

Keeping the Heat Down · *Frances McConnel*

He would have liked this floorplan,
my father, and our desert night-chill.
In winter no matter the heat
in the rest of the house, one hustles
down the long hall to a brisk dip in the sheets.
In their bedroom in Alaska, they kept perishables—
apples so cold they snapped when you bit them.
In the morning, the water in the glass
on my mother's side of the bed was all ice.

I used to iron in there; I liked the hint
of perfume in her sheer blouses, the iron
nosing his sweat from the cuffs. Mother teased
that he bathed like the Puritan farm son
he once was—when necessary. It meant
doing the bed clothes twice weekly
and some implied indelicacy
I didn't want detailed. I breathed
love and authority in the loose steam.

In bed in the cooling darkness,
I dreaded his coming in to open the vents
under the thermopane windows with their stout
brown curtains sealing out
June's all night twilight,
December's pin-pricks of ice.
Then he went out and I pulled them shut.

When we were little, to catch us
up to no good, that is, reading
after lights out, he licked his thumb
and tested the bulb—a small hiss.
Little criminals—my brothers and I. I still shrank
from his step, though too old to spank.
He didn't argue; he just came back and redid it.

When I was fourteen, I decided to sleep raw
like Tuesday Weld. My boy friend quoted an article
about her from *Coronet*: her skin
like the breath of Winesaps. My first defiance,
though kept under covers; and I,
whom my mother used to shake
five minutes to rouse, would spring awake
miraculous, when anyone's hand touched the door.
One night I woke screaming, and he surrendered forever
his rights over my nightmares.

What did he want, keeping the heat down
in our veins? He certainly didn't get it.
What did we learn from him? Not to argue but
to sneak out, warmly dressed, to our undosings,
tiptoeing in from the entry toward morning,
clods of snow stuck to our wool socks.
Sliding into snow linen, we heard the boards knock
under my mother's feet as she turned up the thermostat
to his daily allowed maximum that was never
enough for us, not even tucked into our enormous sweaters.

After he died, she turned it up permanently.
Called home from my family, asleep next to her
or, rather, matching my breaths to her faked breaths—
as close as I could come to a caress—
I began for the first time at night to swelter.
I stared at the phone on the night stand, still
the only one in the house. My father ruled
the phone was not an instrument of pleasure.
We watched when the coast was clear, on the alert
to zip on our parkas and go call our sweethearts.
We had a reputation for passion then, my brothers and I:
the way our voices shook saying goodbye.