

When I was too young to school  
and living in a woodland town  
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.

One time or another, 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 one time 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 sufficient laughter  
that I have stored up ample gentle blessings to bestow  
on any kleine Kindern I chance upon.