

## Family Script · *Anne Blackford*

*But not far away was the Big Swamp—the  
“trembling earth,” the American Indians called  
it—and I was aware of the existence of this  
swamp from my earliest years . . . I was told  
that there was no solid foundation of rock under  
its surface but only mysterious waters which  
flowed ceaselessly from an unknown source . . .*

—Lillian Smith

I

I know the script  
and what it calls for:

hushed voices, the thick green  
baize of the forest floor,

an inability to walk far  
without tripping

The roots have all grown here  
much larger than real life

I could say “like a dream”

I could say—interrupting the script—  
that this is not real

This is the scene where the family  
is called for

to plead for absolute loyalty

the myth where the eldest daughter  
sacrifices herself

Iphigenia reciting her speech  
before her father’s troops

younger than me at fourteen

imploring the gods  
to stop the murderous anger  
between mother and father

And these are the younger children:  
my dark-eyed little brother  
my younger sister who would avenge me  
padding softly over the forest floor  
They've slept with me  
all their lives in this tangled overgrowth  
In the mosquito-damp night  
I gradually count away  
the terrors of their dreams

II

Cut off from each other—  
from ourselves— we move steadily  
toward the heightened climax  
No one's called this murder  
but it is  
This bay at Aulis soaks up  
my voice like rain  
None of them have questioned  
what we are doing here  
Blood sacrifice— even of one girl—  
seems the only necessary sign  
Now I pace over the stages  
of this hallucination— rain forests

alive with buzzing insects,  
moist green leaves, dazzling birds

I have to invent my lines  
as the script keeps veering

I have to keep imagining  
when to throw myself between my parents  
to implore for peace

III

This script is a weapon:  
a way out as well as a death sentence

Being a victim  
of human sacrifice,

I have to choose my real identity  
to survive the last act

My little brother  
comes up to kiss me goodbye

His child's arms  
encircle my neck tightly

Sunlight slants  
from the roof of twisted vines;

leaves swarming with gnats  
gleam emerald-green

I've had to plead with my father  
for the right to grow up

I've had to fight all this time  
for my own body

This is the script  
I've come back to act  
to rehearse the familiar cycles  
of retribution and anger  
Whatever traps I have to face  
leaving this script  
I can't go back to claim  
my sister and brother  
I've come back here  
only to really leave  
to scrutinize the variant texts  
under the handwriting  
This ground is treacherous  
sunken with quicksand  
and rope-thick roots — I walk carefully  
over the moss-grown floor  
I can't afford to trip this time  
Nobody speaks  
for my voice except me  
thousands of years after I  
took back my life  
I'm still just inventing  
what needs to be said  
after I throw the script away