

Waiting for Armistice · Sydney Lea

Under Aunt Alice's
table, its skirts of chiffon
pulled to, the little man
played at his sullenness.

He had been lightly
punished, whatever
his sin, enjoined to act gentle
from this day on. It was partial
darkness he sought,
now and forever.

From the GE above
he heard the broadcast nightly
news, and then The Ink Spots'
baritone crooned
"I want a Sunday
kind of love."

He wanted summer,
under the roundelay
of tern and cloud,
his aunts in that season
in long-skirted dresses,
blowing him kisses,
rounding their blood-colored mouths
to please him.

Aunt Alice,
his favorite, had caught
for him the lead
ring on the sideshow carousel
at a one-ring circus—
good enough.

Now, as he hid,
she sang along.
Sweet trills!
though here and there she gasped,
went rough,
as she had that time when his mother
held her tight
and keened and moaned:
“Don’t cry. You’ll have another.”

“A love to last
past Saturday night . . .”

Impossible,
there, in his put-up remorse,
to imagine the blue
pushpin standing for Uncle
Dick ripped out
of the wall-map, and Alice
done with her morning reports
on the Allies’ progress;
with her modest ladylike shouts
of gusto after the news
till this March: ’45.

How to imagine then
the other husbands later,
home, alive?
All heroes. Strangers.

There would stand
his own father
in the June sphere of light
that fell on the drive
just before night
fell on the house of the women . . .

How to imagine
these women decamped,
the lush perfumes of bereft
Alice and Grandmother,
and of the spinster aunts
—Olive and Myrtle—
and finally of Mother
herself, dragged off
in the winds?

How imagine his future
brothers, battles,
when the closest harmony reigned?
Lisped trebles at bed
and at meals. And for his sickness
his choice of the softest
sensitive hand
to tamp away the runnels
of sweat from his head.

And for his wickedness,
whips laid on like wands.
Sweetness of female indulgence,
forgiveness, unearned!

The satin skin
of the afternoon bay
that summer would always return
to the light-soaked cottage
in an even gentler way
its ever-so-gentle image,
forever in mind
wedded to the tunes of Tin Pan Alley—
“You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby,”
and all the battalions
of others,
even sweeter,
and the hopeful smiles of that season.

Wasn't there blood? O maybe . . .
O surely! But it was hidden,
the one thing unshared.

Every day a Sunday,
so that these women
in their refugee camp
(the same old radio bears the word,
nearly forty years gone by)
—their clothing yanked
away, and their lives—
bring on the selfish little man's tears.

There is no safe place to hide.

—after the Beirut massacres