And His Second Wife, Margaret, 1881

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by

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English 4

Every spring he took the dresses out
and aired them on the line.
For the child, he said,
Should not forget her mother.

Wide skirts sailed, pleated
and triangular as fans;
terrible stiff sleeves,
blown big as loaves,
hung tiny at the wrists;
throats gaped with little buttons;
and rows of spidery hooks and eyes
scribbled a dead language
across the bodice linings.
The petticoats had stayed decently folded; sour as petunias, they yellowed in the bottom of the trunk, five years.

The child studied her father’s face nodding after the strange dance of the clothesline, silently; his face blurred until—distracted—he turned and said, Oh, Margaret, as she approached,

and she stretched out a curved warm hand to each, the only part of the ritual a child could understand.