

# Annie Mairéad Hunter

## *Double exposure*

We're gathered against the white asbestos wall of the outhouse where my grandfather brewed delinquent wines. Those wild ferments could peel the tastebuds off your tongue, but when he fluked a beauty, we'd drink it there by the mangle and lick our cups clean.

It's not a stiff tableau—after all, my father's sister (the arty one) is behind the camera, and by the angle of the sun, it might be mid-afternoon on Christmas day. No, not stiff but smeared, because someone—perhaps my aunt—had shoved the slide slap-dash into the carousel and scratched the film. Or so I thought— but up close, the image reveals a shimmer of water,  
a breaking wave  
at my grandfather's waist, the darkness under the pergola and the steely conifer behind him shot through with a shaft of ocean. He rests one hand on the back of the chair where my grandmother sits in a frock cut from cotton lawn—white flowers strewn over a ground of Wedgwood blue. A double string of pinkish pearls sweetens her skin. She's fully immersed, but that's hardly strange— she always loved the sea. She'd strip naked on the beach and step calmly into her bathing suit, as if old flesh were nothing to gawk at.

My other aunt (the one who adored all shades of aqua)  
has bobbed down beside the chair. She smiles as her fingertips smooth  
the armrest, unperturbed by the UFO-glint of a hovering tin  
of condensed milk against her right ear. And my uncle seems unabashed  
by the faint glass flagon that drifts across the crotch of his trousers;  
nor does he mind the crumpled bag of sugar that haunts his hand.

My fine-boned father beams and sprawls on buffalo grass in shorts  
and an open-neck shirt. His curls tumble over his crown and his feet  
are bare—the joy still in him. A babe in rompers, I am plumped  
between his knees, steady in the hands he got from his father.

A pale white rhomboid,  
the rim of a spectral esky, hangs in the space between us.  
I reach for a plastic roly-poly clown and my big cousin, her topknot  
lost in a sky-blue bow, makes it dance. In bib-and-brace shorts,  
my brother stands before us and holds aloft his new red toy.  
He speaks from the depths of a cone of sparkling water,  
its vertex fixed behind his head.

My father looks at his son.

My aunt (the one who adored all shades of aqua) looks at her nephew.

My grandfather smiles at his family and blinks in the sun.

My grandmother squints at me.

My uncle looks at his little boy and rubs his stubble.

My aunt (the arty one) looks at us all through the eye of her camera.

But my mother looks at no one.

In her fitted bodice and tucked full skirt, she is a study in quiescence.

Elbow on knee, she genuflects at her husband's back, her pointing finger poised to brush his shirt, her ring finger curled discreetly around a box of matches. I enlarge her face and there it is:

the grimace of rage so subtle,

anyone could miss it. I think she would set us all ablaze—

but what could she do, caught beneath that ghastly pane

at the edge of the sea, with its picnic blanket,

its perfect shortbread, its thermoses of cooling tea?