

# Naomi

*(in memory of my mother-in-law, Naomi Collins)*

Haymowed in Farragut barns  
and apple-dumplinged in Shenandoah kitchens,  
she grew straight and useful  
as a butter churn,  
as a grove of cottonwood,  
as the vertical lines of Puritan houses  
set out on the plains of undulating  
wheat and Indian corn.

In her green years, growing tentative  
among peach and apple orchards,  
she tested her metal, finally,  
on the Iron Range, at twenty below,  
in classrooms of Czechs and Poles,  
of Swedes and Lithuanians.  
A green/brown girl among chattering magpies,  
she was burnished and shone.

Fifty years later, the children of miners  
remembered this mother hen  
who'd taken them under her wing.

Though often fretted by minutiae--  
the time of meals, the cost of beef,  
the bright green suit  
her son insisted on--  
a suit that "only Negroes wear"--  
she seemed to bear life's greatest trials  
with serenity--  
the deaths of sisters,  
Depression-era relatives,  
a husband gone to war at 43,  
a son in jail in 60's Mississippi,  
her spouse's death—  
as if saving all her courage  
for the Iron Ranges yet to come.

The last she traveled like her pioneer  
grandmother: stolid  
and uncomplaining  
across the gaping prairie  
wilderness  
toward home.

~Sheila Collins

