

Ex-Brother-in-Law

by Rebecca McClanahan

Without the law, there is no brother,
and no ceremony to mark the breaking.
Christmas Eve from the box packed away last year
we uncover the stocking stitched with your name,
not knowing what to do with it. Later as we gather
to watch family slides projected on a sheet,
your face surfaces among ours, miraculous
as the imprints emerging on the shroud of Turin.
When you were here, how simple it seemed,
the pattern of blame and solution: If only you would turn
that way or this, if only you would disappear,
my sister's life could begin again. But what of our lives,
the severed sisters, aunts, brothers, nephews, nieces,
fathers, mothers--all those unregistered
couplings of hearts-- left to wonder
if you were ever ours, and by what decree.

Have you married some new family, are you sharing
their holiday feast while we sit here
at the table you refinished--your windburnt hands
with the freckled knuckles, rough-hewn hands
that sanded until the grain revealed itself,
the complicated whorls beneath the surface
where so much of you remains. The daughter
you started fourteen years ago wears your face
and keeps growing. And your son still brags
about the time you accidentally shot a power-driven
nail through your hand while building
a skate ramp-- *For me!* he sings proudly. *For me!*

It's the small things that make a job,
you once said as you knelt eye-level to the task:
this cabinet you built to store the mementos,
all the odd, unmatched relics that have no place.
You worked two days and we were satisfied.
No, you said, *it's the finishing that matters.*
Another day's labor found its completion:

a hand sanded notch and this perfectly engineered sliding latch with its effortless closing and opening.

- *Winner of the Wood Prize from Poetry*