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Family Ties

by Maureen DuRant

Refused to sit down,
Miss High and Mighty.
My Oklahoma aunts
told the story again and again.
Jack's girl don't know her people.

Twisting on my new white
summer Keds, my cotton
sundress wilting in the heat,
I crossed my arms against
the smell of grease, a heavy
weight like red earth that refuses
to scrub away or a clinging tick
on a coon hound filling to bursting
with blood siphoned away sip by sip.

The peeling wallpaper,
faded magnolias past
their prime, exposed layers
of stained plywood, wadded
pages of magazines stuffed
in cracks, trying to keep
vermin and dust at bay.

A fan stuttered at the end
of each turn, stirring old
catalogs stacked
on an enamel table, weighted
by bottles and sticky glasses.

I mumbled, nice to meet
you. Ruth cackled, her empty
gums opening a soft cave,
her watery gray eyes,
shriveled beads in swollen
sockets, repaid my gaze,
recognizing their kin.

Lurching from her kitchen
chair, she pressed her face
close to mine, and I smelled
her familiar breath.
She reached out and pinched
my arm, twisting
my tanned skin, digging
yellow nails into my flesh.

I ran, the screen door slammed;
tired red dogs in the hard dirt
yard raised their big jowled heads.
I waited in my daddy's
Buick, borrowed for the road
trip into the Quachita Mountains.
The sweat trickled down
my face. A welt raised, my heart
beating to its throbbing pulse.

My aunts were wrong. I knew
my people. I knew the glove
box hid a flask of Southern Comfort,
Daddy winking, swigging a long
draw, then coaxing just a taste,
baby girl. The bitter taste of poteen,
the fleeting warmth of rotgut,
and the lingering spirits left marks:
eyes the color of Bigfork chert, soft
teeth, a loose laugh, and a whiskey want.