

Elizabeth Retreats

after Fred Chappell

*No one here is of a proper age
To understand Elizabeth at this stage
When all that's good is past or yet to come*

Surely, Fred, we must be related.
My Yankee friends think we are all related,
talk slow, marry our cousins,
but what about you and me,
the ones who got edge-u-cated?

Off in our universities, we write poems
about aunts, grannies, cousins and such,
paint them eccentric, crazy—
us, but not us.

At family gatherings, my kin-folk
keep asking, "You done with school?"
They don't understand who I am—
they know me better than I know myself,
still send me off to the porch
where I eavesdrop on their world.

I know your niece, Elizabeth,
she's me, I'm her,
dancing blind in the half-light
determined to hear and not hear
the voices from within,
cradled in the porch-swing
dreaming gibberish
I'm learning to translate.

A Short History of Georgia

My ancestors were the other Georgians—
not the aristocratic Brits landed in Savannah,
the ones who would build columned plantations,
but the Scots-Irish hardscrabble farmers,
debtor-prison parolees, and a Cherokee girl.

Great-grandfathers on both sides wore Rebel gray,
but didn't fall by Yankee hands, didn't venture
far from the Blueridge foothills. Then there were farmers
and cotton-mill workers, who survived Restoration
and the Depression, not noticing much difference.

Great thinkers, nostalgic, have told the story
of the ideal South, about simplicity—
the Agrarian utopia. They chose to ignore how
the New South is not so different from the Old,
how the land cannot resurrect the people.

I am one of the first in my family to attend college—
a graduate of Oglethorpe, named for Georgia's founder,
where I first read Faulkner, first understood fury and sound
and why Caddy could not speak for herself—
where I first realized how much I had to say.

Living in the Material World

1973

Most important was my Flintstones' lunchbox
pink metal canvas for Pebbles
also in pink, like my first-day dress
trimmed in eyelet tatting on the hem and sleeves.
Girls still couldn't wear pants,
but the teachers could paddle us,
and on the playground
I learned about the cool girls
who had their Dick and Jane readers
covered in flower-power contact paper,
mine wrapped in recycled grocery bags
harder to read out loud
sitting in the language arts circle,
Montclair Elementary, First Grade.