

The lamp's flickering moved the shadows on the high ceiling. Wearily, I watched and waited. Strangely different serpents, long and white, slid across the ceiling, and I found myself contrasting them to the cream flowers in the ceiling wall-paper at home. Flowers were much nicer, much more entertaining. Somehow, as my thoughts turned to home, there in the strange half-gloom, I didn't mind waiting.

Filling In The Distant Background

Betty Richart

My background, I think, is a strange one for a would-be poet. There is hardly a trace in it of the blithe irresponsibility of artists. Instead it is stern with engineers and judges and lawyers, all of whom probably turn wearily in their graves at each new evidence of my lack of discretion. My forefathers, so their loyal descendants tell me, were honorable men.

My maternal grandparents were an oddly matched pair, both native Hoosiers. My grandmother was locally famous for her cream pies, her fearlessness, and her ability to run her husband's business. My grandfather needed her. He was indolent, generous, and easily prevailed upon. His once thriving business ceased to be a "paying proposition" when his wife died, and he and it withered together till now they are all a rather vague memory.

Grandmother's mother and father were sturdy farmers, as close to their land as to their family. They were able to look out over their good

green Indiana acres with calm minds securely rooted in the community and respected by their brethren. Surely they must have sung hymns loudly and tunelessly among their neighbors every Sunday in church!

Grandfather's parents were of a different sort. His father was a school teacher and his mother a member of a distinguished family of lawyers. Both had an inflexible code of morals. Their pictures show profiles as harsh as the Great Stone Face. They were vigorously opposed to card playing, dancing and anything beautiful or gay.

Remotely, my maternal ancestors were Scotch and English. Perhaps it was they who endowed my sister with her incredible Titian blondeness, and me with my love of wind-swept bare places.

My paternal grandfather was a Pennsylvanian. He died so young that I never knew him, but I have loved his pictures from my childhood—his leonine head and benign expression and strong jaw. My grandmother is now my only living grandparent. She "stands as a tree the birds have left, unutterably bereft." Her husband is dead, and her favorite son, who was my father. She is dead herself to the joy of living.

All my paternal ancestors were from Pennsylvania, save those in the dim background. My great-great grandparents were Hollanders, and many of our attitudes and aspects the family has retained something of their earnestness and stolidity. In many of our attitudes and aspects we are Dutch.

In recalling my complex ancestry, I am reminded of a contemporary poem.

"With him for a sire,
and her for a dam,
What should I be
but just what I am?"

What, indeed should I be but a weird mixture of good, bad, and indifferent? What but a saint and a sinner?