

Roulstone Once Removed · *Debra Hines*

The World War II fighter plane hand-painted on my dinner plate
splayed its proud wings through the sauce of my Chicken Picasso.
The acrostic for my mother lay within inches of your plate.
We'll discuss it later, you said, as you launched
into the true tale of Mary Had A Little Lamb.
Neglected by its mother and close to death at birth,
the lamb was nursed to health by Thomas Sawyer's daughter, Mary.
Dressed in pantalettes, a shawl and ribbons, the lamb
nestled beneath Mary's desk at school.
Young John Roulstone was a visitor at the school and lyrical witness
to Mary and her lamb. He was sensitive, even cavalier,
riding through the fields on horseback—
the original verses hand delivered. I sighed.
Mary must have felt something for him, something strong, I said.
He was sensitive enough and cavalier, you said,
but when the lamb was gored by a longhorn on Thanksgiving Day,
it was Mary who held it as it died.

Reaching for more rice, you told me:
Your eyes have the clouded appearance of watered silk. *Moire*.
I returned to thoughts of young Roulstone, John Roulstone,
nephew of Rev. Lemuel Capin,
the spring before he entered Harvard,
on the day he visited Mary's school.
Think—it was 1812 and March when he became a poet. I sighed.
A poet of sorts, you shot back. To write *The Three Bears*,
Southey went north. Did Roulstone travel, know anything about the
world?
How could he? Roulstone was young, I said,
he died before the end of his freshman year.
Yes, of consumption, you smirked, the poet's disease.
I continued: I'm sure he called his mother's name from the sickbed,
or the name of another woman dear to him,
and that woman, the aunt or sister who tended him,
must have felt his presence weaken in a most elegant way—
like winter light
with its faint bluish cast, wavering—

light finding form
among the tinted bottles at his bedside.
This is the poetry Roulstone knew at death.
The thought of it! I said.

A fragment of aircraft appeared on your plate.
Your face was red as you bit into the chicken.
You picked the olives from the sauce
and lined your plate with them.
I spoke: Picasso once said if all the lines in his life
were connected
they would form a circle.
Wrong! you snapped. He said they would form a minotaur.
A minotaur! Picasso saw in himself a particular shape.
He made that shape into a constellation.
I began to weep. Oh, what difference does it make?
You replied softly, Mary Sawyer became Mary Tyler,
matron at the McLean Asylum for the Insane.
It was said her courage in the face of pain was extraordinary.
Everything she planted or tended
lived, budded, bloomed and shed its fragrance for her.
You paused. Roulstone, as we know, merely died.
I dried my eyes and stood up to clear the table.
Is the story finished? I asked.
Finis, you said.