

Ada



Even in life she was a shadow:
gaunt frame,
pinched face,
white hair bunned in back
almost always wore black,
a Canadian Gothic.

I imagine her once,
a willowy beauty
who must have caught the eye
of that handsome Irish man
a grandfather I never knew.

Perhaps his leaving her so young--
Before she hardly knew him--

dead of influenza at 28
his only legacy, an infant son,
had turned her mirthless.

Or perhaps it was the landscape
that did it; that windswept,
pre-Cambrian shield
yielding nothing but grim,
where two billion years before
the meteor
Miriah had dropped
its load of cobalt, copper,
nickel, making the owners
of Falconbridge rich,
while their workers picked
and shoveled,
drank dust
with their whiskey,
left widows like Ada
to take in washing.

A soul deprived of beauty
withers.
What was left to nurture
so delicate a creature?

Surely not the rheumy,
sulfurous sky,
nor slag heaps looming
above the rooming houses,
nor mud-filled streets,
nor tree stumps
giving no hint of
the vertiginous land
that once drew Iroquois,
Cree, Algonquin.

I never knew what

drew that jolly Mr. MacDonald,
a railroad man, to marry her
a second time over.
Her sister, Aunty Em,
was by far the livelier
of the two.

To me, she was the grandmother
who forbid me to play
with Annie, a miner's child,
poorer than we. Lice,
she said.
I must have been three.
I have finally forgiven her.

~Sheila Collins