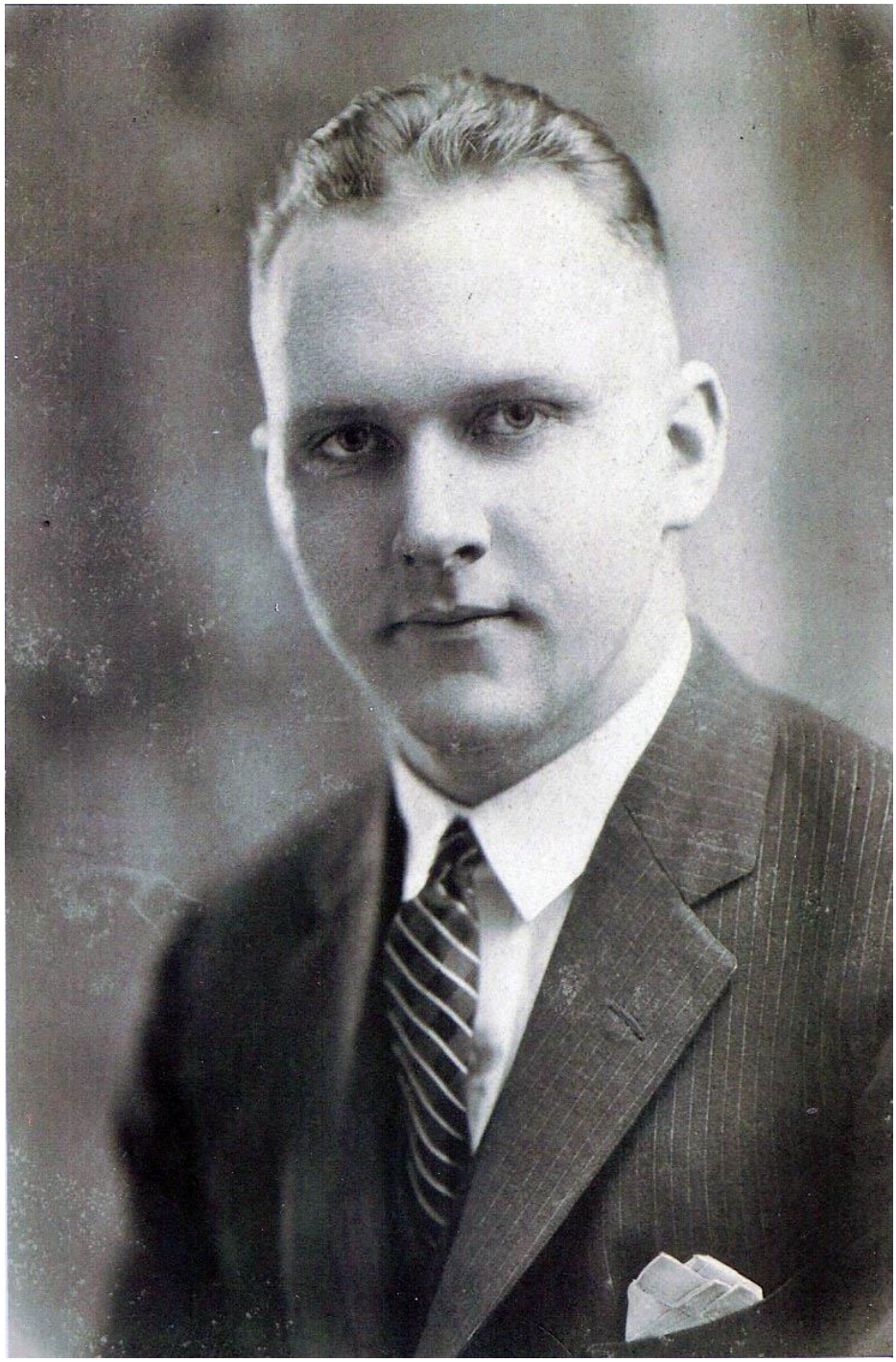
Mornings on the wide gray verandah
the adults, stout in their leisure,
gossiped of scandal,
complained of the weather.
Beyond the shimmering oatfield,
past spruce, white pine and balsam,
Lake Simcoe, glittering with diamonds,
sang in its ancient crater.

She returns to this place
Between dreaming and waking
on days when the air is clear
and song birds come to her feeder.
Silver-haired, with veins
that have known long work and sorrow,
she submits to having her brown bob combed,
laces a pair of high topped shoes,
and heads for a field of buttercups
to wait for winter.

~Sheila Collins

William McKinley Collins

1901-1976



Bill

Out of the hard, unyielding earth,
land worn smooth,
old mountains shaped like turtlebacks,

ice bound winters, great sleds hauling
blocks of ice across the frozen earth.
A land so hard, even drinking water
had to be melted down.

His mother called him Willie and let his curls
grow long,
as though to tell the land,
"See, even from you I can wrest something warm and soft."
But he knew better.
He looked to survive and he would have only
just plain "Bill," with no curls.

Old Ben, the preacher, stands with two fine horses,
derby hat, black suit
against the barren land
armed with a gospel of hellfire, hard work,
determination.
No summer soldier, he brought his kernel of love
concealed in a rock hard shell
that it might survive the buffetings of wind and ice.

Boyhood saw the gentler days of Minnesota towns
and woods' golden summers,
alarm clocks fashioned from a piece of string
tied to the big toe.
Tramps in the woods and fishing on the riverbank
taught him how to be quiet, if not patient;
and the craftsman in the boy carved from these
elements the rough outlines
of a friendship that seventy years of whittling
would not exhaust.
(His parents named him Everett Lafayette,
but he was always "Steve" to Bill).

The North was not through with him.
As though to make the lesson plain,
the winter angels came for Jenny Dickson,
the bonny lass who collared husbands Saturday
nights in the saloon and sent them home
to wives and children.
Perhaps in his heart of hearts he always wanted
to be little Willie to someone again.
But the land was teaching him
when you break your arm at the age of twelve
and you have no mother, you go home and
get in bed. You can't always be asking for favors.
And when they found him half delirious with
the bone sticking out of the flesh
he never complained,

because he always did the best he could.

When Ben went blind from poring over Greek and Hebrew,
he sold tombstones and farm machinery,
content in his flinty faith to have been well used.
And when he fell and broke his leg and it healed crooked,
he was not heard to complain but only told them
to break it again because he did not wish to live
if he could not walk to and fro in the earth.
And so he died on the operating table; and in
this ungentle way the land gave Bill his
diploma and launched him onto a stormy sea,
a tall, proud ship conceived in love,
and weathered in adversity,
that would keep many afloat.

Self pity was unknown to him
and he found apologies embarrassing.
He was always content to meet life on its own terms,
and he never came away second best.
He was always hungry for life, and though he
never had enough of it,
he savored every bite.
He enjoyed life like Joe Louis enjoyed a good
fight, and he savored its happy times like
a North Dakota farmer savors his hard won breed.
He took from the land what he needed,
and he was well content with his living.

~John Collins

In My Father's House

In my father's house
the memories of childhood pull
like a strong undertow.

I am again the small boy
sweeping stones,
trailing sand
and dogs:
a rolling stone gathering memories.

You were so big and I so small.
You created the world, while I played in it.
As we grew,
so grew this house
as the turtle's shell
to accommodate its inhabitants.
The sounds of tools were a kind of music,
an accompaniment
to the songs of a child's life.
Saws, hammer and nail, drills, shovels, chisels, axe,
cement mixer, even the whisper of a paint brush
were music to your ears.
In them you found again perhaps
the peace of a Minnesota childhood.

Sundays in July blossomed
With aunts and uncles,
miscellaneous cousins
and assorted friends,
while the little kitchen consumed
vast quantities of berries, corn, tomatoes,
cukes, grapes, eggs, flour and milk
from Indiana farms and woods
(I loved you, Peter's Dairy)
Sending forth in season
streams of salad, pies, casseroles, jellies, jam, biscuits, chicken
and potatoes in profusion:
mashed, baked, fried, scalloped, boiled, left over.

Sitting in the silent rooms
I feel your presence
in every board, brick, plank and pane.
I see you forlorn at your empty workbench,
musician at a keyless piano.
Come with us and we will hammer tunes for you
down all the years of our lives.

Woods of oak and dunes of sand
filled up boy
with tree houses, grape arbors,
sassafras stems, sand pits, poison ivy,
hornet's nests
and young girls in first bloom.
August days did not exist in time,

But were instead moments in eternity
marked only by the passing of clouds across the sun,
rhythm of waves caressing sand,
the distance in bare feet across a hot pavement,
the progress of moves around a Monopoly board
in the quiet of evening,
and the number of times a whippoorwill sang
before you fell asleep.

The real estate agents remind us
that memories have no price tag.
soon, there will be strangers within your walls
who will not know, or care, or feel.
But not yet.

We will not forget.

~John Collins

My Father and I

We touched awkwardly, too stunned by the immensity of feeling to acknowledge it openly.
We touched more intimately through wrenches and saws

and a well-planed board.
We dug beautiful holes together,
and painting a house under his appreciative eye was just swell.

Cars and wood and sickness were the things that gave us an excuse to meet:
lovers under the hood,
and diners – places where we could get a cup of coffee
when we got tired of driving;
places where we could be seen together
without people jumping to conclusions.
We spent a lot of time driving around –
to auto parts stores
and garages
and lumber yards
and hardware stores.
My father always called men he didn't know "Jack."
"Hey, Jack, can you give us a hand?"
And we loaded up cars and straightened bumpers.
We treated those cars so lovingly
and took such satisfaction in our work
not daring to admit to ourselves
that the car was just an excuse to be together.

Oh yes. Time stopped when a rusty bolt wouldn't give;
and the sun stood still while we wormed a wire through a conduit.
While he sawed the lumber I held it,
and the wood was our communion.
It was like holding hands.
And measuring and leveling and marking
was looking into each other's eyes
or drinking long cool drafts of water.

An hour of burning leaves,
raking, looking into the fire
was an eternity of satisfaction.

~John Collins

Naomi Rose Collins
1899-1982

Naomi

Haymowed in Farragut, Iowa barns
and apple-dumplinged in Shenandoah kitchens,

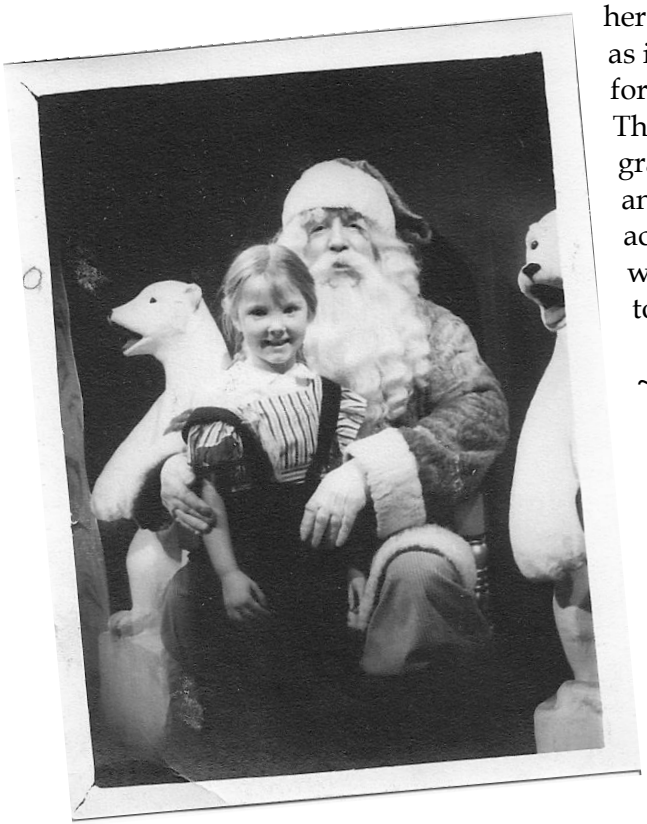
she grew straight and useful
as a butter churn,
as a grove of cottonwood,
as the vertical lines of Puritan houses
set out on the plains of undulating
wheat and Indian corn.

In her green years, growing tentative
among peach and apple orchards,
she tested her metal, finally,
on the Iron Range, at twenty below,
in classrooms of Czechs and Poles,
of Swedes and Lithuanians.
A green/brown girl among chattering magpies,
she was burnished and shone.

Fifty years later, the children of miners
remembered this mother hen
who'd taken them under her wing.

Though often fretted by minutiae--
the time of meals, the cost of beef,
the bright green suit
her son insisted on--
a suit that "only Negroes wear"--
she seemed to bear life's greatest trials
with calm serenity--
the deaths of sisters,
Depression-era relatives,
a husband gone to war at 43,
a son in jail in 60's Mississippi,
her spouse's death—
as if saving all her courage
for the Iron Ranges yet to come.
The last she traveled like her pioneer
grandmother: stolid
and uncomplaining
across the gaping prairie
wilderness
toward home.

~Sheila Collins



Childhood

This is for You, Mr. Dockoff

Naomi from an Iowa farm and William
from a Minnesota parsonage
arrived in Chicago as immigrants:
he, orphaned at fourteen by influenza and rural poverty,

she, the farm daughter who must give way
to the elder son.

The first apartment on California Avenue
was comfortable, but beyond their means;
five years and five apartments later,
they found their economic level
with immigrants from Easter Europe
in a bungalow on Sacramento Avenue.

Protestants in a Catholic sea,
sandwiched between the Dockoffs and the Pech's,
between Bulgaria and Poland,
we struggled to preserve our middle class self-image
unaware that God was opening to us
our peasant and worker heritage.
My Methodist mother begrudged my Irish
father his poker nights,
sharing significant years with her Polish neighbor,
but clinging withal to the illusion of being "different."

And I remember Saturday morning serials
at the Acadia Theater,
Saturday afternoon confessions at St. Galls,
and Saturday night baths at home.

Kmeciok, Stuebenfall, Trocinski, Eichstaedt, Urbanowitz
Hradek and Yankus.
I remember you well:
accordion lessons, 7:00 AM trips to the bakery,
seven cent street car rides,
and polka lessons in the seventh grade.
Mrs. Yankus chasing us
off her two-foot strip of lawn.

Yes, Gage Park, it has taken me this long
to know you as my pride,
and not my shame.

~John Collins

Lessons

I would have you remain in the wonder
of childhood, as I spent mine:

In Dolan woods,

gathering bloodroot and foxglove
by streams meandering through forests
thick with myrtle;

discovering fairy bowers
and hanging vines stout as rope,
from which we swung
like monkeys, or like Tarzan
descending from an oak;

watching as boys peed great arks
from eight-foot cliffs
which seemed like mountains then,
while we girls marked the trajectory
with sticks;

At Grandma's cottage,
skinny dipping in dappled water
so clear you could drink from it;
soaping your hair
and diving under to rise it off;

watching for hours
in the pool behind the boathouse
the miracle of tiny translucent blobs
of jelly turn to polliwogs,
grow limbs, and then
to frogs;

listening for the hollow clop
of the milkman's horse on the pavement,
the click of the knob,
and the opening of the little door
on four fat, gleaming bottles
of milk, their cream resting
deliciously on top.

Watching your grandmother lift
steaming jars from the ample black
kettle; tasting afterward that sweet
embarrassment of pickled beet.

Later on, the perfume of lilacs after rain.
It was your first breathless kiss;
His name doesn't matter—
it was the smell of lilacs you remember.

I would have you remain in the wonder
of childhood, as I spent mine

but the meandering stream is now covered
with pavement, bloodroot and myrtle
found only in poetry and myth.
Green bowers have gone
to development tracts with ticky tack
houses and fake stone entrances.
The cliffs where once we learned anatomy
are blasted to dust. Oil slicks the water
where we bubbled and rinsed.
No one remembers a pool
where the polliwogs wiggled.
After Three Mile Island, Chernobyl
and Fukushima, of milk and lilacs,
what can one say?

And that is why, on a day
when we would rather be doing
anything else but this,
we are here in the streets
with signs that shout:

SAVE THE EARTH FOR OUR CHILDREN!

~Sheila Collins

Sibling Rivalry

Freddy.
Even at forty I name you in the diminutive,
as if you are still the tousle-headed kid
who spied on my boyfriends through your periscope;
the younger brother who refused
to dress for church on Sundays,
causing the walls to ricochet
with argument; the brat
who wouldn't wash his neck,
whose room smelled of stale
peanut butter and unlaundered sweat,
the introvert who sat drawing trains
for hours; the C student for whom
Dad had a college bank account,
but not for me.

When you entered the army
I was marching in the streets
against the war.
Always in my dreams the generals
whose hair I want to tear,
whose smug jaws I want to punch,
whose arms I want to pin against the floor
until they cry, "Surrender,"
are yours.

Briefly, we met
In the mutuality of loss
the time Dad died
and I was halfway 'cross the country:

Your letter was so full of tenderness
and loss.

Now, in your 36th year
with children of your own,
a once fitful marriage grown
comfortable, a modest home
in Queens were you grow
string beans, and a room
to house your trains,
we grow into brother & sister,
marching together in the rain
at Indian Point and Shoreham,
seeking to protect this last terrain
on which our childrens'sibling rivalry
is sown.

~Sheila Collins

Childhood Disease

Watching you from the doorway
of your dried peanut butter and clothes-
strewn room, your schoolgirl shape
silhouetted beneath the quilt I made
when you were still an abstract
undulation of the abdomen,
your face now puffed
with hives, like scarlet letters,
those mother-may-I eyes,
that smile, sweet with tenderhooks
to haul me in.

I watch myself, as in an old home movie,
a girl of ten, shy and calculating
as a wren, importunate to claim
time of my own working mother.
I know the posturing well:
the reproachful downturn of the lip,
the words perched on the edge of the tongue,
heart steeled against rejection.

Thus, gathering guilt and memory around me
familiar as an old comforter,
I sit down with you,
lapsing into the part
as easily as a veteran actress
making her comeback.

~Sheila Collins

To a Catholic Schoolmate

Once you were young and full of legs,
we drove around together
in your mother's beat-up Chevy.
Boys chased us through St. Cecilia's
parking lot: we giggled at the sex
books found in our father's drawers,
drank beer and ate pizza at Policci's.

Even then, I couldn't comprehend
why you had to go to something called "confession,"
whispering to a faceless man in black
what we had already confided to each other
thinking it was all a part of growing up.

One day you were whole and heather-handsome,
the next, a hollow in our crowd.
At sixteen they took you from us,
called it "opportunity," "tradition,"
a way out for working class girls.

We only knew it felt like death.

Years later, when someone saw you in the street—
or perhaps it was something we heard—
you had become a black bird
flapping, with white wings, exotic
and altogether unhuman.

Vatican II has come and gone since we were young
and many of your sisters have rejoined
this race of birth and betrayal.
But I watch in their calf-length gaits,
the stooped frame of the cheap laborer,
and hear in their hesitant hearts,
the lingering symptoms of purdah.

~Sheila Collins

July 17, 1979

Thoughts on the occasion of my 50th birthday and the fall of Anastasio Somoza Debayle

I

Four years old on Chicago's South Side
I remember best the wooden porches
appended to the backs of three-story apartment buildings.

Painted grey, suffused with the smells of six kitchens,
They served as jungle gym,
escape route to the alley or basement pissing place,
meeting ground of matriarchs,
avenue of rattling milkmen and clanging garbage men,
anchor of multicolored displays of underwear.
Awesome to a four-year-old.
Sanctuary of W.C. Fields from the cares of life
where millions of worried men forgot the Depression
over a bottle of beer
before supper.

II

My reveries were not disturbed
that day in 1934
by the bullet entering Cesar Sandino's brain.

Playing in the washtubs,
I did not know
that children in Nicaragua were changed
in the twinkling of an eye.

The naked eye does not detect
the taking root of oppression
in the soul.
Its effects pass belief
Changing the world for a lifetime.

While I played,
your father stole a country with a shot.
You have grown fat and rich,
arrogant and cruel from that shot
while children like me
paid for your crimes
with loss of hope and freedom.

III

My whole lifetime has been poisoned
by your family.

When I joined the Boy Scouts
your father stole the fruit plantations.

As I took notes on politics
behind ivy walls
your brother's goons enforced long hours, low wages
and young men like me
were tortured in your jails.

I played with my daughters in the grass
while children starved
so you could live like Rockefeller.

As my father lay dying
reminiscing about pissing in the sand,
your National Guard gunned down
school children.

Today I am fifty.
It has taken this long to get you off
the backs of the Nicaraguan people.

Fifty years old in New Rochelle,
weary of trying to live
with the illusion that hungry children do not pay
for my comfort,
I yearn for freedom,
new vision
and solidarity.

IV

Today in Chicago, Black children
play on my wooden porch.

While in Managua,
guerillas who do not remember a time
when there was no Somoza,
sit in your bunker.

Together
we piss on your memory
and join hands to make a new world.

~John Collins

Sorrento Summers

The Oldest Meeting

The oldest meeting is land and sea.

The lifting morning fog reveals Andy's sizzling serves.
Megan chasing balls, while fathers and daughters
commune over the net.

The land and sea are generous with their treasures
for the patient and persistent:
hikers are slowed by visions of blueberries,
while the receding tide yields a harvest of clams and mussels;
and who is to say whether they are more satisfying
to dig or to eat?

Picnic sails, lost shoes, girls overboard,
a grace of porpoises and the marriage of wind and sea
in a boat are some kind of paradise.

Grey skies release us to read and create,
and what is so pleasant as a long game of Monopoly
in a warm cabin on a rainy afternoon?

Sultry evenings draped with color as the sun kisses the horizon,
Irish folksongs, Tommy's tenor and the music of laughter
giving way reluctantly to yawns and "read me a story"—
and at last the longing to experience each magic moment
gives way to sleep.

Sunrise comes as a quiet explosion of life, and what is sweeter
than the smell of coffee on a Sorrento morning?
not Hamlet's choice for us, but to swim or to hike or to sail
or to loaf.

Each day's joy is tempered only by the knowledge
that one day less remains, and the magic summer
ends with plans for the quiet grace

of a canoe slipping down a river, and the
beckoning legend of Katahdin, a renewal and deepening
of treasured friendships.

The oldest meeting is land and sea.
In that meeting we are born anew,
and a summer becomes a magic lifetime.

~John Collins

The Bay's Answer to the Strategic Defense Initiative

among the wild rose and juniper
she sits, hunched

at the bay's edge
claws extending, retracting
ears perked to catch
each giveaway
ripple of grass,
nose alert
and whiskered,
radar intent
on sifting the scent
of friend
or prey.

down the bay
a flash of white
light
dips and crests
riding the air
to some invisible line
above the horizon
then down, plummeting
past tree-top &
shoreline
like a rock thrown
from heaven,
a laser, swift & unswerving
breaks the tide's shield
with a single
baby's squawk.

~Sheila Collins

Progress

The shabby eloquence
you hallowed from this rocky earth
is disappearing now,

its derelict beauty scraped
and bulldozed into money's artifice
elegant in some New York realtor's ad,
but hardly useful
for old men puttering in.

Down by the lobster pound
where fireweed once grew in abundance
and danced in the wind
the air is silent.
No frothy uplift of leaf and pod
to meet the sea-blown currents
that hold balletic gulls aloft
over the ocean's skin.

What's left of Toot 'n Tommy's boatyard,
that old wreck and resurrection
of the lobstermen's trade
still stands at the bend,
shaking its grey, wood-shingled
workingman's fist
at the vulgarity
of the nouveau riche.

But the asphalt has now
reached past their yard,
a last boat propped for quaint effect
and Toot 'n Tommy, those wizened old men,
who seemed a fixture of the landscape
now gone to rest.

Only the unpaved section
that stretches round Doane's Point
and the old men down by the dock
who never tire of sunsets
or stories told over,
attest to when this fragile peninsula
held work and leisure
in organic embrace
that moved to the rhythms
of the seas' dark moods
and the earth's rough crust.

~Sheila Collins

That Night

That night we all got drunk
from too much sea & leisure
we'd cooked Maine lobsters,

shoving our scruples beneath our belts,
eyeing the great orange beasts
arched high on our platters
with greed,
laughing gustily
at some old recollection of friendship,
oblivious for a moment
to the deeds that occupied
our working lives:
the slaughter of innocents,
racism, & the threat of nuclear war—
honored only by our wine-drenched
conviviality.

For a moment, we forgot
you were absent; last child
born at the end of the 60s,
when Selma & Mylai were only names
on the map of your parents' memory.
Your landmarks: Three Mile Island,
rising cancer rates,
and a distant country called El Salvador,
where men went about for no good
reason slaughtering children.

Until you appeared at the door:
tears streaking a face of thirteen years
and the stiletto rage of a Jeremiah:
"Butchers! Murderers!
Even lobsters have lives to live."

Stunned in our slovenly grace,
even gluttony could not save us
from the lessons we'd taught
too well.

~Sheila Collins

Anxiety

Across a shelf of rock and algae
too far off to threaten, waves test
the stout defenses

of the shore.
In fertile pools gulls swoop
and screech after prey,
loons' slender silhouettes dip
beneath the bay's opaque surface,
the purr of a lobster boat disappears
into the curve of island and mist.

Here in the intertidal zone,
in the withdrawal of the moon's turbulent
cover, the air is silent.
Neither ripple nor moan
disturb its perfect
loneliness.
Beachcombers, intent on clam beds
or the sea urchin's spiny surprise
step across this slight
impediment to desire,
noticing neither the forests
of matted dulse, nor the dark
iris pools
of deception.

A watcher of shadows,
a student of intervals,
I tune my ears to the sounds
of preparation:
out of earshot of gull
and beachcomber, the rat-a-tat-tat
of tiny air sacks among the sea
wrack; a crab scuttling among clams
in search of meat;
gape-mouthed barnacles,
like pictures of swollen children,
wave a frenzy of feathery tongues;
snails, those wounded civilians,
turn gingerly in sleep;
the slate-cloaked Anurida descends
from his perch among the rockweed
dragging a reluctant mussel;
predacious worms lie coiled
in the deeper,
darker recesses.

~Sheila Collins