

Naomi Long Madgett

Reluctant Light

(in memory of Maude Selena Hilton Long)

Mother, I didn't mean to slight you but
it wasn't you that I adored.
You hid your energy in shadows
and I was dazzled by the sun.

I idolized the one whose voice soared to prophetic heights,
whose words rejuvenated epics of the ages. Some fine June Sundays,
slender and magnificent in morning coat, he would electrify the pulpit
with eloquent pronouncements of doom and glory so divine
the very gates of heaven seemed to part, bathing the atmosphere in crystal light.
Seeking his favor, I rehearsed raising my hand like his in benediction,
earning the childhood name of Preacher, shortened in time to Prete.

You gave us daily sustenance but there was never
a choir's fanfare or the soulbeat of the mighty to grant applause.
You baked the bread for which we seldom thanked you,
canned pears for winter and mended Depression-weary clothes,
scrubbing sheets on a washboard, humming hymns to lift your sagging spirit,
and cultivating beauty in endless flower pots.
The summer when he toured the streets of ancient Palestine and Rome,
you consoled yourself by painting pictures of the Appian Way
using the kitchen table for an easel.
You coached me with my homework, rejoiced
in my small triumphs and prepared me to confront the enemy,
tapping your umbrella against my fifth grade teacher's desk
to punctuate your firm demand for justice. I didn't recognize

your subtle power that led me through blind, airless caves,
your quiet elegance that taught me dignity – nor could I know
the wind that bore *him* high into the sunlight
emanated from your breath. I didn't want your journey,
rebelled against your sober ways.

But I have walked through my own shadows and, like you,
transcended glitter. I have learned
that I am source and substance of a different kind of light.

Now when they say I look like you and tell me
that I have deepened to your wisdom, softened
to your easy grace, I claim my place with honor
in that court of dusky queens whose strength and beauty
invented suns that others only borrow. And Mother,
I am glad to be your child.