

Four Grandfathers

When I was too young to school and living in a woodland town
never watched too closely
I played around the feet
of Die Vier Alter Deutsche, the four old men who daily rose before sunrise,
then, unshaven and in yesterday's wrinkles, gathered at the grocery door
precisely six o'clock each day
where each bought a quart of Carling Black Label wrapped in brown paper
before making their way to the butcher's bench to speak their guttural German
and to ask me every day the same questions, laughing at my answers like doting
grandfathers.

My mother thought I was at my aunt's who thought I was still up at the hill house where
bitter morning seethed
among the cinders of the drunken night and no one knew a tender word
like the ones spoken by my four Grossvateren with their day-long Carlings
and their simple, reliable routine— six o'clock at the grocery door,
then watch der Kinder (that was me)
and make small jokes we all had heard the day before.

Once only, they all arrived
smooth faced and rigged in coarse wool jackets with narrow silk bows around their stiff
collars and did not laugh when they greeted me
and when I asked they only said
“The old ones, sometimes they go away,”

then fell silent over their Carling Black Label Beer and a bit after lunchtime, they rose and walked back into the forbidden houses and did not return until next morning.

A bad day would come, I always supposed, my father would reel down the hill
and scatter the old men
like kicking over a checker board and grind them underfoot
like smashing good china
and forever after I would not be allowed ever to mention them again,
but that particular bad day never came
and constantly the old men marched back
to their mystery homes at the coming of evening and constantly they awaited me
when the family forgot me and I slipped away.

The four of them had huge rough hands with calluses still thick and brown
from lifetimes spent felling trees with axes but, when time came for me to go
and each would pat my cheek
as softly as the lighting of a moth
and say “Komme, we see you bis morgen,”
I wondered if in the magic lore of the very old there was a gentling spell
that could stay the hard fast hands of a working man and turn fury into kindness
as time had done for these,
my secret German grandfathers.

In the end, their words were wrong, because it was the young who went away,
and my family’s midnight rides took me from my proper home, but also they were right
because

I swept away the ashes long before

a child of mine could ever be forgotten, and every leave-taking is lit by knowing I will be here
at their return

so blessed to have lived enough laughter

to store up ample gentle blessings to bestow on any kleine Kindern I chance upon.

