

Double Exposure

Lewis Horne

The picture gathers from a host of things—
From giggles of remembering, not play
By play but one word lifting from another
Into a rearview record, a happy weather
That the two of them share, sisterly;
From black-and-white shapshots of friends and neighbors
Crisp with silliness and flexed in poses,
Next to cotton or to lettuce fields,
Flappers lithe and bold in stockings, heads,
Carving time out of their Sunday afternoons
Before the Monday and the Great Depression;
From yellowed letters and notes that speak of "him,"
Off with the National Guard, of California's
Buzz and the heady toil of waitressing
In Mary Pickford country—!

The picture shows

(It's only in the mind) two sisters, one
My mother, shy and reticent, the older
Buoyant with a natural confidence.
They sing together at the dishes, swim,
Each in her way, in the high school's current
Of textbook and romance, thrill on Fridays
When time for the weekly dance comes round—and walk
With their friends, all girls, from the farm to town.
("You'd never do that now. It wouldn't be safe.")
Then dance and dance. "Charleston! Charleston!"
The picture moves with an innocent self-regard.
What else would the world look upon but them—
Mama and Dad, brothers, sisters, friends!
A small world, certainly, but big enough
For them and the band and the boys and their talent for
Beautiful quick recovery. Time without end.

To this, I add an overlay. Two days
Before she was eighty, crossing the glistening floor
Of Smitty's, purse in hand, nothing to
Regret in her movement, nothing a person need
To lift her foot around, nothing slippery,
My mother fell. Not slowly. Yet, as in
Such moments, it plays itself in the history
Of my life slow-motion:—the slow pitch forward
As though something swallowed the space in front; Knee, hip,
and—I could see it coming—forehead
In a heavy landing; a cut from something on
The glossy floor, a thin trickle of blood
Across her glasses. With the manager, I checked
The spotless floor. Only a small scuff mark
With no perceptible reason for being.

How
Do you read the obscurity of such a tumble?
"Maybe I blacked out for a minute," she said.
Child number five, she's the oldest left
Of the family. Charleston? She could
Dance that into her seventies. Life
Has its overlays that sometimes make us wise,
But lathers us with a slippery fear for the fragile.