

Susan Olds

Birthday Poem for My Grandmother

(for L.B.M.C., 1890-1975)

I stood on the porch tonight— which way do we
face to talk to the dead? I thought of the
new rose, and went out over the
grey lawn— things really
have no color at night. I descended
the stone steps, as if to the place where one
speaks to the dead. The rose stood
half-uncurled, glowing white in the
black air. Later I remembered
your birthday. You would have been ninety and getting
roses from me. Are the dead there
if we do not speak to them? When I came to see you
you were always sitting quietly in the chair,
not knitting, because of the arthritis,
not reading, because of the blindness,
just sitting. I never knew how you
did it or what you were thinking. Now I
sometimes sit on the porch, waiting,
trying to feel you there like the color of the
flowers in the dark.

Of All the Dead That Have Come to Me, This Once

I have never written against the dead. I would
open my
shirt to them and say yes, the white
cones still making sugary milk,

but when Grandfather's gold pocketwatch
came in by air over the Rockies,
over the dark yellow of the fields
and the black rivers, with Grandmother's blank
face pressed against his name in the back,

I thought of how he put the empty
plate in front of my sister, turned out
the lights after supper, sat in the black
room with the fire, the light of the flames
flashing in his glass eye
in that cabin where he taught my father
how to do what he did to me, and I said

No. I said Let this one be dead.
Let the fall he made through that glass roof,
splintering, turning, the great shanks and
slices of glass in the air, be his last
appearance here.