Shallowater

Darla S. Bielfeldt

Iowa State University

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Shallowater

by

Darla Stolz Bielfeldt

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PART 1.

SHALLOWATER
I was born and raised in Shallowater, a small town on the western edge of Kansas. Life there was simple and logical; edges were straight and planes were flat. The nearby towns were in predictable positions -- one fifteen miles to the west and one fifteen miles to the east; one thirty miles north and one thirty miles south. The county in which Shallowater was located, was 900 miles square and had 1,500 residents, all of them my neighbors, friends and teachers, many of them farmers who cared for acre after acre of irrigated wheat.

From the top of the CO-OP elevator, I could see how the land was laid out like a block quilt; I could see the lights of the town thirty miles north, and of the Colorado town that lay thirty miles west of it. I could see that the country roads ran straight miles east and west before intersecting with roads running north and south. It was impossible to get lost in Shallowater. It was impossible to hide.

The town was clean and ordered. Main Street ran north and south and had four paved streets to the east of it and four paved streets to the west. In the middle of town a railroad track intersected with Main Street, and along its rusty rails, lay two grain elevators, one on the east side of town and one on the west. The County Courthouse was on a large block in the middle of town, across Main Street from the Post Office and the single grocery store.

Options and choices were rare in Shallowater. There was one grade school, one middle school and one high school. One swimming pool and one movie theater. One gas station and one restaurant. One doctor, one lawyer, one car dealership. The only choice I had while growing up, was what books to check out each week from the Shallowater Library, and by allowing me this single freedom, Shallowater betrayed me. In books I saw other places, other worlds, and my own weighed on me like stagnation and silence. I
learned about people whose lives seemed infinitely more exciting and complicated than mine: Will Stanton who moved from England to Wales and discovered he was the last born of the Old Ones, an immortal servant of the Light; Claudia and Jamie Kincaid who ran away from home and secretly moved into the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Peter, Susan, Edmond and Lucy who walked through a wardrobe and into Narnia. Even Dorothy was swept away from the Kansas plains, but I was there to stay.
FIRST BORN

I was the first-born of a very young couple who had met on the Luther Hay Rack Ride of the small Lutheran Church in Shallowater, Kansas. The old people in the church still spoke German and most of the children stayed in the area to help farm wheat, corn and sugar beets. It had, therefore, been a very big move for my father to accept a job at the CO-OP elevator in Bethune, Colorado -- 60 miles from home.

Two weeks after my mother graduated from high school, my father married her and moved her to Colorado. Even though Bethune was a small town, it was a city compared to Shallowater, and my mother felt like a stranger there. Out of timidity, she learned to drink sugar in her iced tea and to smoke cigarettes. She started playing Yatzee with the girls on Friday mornings. She often called home to her mother and grandmother.

Shortly after my parents' first Christmas together, my mother became pregnant with me. There were hospitals closer to Bethune, but I was to be born in Sharon Springs, Kansas, 10 miles from Shallowater. The first-born would be born at home. Besides, my grandmother was a nurse in the hospital and that was a comfort to my mother.

On Sunday afternoon the week before I was due to arrive, my father moved my mother back to her girlhood home so she would be near the hospital if need be. My mother lay on the sofa watching soap operas and drinking sugared tea, growing impatient with the wait. Every night after my father got off work, he would shower quickly, wash the grain dust from his hair and face, and drive 60 miles to be in Shallowater with her. He wanted to be there when his first child was born.

Thursday, however, was his bowling night, so before he headed out for Kansas he would bowl three games. He had the best average on the CO-OP team and he couldn't let his co-workers down by missing a week. This Thursday he was feeling very lucky. His first game had been a 256, his second was a 278 and he had kissed the scorekeeper more than once. He was going into his 6th frame of the 3rd game with perfect strikes when the phone rang for him. My mother was in labor.

My father says he burned rubber leaving the bowling alley parking lot. He sped all 60 miles to the hospital, but he was too late. I was already here by the time he arrived.
GREAT-GRANDMA

Great-Grandma was the matriarch of the family, a strong woman who lived in Shallowater for a century and had a story for every year. She was always there, in her chair, sitting and watching, drawing us near, gathering us around her, loving and claiming us all. When I think of Shallowater, I see Great-Grandma sitting in that chair, waiting for me to come home, spreading the folds of her dress flat in her lap, spreading the land flat and smooth around her, rocking back and forth in straight, straight lines and patiently waiting for my return.
I.

Last night I called my mother and found my first lover there -- sitting on the sofa talking crops with Dad, asking Mom about me: *Is she happy? Is she well? Can she stand to take a phone call from an old friend?*

secretly hoping, maybe, that his voice would be enough to call me home back to the front of his green Chevy truck with the cattle bars on back, his rough hand pressing my thigh, making it crave the dusty, hot seat, my eyes lowered to the rusted hole on the floor, the gravel road rushing past us.

Last night I dreamed about old lovers, men who wear flannel and t-shirts, dog owners, beer drinkers, two-stepping smokers, men who dream about escaping to Wyoming, Montana, Alaska, riding in silence.

I drove alone to Madigan's Tree where we had parked, drank TJ Swann and smoked, whispered in the space left us by the wet summer air and stars that pressed us down to bodies, touching bodies and cloth and not cloth.
II. Alone, I climbed the branches of the great old tree,  
walked out over the wide top of Lovers' Curve,  
the place where the largest branch rises high,  
and falls back upon itself to touch the ground -- seeking its roots.  
I lay down on top of the branch, looking down,  
the thick rough bark pressing into my stomach and face,  
my legs and arms wrapped around the branch, anchoring me.  
Below me a couple was getting married as so many couples do  
in Shallowater, under Madigan's Tree, under the Lovers' Curve.  
From above I could see how the bride's father had mowed the grass  
in the shape of a heart, the overgrown grass a shaggy background.  
His mower had circled around, around the center where the couple stood  
The bride's mother had set out pots of flowers, one by every fencepost.  
She had been growing them for this all summer, her fingers touching,  
seeking underneath the lush green for the one dead leaf,  
pushing plant spikes -- fertilizing probes -- into the black dirt.  
I saw the top of the bride's head, her scalp shining pink through the part,  
her Grandmother's comb holding back her blonde hair,  
a whisper of baby's breath under the silver tines.
III. Under the tree I see its roots, the thick black ropes seeking the water that is still farther down, the smaller roots -- frayed ends like hair -- reaching lower still to a bed of flat grey rocks. Here the water silently gathers around the smooth stones and waits to nourish the tree and all it holds. The water soothes me, but then I see, still farther down below the tree, below the black roots, and the grey rocks and the patient water -- my great-grandmother, the roots growing down, around and through her, Her eyes are open, their pupils dark and still, and she is watching me. She is alone for just a quiet while but she wants me near. My bones are old and dry, she says. I'm not enough for even a single tree and I want to sleep, and she reaches up to pull me close. The bark scratches my hands and my face as I fall, screaming, as I remember what it was to kiss her, her whiskers scratching my chin, her breath too dank and greedy, coating me. I scream awake and am alone, my fingers seeking the dry stone wall. Outside my house there is a curved wall and someone has written: TELL HER THAT I LOVE HER on it in tall white letters, and I shake as I pray that they don't mean me.
Children's children are the crown of old (wo)men. Proverbs 17:6

And the great-granddaughters are the jewels in its band.

Alma Clinton

In a grey house in Shallowater,
Back by the elevator, Great-Grandma sits by a picture of her Lord
And sews dresses for all the baby girls
In the family. She wears the family crown
And claims us as jewels in its band.

The part she had made up about the band,
We thirsted for much more than water,
And swore we would never remove the crown
From this woman -- a mother, who although so great
Had never born a breathing girl,
So named us instead as blessings from the Lord.

She would say she was loved by the Lord
Even as she unwound the elastic band
Around her knee and rubbed in what the girls
At coffee said would keep down the water.
She special-ordered WD-40 in great quantities, and massaged it in as she told her crowning tale:
Oh I think I could have crowned
The mayor's girls back then. Forgive me, precious Lord,
For feeling that way, but their pride was so great.
In their daddy's parade, they thought they outshone the band,
And that cheers were falling around them like water.
They were such frilly, frimping girls --

I thought they would squash that car, those two humungous girls.
And the mayor, who thought he should have had a crown
Just so he could peer from under it, his eyes all watery,
And know he was important. And Lordy!
If he didn't hire a high school marching band
To strut in front like he were something great --

Rolling down Shallowater's one street in that great
New grey machine, with his two fat girls
Sweating in time with the boys in the band.
When the crowds kept coming -- you can bet without his crown --
Just to see that new car, and those fat ladies a'lording
It up, I laughed and said, "Alta, you'll live to see it all in

Shallowater!"

Then Great-Grandma would rewrap the band
Around the water on her knee and sigh,

But, Lordy! You girls here are sure jewels in my crown.
When I was little my father set traps for minnows and bullfrogs late at night, and he always took me and Great-Grandma with him. We would drive down sandy roads with the windows open and the stars and wind blowing past us until we got to Finley’s Pond, the only water around Shallowater, sluggish and slimy and smelling of dead fish and leaves. Grandma always told me stories as we went.

She told me how the Old Maid’s Pool just appeared one day in Bud Fischer’s pasture, perfectly circular and apparently bottomless, and how Indians and old women will rub certain weeds together to stop a bee sting from stinging. She told me of the Adolf boy who had been killed in his garden with a shovel and how the pigs had eaten away his face before anyone found him. And how if one were to hold a pan of soapy water under a light where miller moths were flying and suddenly snap the light off, the moths would fall into the water and drown. It works too.

But one story remains more vivid than than the others. I can see her telling it:

When a turtle bites, she whispered, They don't let go until they hear the thunder. Once when I was young and foolish, I let a turtle snap me and the bugger wouldn't let go. Hurt! I thought he'd eat it to the quick, and then I remember about the thunder.

At that Great-Grandma would lean back against the faded seat and yell out the window. Boom! Boom! Boom! Can't you hear the thunder, you goddam turtle?

Then she would lower her face to mine. That's what I said, now. You remember that, Little Girl.

I remember, Grandma. I remember every time it rains, and it's been a very rainy spring.
NIGHT LINES

When my father brought home stringers of fish,
watery, glassy blue gills, and catfish black and sharp,
I would come, padded in my sleep
and slip my finger down their sides,
touch a glassy fish eye, see
how the catfish's black whiskers
would coil and cling to my skin.
I'd wipe them away in the still-wet grass.

My father would slide his knife,
lightly -- the skin is not too thick --,
cutting a long slit down the length
and reaching down into the fish,
between the insides and the skin,
lifting out the wet mass, he'd seek,
finding hidden under the intestines,
behind the heart, a round white sack of air.
This is what makes the fish float,
keeps him from sinking.
LEARNING BLACK AND WHITE

Everything that day was black and white -- the black coat and hat of the father; the white blanket shrouded around his smallest son, the dark eyes and black hair of the older boys, and the deep grave dug through the snow, down into the frozen ground -- the sharp edges of tombstones. In the distance, the crisp branches of oak trees and the steeple of the Lutheran church sliced into the sky.

Ashes were scattered across the new snow. At first, the ground had been too frozen to dig, so the neighbors built a fire in the church's graveyard and stood around it, drinking schnaaps and wiping their sweaty faces, until the fire had died down enough to leave it overnight. In the morning two uncles, brothers of the dead woman, dug through the warm ashes and into the softened ground. And in the late afternoon, the man and his three sons came to bury their wife and mother, and as they stood in the cemetery, ashes blew across the snow and against their feet.

The youngest boy in the scene is turned away from the graves and presses against his father's side. He has reached his two small hands upwards, and holds onto his father's elbow. The boy is the only one who is not staring at the new grave. He is looking up at his father like he is ready to ask him a question, or like he would crawl up into his father's arms if there were ever room.

The smallest boy in the photo is my father and I think this day in the cemetery, when his mother was buried, taught him all he needed to know about black and white. No one had to say it aloud. His father did not say, *Son, things just are what they are and nothing more*, but the day evoked in my father, the beginning of a firm belief in the starkness and finality of choices.
My father, whose name was Ralphie, first saw black and white when, after three months of not seeing his mother, he was allowed into her sickroom. Ralphie wore leg braces until he was five, so his aunts had to carry him upstairs to where his mother lay dying of cancer, her beautiful breasts betraying her. Her legs were wrapped in quilts and her arms were folded quietly across herself. Ralphie must have been both horrified and fascinated by her white stillness.

My father understood, from this young age, the starkness of life. He knew nothing about casting a situation into a better light. It wasn't part of who he was. For him, things were necessarily what they were, and one barely had the option of focusing on the dark or light aspects of them. And if one found he did have a choice, it was better to focus on the dark and hope to be distracted by a bit of light, than to be in the light and be betrayed by a bit of darkness.

He only understood black and white, not grey. His two options were forever in contrast. One/Two. Black/White. Consequently, my father could not understand people who had vague opinions or whose lives seemed ill-defined or haphazard. It wasn't that he was impatient with these people, or thought they had weak characters. He just didn't get it. It was far beyond his experience and not anything he knew.

My father could only grasp things in sharp contrast to one another, and he saw the contrast as objective, external, stark. He had no use for psychology or for the subtleties of emotions and did not know what to do with feelings. When I was twelve I failed miserably at a piano recital and my teacher had to bring me my music. I was humiliated and as I cried on the way home my father could not think of anything to say. Finally he said, Well, you did pretty poorly. That will knock you off your high horse! This bluntness was typical of my father. It wasn't a purposely cruel remark; it was just an accurate description--an external description.
However, his understanding of black and white -- a trait that is easily misunderstood as closed-minded or limited -- was useful for my father. It allowed him to work day after day at a grain elevator, until the days totalled thirty years, because working at a grain elevator was simply what he did. It gave him an unshakable faith in God and gave him a freedom from questions which are in essence, unanswerable. He didn't ask why he worship God the way he did; it was just what he did. Once, when I was contemplating marriage to a good Catholic boy, he dissapproved. His simple reason? *Darla, the Stolz's have been Lutheran as long as the Bussen's have been Catholic.* He knew who was, not in a way that was intolerant or bigotted, but in a way that could be envied for its surity.

My father's aunts always told him that his mother's last words were, *Take care of my little Ralphie,* and in a strange way, a way that my father would never understand or question, the starkness and completeness of her death nurtured him. He was a boy whose mother died. Her burial scene -- snow, ashes and dark grave -- taught my father black and white and this knowledge was enough.
At the bowling alley in Shallowater, great smooth globes sit against the walls, colored globes -- purple or blue or plain black or black with metallic flecks. My mother has her own new ball cradled inside a vinyl bag. It's colored "Golden Swirl" and is like a week-old baby, twelve pounds with three holes drilled in its smooth face, two blank eyes and a wide round mouth. The lip of the bottom hole, the thumb hole, is still sharp. My mother must wear it down herself.
The first night bowling she did not know how sharp it would be and came home with her thumb cracked and bleeding. But tonight she spreads on Second Skin from a metal tube. I watch her thumb as she blows the liquid armor dry, the rounded tip of her thumb growing shiny and taut under the clear plastic skin, the open crack trapped underneath.
Every year on Great-Grandmother's birthday
we would gather in Shallowater in the town quonset,
a windowless building with cement floors and curved tin walls.
Great-Grandma would wrap her aging body in a quilt
and sit in a lawn chair pulled up to the cake table,
laughing and talking and loving us all:
At the Moore family reunion in Scott City, KS
Loud Uncle Charlie who liked light toast
and kept snapping peacocks and cement donkeys,
and Aunt Waneeta, his wife, who always showed me
the scar on her leg, the only remnant of her cancerous mole;
Big Uncle Johnny and Aunt Madge, who made stone clocks
and polished rock jewelry in their cluttery basement.
They had given us the handsized tan globe,
rounded and smooth on its red rubber stand and
my brother and I secretly rolled and rolled it
across the green shag carpet of our trailer house,
making a straight path between us;
stiff Uncle Emmett, deaf from years of riding custom combines,
And Aunt Rose Ella, who painted buck deer on sawblades
and donated them as prizes for our ten-point pitch tourneys.
And always Uncle Edgar, eyes lit, who bid up and over the other players. Leaning back on his metal chairlegs, he'd cock his imagined rifle to the curved tin roof and holler,

*Boom! Boom! Boom! I'm gonna shoot the goddamn moon!*

And one winter, alone by a grain bin outside Shallowater, he did.
HUMAN SHAPES

Uncle Johnny was a cobbler by trade
and came to know about men the long days he sat in his shop.

\[ \text{When you touch a men's shoes long enough, when you rub oil into the creases across the tops of their boots, or cup your hand around the toe or heel, you begin to see how it is for them.} \]
\[ \text{Some men walk loudly, wearing their heels to whispers. Some mince their steps, holding themselves close, so toes turn upwards and leather creases and bends. And some men wear their shoes to shapeless mass.} \]

At night Johnny worked in his basement,
grinding and polishing stones into great smooth globes,
things that do not take on human shapes.
At home we had one of his blonde stones
that lay in the hand like a heavy softball.
Alone together, my brother and I
would lift it from its red rubber stand
and, sitting on the floor, legs spread, feet touching,
so from above we formed a diamond,
we would roll the stone slowly back and forth --
the weight of the golden globe pressing down
the green shag carpet of our trailer house,
making the only path between us.
ROAD TRIP

I still remember the night we found that bar in Kansas, accidentally, as most memorable things happen.

We had pulled off the highway down a small gravel road towards a handful of lights that glowed in the flat sky.

They watched you and me as we walked in --

two women in a booth, their fat thighs wet on the red vinyl,

and two men on stools at the bar.

By mistake you opened the janitor's closet,

so a little girl with cropped red hair led you by the hand to the bathroom, leaving me to stand and look around.

I saw something then I had never seen before, nor since --

a stuffed peacock hanging on the wall, his proud tail pinned open.

I hope when we left, one of the women went to the piano with the carved wooden roses, touched the yellowed keys and awakened them with ragtime. I hope the people shed themselves and sang loudly, arms draped on each other.

I hope they let the peacock down.
THE KIDD KIDS

When the Kidd family lived on the south side of town
in a quonset, half-barreled, tin and noisy in the rain
I envied them the curved roof above their heads.
It rose so surely to enter or yield to the sky. Outside,
gallon-sized tin cans from their aunt's restaurant
littered the yard, lying where their big dog had rolled them
with his tongue, seeking scraps still stuck to the rusty metal.
Inside, I imagined the Kidd kids lying in their beds at night,
the calming roof shielding them, softening edges.

But the daughter Hannah yielded young to the strangers of summer,
and bore a son when I was ten years old. She rolled out of town
pulling a pop-up camper, following blocks and blocks of combines.
Brother John's arm was soft beneath the blade of his knife
as he drew hearts and blood before the morning recess,
and the teacher's stolen straight pins slid with ease under his fingertips.
The older brother, David, was smothered inside a metal grain bin, standing on the cement floor when the new grain came, hailing him. He could never reach the top, and when they found him he was pressed against the curved side, his open mouth full of wheat. And last summer I saw Bloyd working at the Shallowater County Fair, a tattooed carney passing though again, rank but soft and slow, blowing shaky haloes over children's heads as they lined up waiting to enter the inflated and portable castle he guarded.
THE LUCKY "B"

The "B" in "The Lucky B" was for Bliss, as in its owner, Phyllis Bliss, and not as in happiness. Every day after high school, I would walk two blocks to the little restaurant and put on my navy and red plaid waitress uniform in the tiny bathroom. I would then fill a plastic ice cream container with soapy water, throw a hard green sponge in to soak, and take the mixture outside to wash the Luncheon Special from the front window. Actually, it wasn't the Special itself -- our customers, although not genteel, did refrain from throwing food --; I only removed a listing of the Special. Then, with white shoe polish, I would write the Evening Special across the entire front window: CHICKEN FRIED STEAK or CHICKEN STRIPS or, on special occasions, ROCKY MOUNTAIN OYSTERS. Passing cars would stop in the middle of Main Street long enough for me to finish the letter that would trigger recognition in the occupants. Usually some old man would lean out his car window and holler, What's on? or if he felt frisky, What's cookin', Good Lookin'? To our customers, "Special" did not mean gourmet, but a guarantee for leftovers tomorrow. They needed sustenance more than palatal experiences -- quantity more than quality. The Lucky B had a reputation for serving huge amounts of food, and in a community where getting your money's worth was highly and necessarily valued, living up to the reputation made good business sense.

Our cook prided himself on the size of his portions. He himself was a man of overflowing abundance who looked like an ex-con-but-Jesus-loving boy. I never believed he was a licensed chef, even when he wore the white paper hat. However, this man, who started sausage gravy by melting a pound of old french fry grease, had acquired
a large beautiful cookbook. He would show it to me, his hands nearly trembling as he
turned the pages to a glossy picture of a chocolate dessert. *I make this*, he would declare.

*Yes, yes*, would come the faithful response of his wife, who served him primarily
as prep cook. *It's rich. Twelve layers there, you see. Then all that sauce on top.*

She was the most homely woman I have ever seen. It is difficult to describe her in
words alone. Her hair was thick and receding, and she wore it in a long, lank ponytail,
the ragged end lying in the middle of her wide back. Her smile was also wide, but her
eyes were small circles like little raisins. She was ugly in a way which evoked stares and
distain from the male customers. Despite this, I did not pity her, for she was kind and
kindness never brings you shame. She and the cook had been married at the age of
fourteen for reasons unknown. They were strangers in town and Mormon, but I believed
they were truly good people.

I was capable of saying the same about most of our regular customers, although I
despised them at times. They were the sons of poor men and came to The Lucky B to
drink coffee and talk about farming. They were very concerned with increasing bushel
per acre and controlling weeds -- to keep them tame as their imaginations, I thought --
and they had plenty of complaints about the CO-OP's prices. The irony was that in order
to gain sympathy about how their hard work went unappreciated, they sat in The Lucky B
for three to four hours a day. Pulling the tables together, and sometimes using all twenty
chairs, they would form a grumbling community. When they got too rude, I would fill
their cups until the coffee was hanging over the edge and pray that it would scald their
fingers on the next drink.

I never knew their names, but to keep their orders straight, I which involved
determining the angle at which each man's greasy seed company cap sat on his head.
Ham and eggs over to 45' right -- Biscuits/gravy side to Over Left Eye -- short stack to Way Back. It proved effective.

I did learn one of the men's names out of dislike for the others. He was a tiny man and the others scornfully called him "Runt." He had probably been called similar things all his life, which made me want to call him his given name even more. It was Earl, and I would fling it at the men when I could. Here you go, Earl. and Want some more coffee, Earl? Unfortunately, Earl adored me for this and wanted to repay me. After a few hours of sitting he would rise from the rest and start his painful shuffle to where I stood by the cash register. It seriously took him five minutes to walk across the seven feet of red carpet and my abhorance grew with every second. I had ample time to see the weariness of his eyes, the brown film of dried tobacco juice around his mouth and down his chin, the urine stains on his left pant leg. He would then slowly and deeply press a dime, always a dime, into the palm of my hand. The men at the table would nudge one another and wink at the cook who stood watching through his little window framed with tiny bags of potato chips. The dime would be sticky, and there was never a time when I did not throw the coin into the trash, or a time that the other men failed to see me do it. It's shameful, really.
BETTIE

We had lunch last Sunday with Bettie, the home economist, and wife of the most powerful Lutheran preacher in Omaha. Paster Schmidt was there too. We had never met Bettie, but even before we got to the house we knew that she made Schmidt mashed potatoes every Sunday. Parishoners talk about these things. I was expecting a very sedate, traditional pastor's wife, and had worn my only business suit -- a very conservative plaid. I was pretty uptight, and thought this was going to be a formal occasion, but when we got to the house, Bettie was standing in the kitchen wearing an apron and mashing potatoes. She had her shoes off and was standing there in her pantyhose. She had sexy feet -- nice round heels, narrow arches, thin straight toes with pretty pink nails.

She told us, "Guten Sontag! Sit down! There isn't a thing you need to do!" and pushed us towards the kitchen table. Pastor Schmidt took off his suitjacket, got us each a beer, and joined us. There was a big wooden bowl of popcorn on the table and he grabbed a large handful. "Bettie always has popcorn sitting out," he said. "It's traditional."

The kitchen was white and had many windows. The table was placed in a little alcove that was almost like a back porch. "Schmidt and I had the windows put in and built this room," Bettie said cheerfully. "I just love sunshine." While waiting for lunch to finish cooking, we also learned that the Schmidt's built the little garden shed in the back yard. It was a white little cottage with a bright green roof. Quaint, I thought.
Bettie is Schmidt's second wife and is at least twenty years younger than him. She is blond and compact, but not petite -- physically capable with big hands, strong forearms, a big nose -- but she's pretty. When she was serving the food, she told us she had made potroast because it was very German and she and Schmidt were German through and through. But when the four of us reviewed our maiden names, and those of our mothers', I saw that there is only a little drop on her father's side. She doesn't have my Stolz's - Adolf's - Stahlecker's - Schlictemeyer's. I think she plays up this little drop because Schmidt is as German as they come. He is a native speaker of the language -- I think his parents are immigrants -- and he promised that after lunch he would get out his two German squeeze-boxes and play a couple of polkas and schotisches. He was very impressed that my parents met on a Luther League Hay Rack Ride, and that I was baptized in a country church where the old people still speak the language. He liked that my father made his own beer and that my aunt had a horseradish patch.

Schmidt grew more and more impressed with my heritage, so Bettie artfully extended her arm to pass seconds on potatoes to him. She changed the subject then and told us that she was a dancer -- "professionally trained" she said. She wanted us to know that this background gave her a type of physical intuition. She said if she watched someone else engaged in an activity like wind sailing or snow skiing, she could do it on the first try. As she spoke, she sat very straight and kept her head properly balanced on her neck. I noticed that her neck looked very strong and thin, and I started to feel very plump and plain, a platdutscher in her Sunday frock. Bettie said she could almost tell, but observation, which muscles were involved in an activity and how ... I thought this was a pretty evocative comment to make at the dinner table with a bunch of German Lutherans, especially if you were the Lutheran pastor's wife, but Schmidt just smiled and smiled at her.
Bettie said she also has the same sort of intuitions with flavors. "You know how some people can look at music and know what it will sound like? I look at recipes and know what they will taste like." And she made me give her the ingredients for the bread I had brought. I listed the recipe, measurements and all, and when I said I thought the cumin gave it its unique flavor, she shook her head gravely and said, "No, no. It's the sunflower seeds." She told me what each ingredient added to the bread. "The oil makes it moist." "The egg makes it light." Now I may make it without the egg. We Germans like heavy bread.

Sometime after seconds and before dessert, I was able to admit to myself that Bettie was a braggart, and I couldn't wait to leave. I didn't even want to hear Schmidt's squeezeboxes. I was uncomfortable being there and was embarrassed for Bettie. She didn't realize that she was boasting -- and I thought Schmidt was a lovestruck fool to see it. He, with his genes for strict disciplinarianism, wouldn't have put up with such dinner table behavior from his children, but here was his wife unashamably begging the centerstage. And he just kept smiling and telling Bettie that the mashed potatoes were certainly delicious.

When dessert came, hot apple strudel, I was able to relax a little bit and observe Bettie talk some more about herself. I was so surprised that she was able to carry on about herself for so long. She told us all about her childhood home in California, and I started to think that maybe begin from the west coast made her so flamboyant. She didn't have the Midwestern modesty that the rest of us at lunch possessed.

It got to be a little much for me and my mind started to wander. I was thinking about my small hometown and how nobody who was from Shallowater could act like Bettie. We grew up knowing our place before God and it kept us in a pretty humble
position. But we weren't too humble. That was almost as bad as boasting. I started thinking about the time Norm and Beatrice Mai got a little too humble in the Shallowater Lutheran Church and were almost run out. During the benedictions, Norm would rest his face in his hands and look pitifully wretched. Beatrice would weep during sermons like the pastor's words were whips, flogging her for her sinfulness.

These things alone were enough to make the other church members suspicious, but then Norm quit his job at the bank, moved his family into a trailer house and started volunteering his Christian duties all over town. He took over the janitorial work at the church, preached in the nursing home, went into the Lucky B and paid for other people's meals. Beatrice cooked and delivered meals for the elderly and sick, read Bible stories at the library, and led four or five women's prayer groups. All this was too much for the members of Shallowater Lutheran Church. The Mais were enjoying their humility and sinfulness a bit much. So a deacon was sent to tell the Mais that either they took back their old jobs, moved a brick house and quit bending over so far during the sermon and benediction, they would have to worship elsewhere.

As I was thinking about the Mais, I clasped my hands together and leaned my head against my fist. I might have even closed my eyes. Halfway through a description of her job, Bettie noticed my prayerful position and exclaimed, "Oh, that reminds me of those old Lutheran ladies who bend over so far during the benediction they act like God is going to strike them with lightning."

And then amazingly, and I had never heard anyone say this before, Bettie said she had never ever had the experience of feeling sinful and in need of forgiveness -- a pastor's wife! I wanted to ask her if she was raised Lutheran, because every Lutheran I know has a super-acute awareness of their own sinfulness and of their falleness into this imperfect world. We're guilty and know it.
But Bettie was proud of her sinless state. She said she recieves the benediction "gloriously." She clasped her hands together, gazed heavenward and said, "Thank you, God. Pour it all upon me." I felt a little ill then, and told Bettie and Schmidt that we must leave. I couldn't have stayed there another minute -- It had become unnerving to be around someone so utterly shameless, so completely different than me.

Bettie wouldn't have lasted in Shallowater either.
IMPARTED KNOWLEDGE

My great-grandmother lived her last seventy years
in Shallowater, KS in a rock-grey house
full of her creations:
hand-sown Dukes of Hazzard dolls --
Boss Hogg spiffy in his white crocheted cowboy shirt --
kitchen curtains of knitted daisies, petals joined
around plastic milk-jug centers;
painted thimbles lined by the window;
baked-dough grapes clustered on her fridge.

By the scratchy brown couch covered with afghans,
she kept stacks of The Weekly World News.
Thank God -- or I wouldn't be half as wise about women.
I wouldn't know about the woman
with her underdeveloped twin's two legs
sticking from her abdomen,
or have heard of the Tuscaloosca madam
with foot-long fingernails --
She had a name for every one and never mixed them up.
All this I learned, leaning against those afghans,
turning pages as my great-grandmother
rocked in the corner, reading her Bible
and spitting brown chew in the can by her feet.

When Great-Grandma started living on tobacco and donuts,
Mother moved her to the Garden City Care Home,
left her things behind and rented the house to a grandson,
a strange man left to wander among Great-Grandma's creations.

Two weeks later he read her magazines in bed,
smoking, drinking, wondering how it would feel
to hold the woman with two extra legs,
or how nice those fingernails would feel on his hips.
Smoking, he slipped away, the long ash burning first
Grandma's rag-tied quilt that warmed him at night.
I cannot find the altar boy these days.
He's slipped away, hiding behind the organ pipes
or lying under the last row of pews
picking off the green and faded gum
left behind by years and years of catechumens.
I cannot find the altar boy, but here's his cassock.
The cotton folds still smell like him --
they brushed against his skin so long,
but now he's gone and left behind the cloth.
The surplice's shoulders are creased by the metal hanger.
The cincture is knotted around the wire and hanging loose.
Do you remember how he felt to walk down the aisle,
the solemn crucifix heavy against his hips -- how it was
for him to sit in the server's seat, his hand reaching
behind it to feel the rough stone wall,
how the chain clinked as the thurible swung up and back
and the incense flowed out in great rushes,
how the purple parament was hung, whispering on the altar,
how the paten and cruets and flagon were placed
around the veiled chalice?
Do you remember the priest's hands during lavabo,
how they floated, white and still, in the water?

*Kyrie eleison*

*Christos eleison*

*Kyrie eleison*

*Christos eleison*
HOME AGAIN

I have spent the last ten years trying to leave Shallowater, living in places that promised more than sameness, straightness, flatness. I have fled to Missouri where the trees rose up on either side of the roads, pressing in on me. I have gone to Colorado where the roads curve around mountains and rise higher and higher, and to Alaska where the dark winters foster privacy. And now I write from Iowa where the plains are disappointingly swelled and where tiny towns spring up every mile or two along the winding roads. Still Shallowater calls and claims me, and it is only when the roads grow straight, and the plains stretch flat for miles, that my heart knows I am home. I am home.

When I was young I thought there was no movement in Shallowater, but I have come to know that it was, instead, in imperceptible motion. It was slowly grinding away at me -- like water wearing away rock, like the sea stealing back her stones, smooth wave by smooth wave. It was forming and shaping me into one who knew Shallowater. It was blessing me with a sense of place.

I can still close my eyes and see every house in town, the fields and fields of ripe winter wheat, the immense view from atop the CO-OP grain elevator. I can remember my great-grandmother, watching and loving us all, her arms open wanting to pull me back to Shallowater, back to home, and I know I will return. The waves are too persistent and the place has already made me hers. I will give myself up to Shallowater before too long.
PART 2.

AMOS ALTA FRANCIS MITCHELL CLINTON
PERFORMANCE NOTES

This piece requires three performers: a pianist, a singer and a reader. The reader is cast as Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton, and I suggest that she be seated centerstage throughout the performance. The singer plays the characters who contributed part of the main character's name, and should stand behind the chair during the spoken parts, and move out to either side of the chair to sing.

There are two pieces for each of the five names, (one spoken and one sung, excepting the last piece) and they are intended to be performed in the like manner with each other.

**Amos:** These pieces are to be played rhythmically with a strong sense of steady pulse unless otherwise notated.

**Alta:** These songs are reflective and gentle, and should be performed with a sense of sadness and regret.

**Francis:** These songs are persistent and repetitive at the beginning and end. Both have a slower, more reflective tempo in the middle section.

**Mitchell:** These songs are to be played in a slow blues style and very inconspicuously.

**Clinton:** During the first song, the pianist may want to improvise somewhat ominous atonal sounds on the piano. The second part should have no music, but should be read as indicated, with the "singer" standing behind the chair.

The music is intended only for enhancement of the words, and should never interfere with the poetry. Both singer and reader should have considerable freedom to stretch syllables and words for effect and the pianist should follow their lead. The piece should be performed by memory, as in a theatrical piece.
GREAT-GRANDMA’S NAMES

My great-grandmother had five names, and one time I asked her how she got each of them. She told me a story about the persons who had added to her name, and as she spoke, the long-dead relatives — people I had never heard of before — became real for me. I imagined them living and speaking, and I saw how they had given much more than their names to my great-grandmother. They had passed to her their traits, their features, their life. My great-grandmother was the head of our family, a strong creative woman, her own person, but paradoxically, she was also just a total of the past’s influences. She was Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton.
I got the name "Amos" from my own great-grandfather, the preacher.

His mother was full-blood Indian. They say she was just beautiful, but that Amos was homely and loud when he preached.

His daddy was a soldier in the old war, and scarred in some battle, only suffering -- jounced in the wagon -- so he was left by his mates with the Indian braves and the beautiful Indian maids.

I like to think she loved him first, wrapped him in robes and rubbed three weeds on his wounds. Ministered to him and made him hers before he even knew.
from my own great-grandfather

the preacher.

His mother was full-blooded Indian.

They say she was

just beautiful

but that Anna was handsome,

and loud when she preached.
His daddy was a soldier in the old war and scarred in some battle, only suffering - plunged in the wagon -

so he was left by his mamie with the Indian leaves

and the beautiful Indian maiden.

I like she think she loved him first.
wrapped him in roes

and rubbed oree weeks to his wounds.

shivered and made him here before he ever knew.
AMOS 2
(sung by Amos)

The only thing that saved me was being a minister.
It gave me grace, mostly undeserved.
I was that half-breed boy of the cripple Francis,
and his Indian maid. I'm sure some still saw me that way
by how they scowled. Crouched down in the back pews,
they squinted and saw feathers -- white and brown --
falling down my back as I broke bread
or baptized their summer babies.
They imagined blood when I finished the cup of wine,
saw it stain my lips and not theirs.
Many were saved from self hatred
by thinking thoughts like these.
The only thing that saved me was being a minister. It gave me grace mostly undeserved.
I was that
cross-breeding boy of the cripple Francis and his
Indian maid.
I'm sure some still saw me that
way by how they scowled
crouched down in the back pew— they
squeinted and saw feathers white and brown.

falling down my back as I broke bread and baptized their

summer babies

They imagined

blood when I finished the cup of wine, saw it in my lips and not theirs. Many were
saved from self-hated by thinking thoughts like these.
"Alta" is for my mother, I might want to think.

Her name was Alma, and that's just one letter from the same.

Mama bore more boys than girls, seven to four,
and none of their names were prettier than mine and hers.

But what's a girl named Amos to do with a pretty middle name?

Still, I was Alta instead of Norma or Lorna or poor, poor Edith.

Edith! Now that's a name! Mother gave it to the youngest girl,
the one with pretty hair but awfully crooked teeth.

We used to say she could eat watermelon through a picket fence!

And I don't think Mama ever forgave herself

thinking Edith might have had more boys if she'd had a prettier name.
and some of their names were prettier
than mine and less.

But which is it
second name to be with a pretty middle name?
like bells freely

Still I was silly

instead of none as long as poor, dear Edith.

Edith, how does a name!
Alpdlie, the one with pretty hair, but nasty crooked tooth.

Mother gave it to the youngest girl, we need a skill that Edith could cut mussambool through a pudding base.
And I don't think Ollie ever forgot himself,

thinking Ollie might have had more sense, if he'd had a proper name.
ALTA 2
(sung by *Alta*)
I just wanted my last girl to be beautiful, is all. Wanted her golden curls to fall down her back when I brushed them. Wanted to dress her in dresses and bows and lace! Oh the rest were nearly boys -- brown and rowdy -- rolling outside and loud!
Quiet. That's all I prayed for in the last. Quiet like the house sat so tight while the rest slept. Carrying her, I would sit on the stump outside and cry, "Let this one be mine!"
I know it was just all the bugs in the fields singing, but once I thought I heard the swollen earth, rolling inside herself and whispering,
*edith edith edith.*
not were many boys


Quel est ce qui

been set so tight while the rest sleeps.

Carrying let I would
sit on the stump—out side and said “In this can be mine” I knew it was just all the

keep in the fields—sing big keep in the fields—sing big

once I thought I heard the story earth—now lay inside her self and
"Francis" was my father's name, of course.
He made honey for half the state -- five wide counties at least --
and everyone knew the Francis family for that.
The honey was in the big cellar that stank
from the barrels of sauerkraut he also kept
hidden in the dark. Up and down those cellar steps,
into the dirt and out, I carried so many jars for my father.
He used to take me to town and we would park by a store,
set up our wares in the back of our wagon and smoke,
people staring at the brown little girl with the pipe.
Father would laugh and say, "This here girl's my best son!"
Francis was my father's name, of course. He made money,
for half the state—five wide counties at least—
and everyone knew the Francis family for that! The money was in the big cellar that stood from the burned house.
Oh, Father worked so long and hard!
Up and down those cellar stairs, into the dirt and out.
I carried so many jars in my father.

He need to take me to town and we would stop by a store
set my gun near in the back of our wagon and smoke

Father would say, "Tell me, Wherever goes my best boy?"
FRANCIS 2
(sung by Francis)

There was no way to keep my girl from being mine.
She was just that way from the day she was born -- a beautiful baby, but bold -- screaming all the time we would hold her, rolling on logs and falling on her knees without crying. Oh her mother was trying -- hemming on lacy collars, telling her a beautiful woman can't have bumps on her knees, hard white scars -- brushing her hair until it popped and sparked. But Amos -- I call her Amos or Amy -- would start that squeal, jerk back from the brush and push out her lip. Watching her, I would fight down the urge to cheer, could feel it rising in me like my chest were a rain guage, and my daughter was some hard August rain.
MITCHELL 1

Mitchell was my first husband's name -- John Mitchell.

People thought it odd that I married him, but they didn't know all his ways -- how he would make beer on the coldest days when the house was shut tight and the smell of the malt made us crazy, light-headed and drunk before the first cold taste.

He would play the harmonica and dance under the trees with his girls -- Cora and Lora -- twins. They weren't even mine, but I loved them hard, like I knew my own would never survive. Mama said her girls were nearly boys, so I wasn't surprised to have none of my own. John died after six years and I kept his name another ten after he died. Pneumonia. He and our little John died three days apart, leaving me with the baby, Clarence, and those eleven year-old girls.
Traditional southern hymn. Play with a slow walking bass.
MITCHELL 2
(sung by Mitchell)

Had I known all being married would bring to Alta,
I would have walked away that first day I saw her
at the Mayor's parade. She and her friend, Mary, were in blue
and bright-eyed, hair back, curls damp against their faces,
sun in their eyes, scoffing at the mayor's two fat girls
riding in that new gray car. "They are going to squash it!"
And Mary hushing her, Alta hands on her hips
those same hips I would feel years later
when she would ease herself on me and whisper,
"Remember me like the first day, John."
And I would see those hips that I held -- handfuls of her --
those hips slim beneath her blue gingham dress as she stood
on the corner, laughing, arm shielding her eyes from the light.
Had I known all being married would bring so little, I would have walked a way that first day.

I saw her at the mayor's parade.

She said, her friend Mary was in blue and bright eyes with hair back.

In their eyes, seething at the mayor's row for girls riding in that new grey car.
"They are going to squash it!" and Mary leant by her Al in bands on her hips those same hips I would hold years later when she would rave her self on me and with a purr, "He - saw - her - me like the first day John."
CLINTON 1

(spoken by A.A.F.M.C.)

Clinton was the name of the man who married me next.

We were working at the same farm -- he out in the fields,

and I cooking indoors where the men came three times a day.

I filled bowl after bowl with food and the other girls would serve.

Standing in the hot kitchen, I could hear the men laughing,

imagined them scraping their forks on the plates and winking.

During Harvest we all had to pack up and go to the fields,

take those sweaty men chicken and bread and tea.

Clinton was cutting nearest the kitchen and circled around

when he saw me come with lunch. Later he would tell the story,

say it was the best sight he had ever seen, and laugh

that he meant the chicken and tea, not me. Winked

and said he married me for my honey wheat bread.

It was my mother's recipe but I never told him that.
She just wasn't the kind of woman you could say you loved.
She was too tough, made you feel she was powerful,
talking about her Great-Grandfather Amos and how his Indian blood
was in hers. She was wild at times. Once fevered, she taught the cure
would be to smoke three weeds or to taste blood --
said she heard things at night, like the earth was whispering to her
and she couldn't pull the world tight enough to keep it quiet.
Walking with me at night, she would stop, stretch her arms high,
say, "You don't feel it, do you?" and slowly circle around me.
She was up at three to have the house sit still awhile --
smoking that pipe and thinking, probably, how strange
that she had ended up with me in gray Shallowater,
nothing more than Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton.
Clinton: She just wasn't the kind of woman you could say you loved. She was too tough.

Both: Made you feel she was powerful. Talking about her Great-Grandfather Amos and how his Indian blood was in hers.

Both: She was wild at times.

Clinton: Once fevered, she thought the cure would be to smoke three weeds or to taste blood.

A.A.F.M.C.: Said she heard things at night, like the earth was whispering to her and she couldn't pull the world tight enough to keep it quiet.

Both: Walking with me at night, she would stop, stretch her arms high, and say You don't feel it do you?

Both: You don't feel it do you?

A.A.F.M.C.: She was up at three to have the house sit still awhile.

Both: Smoking that pipe and thinking, probably, how strange that she had ended up with me in grey Shallowater, nothing more than

Both: Amos Alta Francis Mitchell Clinton.