

The New Criterion

Poems January 2003

In the guesthouse

by Mary Jo Salter

1. Long exposure, 1892

All of them dead by now, and posed
so stiffly, in their sepia Sunday
best, they seem half-dead already.
Father and Eldest Son, each dressed
in high-cut jacket and floppy tie,
never get to sit in the sitting room.
They stand to face a firing squad
behind Mother and the little girls®
themselves bolt upright on the sofa,
hands at their sides, their center-parted
hair pulled back, two rows of rickrack
flanking the twenty buttons down
the plumb line of their bodices.

And here, discovered alone downstage
and slightly to the left, the boy®
such a beautiful boy. Although
they®ve tried to make him a little man,
upholstering him in herringbone,
you can see him itching to run out
with his hoop and stick, happy because
even at this moment, when
nobody could be happy, he knows®
in the tilt of his blond head, the frank

time-burning gaze beneath his cowlick
that he is the most loved.

2. Flappers, 1925

I'm in the guesthouse some days before
focusing on another portrait:
professional, black-and-white, composed

to lend a spacious dignity
to the one life lived behind each face.
Again, the date's approximate;

I'm guessing from the arty look,
the flapperish, drop-waisted frock
and ropes of wooden beads on the wife

of yes, it has to be. No more
the poster boy for posterity,
he's a commanding forty. The cowlick's

still there (although now he slicks
it down with something), and he still
cocks his head to one side, a hint

of flirtation, exasperation what?
in the eyes he trains at the camera
as if he'd give me what I want

if only he could emerge now from
the frame. We stare in mutual
boldness while his wife's long profile
is tendered to the child between them.
One girl: a modern family.
I speculate a little son

was lost to the great flu; even so,
this fair-haired Zelda in a bob,
ten years old, would come to seem

enough, the image of her father.
The smile high-cheeked and confident,
the shining eyes, the upturned chin

people matter more now; they'll die
less often, now that the Great War's over;
everyone's allowed to sit down.

3. Wheelchair, 2000

The jumbles of grinning faces jammed
together at birthdays and Christmases
in color photos around the house
don't interest me.

They're merely *today*, or close enough;
anybody can record it
and does; if everything's recorded
nothing is.

But puttering about, the guest
of a ghost I now am half in love with,
I'm drawn one day to pluck one image
off the piano.

A wedding. Or some minutes after,
outside a church I've seen in town.
The bride, who has exercised her right
to veil, white gown,

and any decorum life affords
these days, is surrounded by the girls
some floral aunts, a gawky niece
in her first pearls

and all the men in blazers, khakis
running shoes? Boys will be boys.
Squirming, they squint into the sun:
some amateur

shutterbug has made sure they can't
see us, or we see them, and yet
I understand now who is shaded
there in the wheelchair.

Dwindled, elderly, it's Zelda
her lumpy little body slumped
like a doll's in a highchair, shoes just
grazing the footrest.

It must be she. However many
lives her hair went through
Forties complications held with tortoise-
shell combs; beehives;

softer bouffants like Jackie's; fried
and sprayed gray-pincurl granny perms
in all the years (say, seventy-five?)
since I last saw her,

she's come back to that sleek, side-parted
bob, which (though it's white) encloses
the girl who's smiling, pert, high-cheeked,
despite the pull

of gravity: just like her father.
Or as he was. *When did he die,*
and how? What was his name? What's yours?
I could find out,

surely, when I leave here; the owner
might well be her granddaughter.
I could scout, too, for snapshots even
more recent@some

get-together with no wheelchair@
to prove what I'm sensing: Zelda@s gone.
Why would they bother to frame this scene,
unless it@s the last?

But why should *we* care so for people
not us or ours@recognized by sight
alone@whose voices never spoke
with wit or comfort

to us, and whose very thoughts,
imagined, every year grow quainter?
Yet they must have felt this tug as well,
repeatedly

peering at someone they were bound
to come back to, as in a mirror.
Who says they@re more anonymous
than I am,

packing up after my two weeks
in the guesthouse? I make one last study
of Zelda@s father, lingering with
the boy, the man,

sealing his developing
face in myself for safekeeping.
Too soon to leave. But then, nobody
ever stays here long.

Mary Jo Salter is the author of *Open Shutters: Poems* (Knopf).

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