

Doris, my Polish Aunt, is Dead

She was an unawed Fundamentalist,
retelling
(large Slavic eyes like Ikons)
those ancient wonders as if all were quite routine --
An Adam and an Eve set on an empty
earth,
and the blind and deaf given senses
in marvels every day and place.
She had known ghosts, she said,
most familiarly,
felt them and understood
their credible intentions:
had even survived by incantation
a scorpion's thrice-whipping sting
from the sand floor
of her immigrant parents' farm.
I grew unknowingly to need
her unastonished glance
that, listening, glowed as if my fate
and that of all our kin
had been of old foreshadowed.

Even now I see the highveld sun
crushed through the coarse lace curtains,
scattering jagged confetti
on her greying haloed hair. She sewed
most days, turning the wheel seeming
without touch.
She cut and sewed
and told of her few schooldays;
once how the girl next door scratched the lice
and had to have her head clean shaved :
how on the South-West border farms wild animals
infused with restless human souls
walked, searching, in the night. Her second-sight,
her placidness, was an immense still lake
between the hills
of our gloomy adolescence —
my cousins and I skulking, vexed,
pretending deafness
to her low belling voice.

I always must recall
her sewing for me only a blue dress
cut on a circle,
skirt lifting platelike to my waist
when I twirled the jive steps she hated so;
and her own vain times
when I wound her wirehard hair into curls,
or stood for her, a sulky statue,
as she used my frame to pin a leisured,
paying, Johsburg lady's hem.

They wrote how she had
deafened first (then died),
staring in contentious silence, quite withdrawn,
eyes cauled
beneath hair sprung like silver coils
about a pale, time-spiting face.
Immediately, now,
I need to tell her of my ways, my wants,
and watch her unperturbed
ordain (I, happy, smiling, *do* disbelieve)
these accolades
and fears and pains are legislated
mine;
are rightly to be clasped by me, by her.
So, for a moment, pleased, without will,
charmed by her cosmic order,
I might even seem to listen
for a nonexistent spirit's wings.

SHEILA ROBERTS