

Valerie Smith

**The Man in Our Family Portrait**

*John Whipple Adams and his subjects, 1845*

Claimed he was an artist.  
A twitching black beard rendition  
of Abraham Lincoln,  
subtly suggesting:  
*Have a seat.*

I could feel him posing,  
the corner of the room off angle.  
We would be prayer angels;  
he would be god.

Eyelashes fell to a hush.  
Blamelessness billowed open  
to ill-advising. A handkerchief  
caught mid-clutch. Poised,  
persuaded. Silence steadied my knees,  
my soul covered to dust the floor.

His hand rested, swearing  
an oath we wouldn't remember.

## To Function or Operate Properly

What if we worked on it,  
took it apart,  
dismantled it  
in the living room  
in front of the kids.  
What a mess

we would make  
of the wheels falling off,  
rolling down the stairs,  
out the door,  
into the street,  
past the chorus of foxgloves  
heralding, trumpeting,  
screaming, shouting heart  
failure in a pattern of teardrops.

What tools we would use  
against the machine yesterday  
rusted over, caking our palms  
bloody, metal to the bone.

What of our home?

## Mittraphap Road

Fluid destinations,  
home locations,  
and occupations.  
Never too far,  
in a way,  
we always know  
exactly where we are.

When your goals  
were north in Nong Khai  
and my morals  
were south in Saraburi.

Foot and carriage,  
hoof and yoke,  
packed solid the earth  
so long beneath us.  
For one day

we would say,  
it was worth the time,  
distance, calls,  
cards and pictures.

We would stop playing  
games, rising and falling over  
Yen Mountains of marriages,  
babies, and too much time away.

Smoother, now  
paved six lanes wide,  
proud, expanded  
by asphalt and cement  
to outlast us.

## Treating Sarge and Betty to Ice Cream

Sometimes they can't hear  
you against so many

other words they heard before.  
Repetition is an angry thing.

Sometimes they remember you  
better than you were,

better than them. Memory  
is a kid in a candy store.

They have no time  
to trifle with little

things like longsuffering.  
Patience is a gift unwrapped

by grooms and new moms.  
Sometimes they don't say

what you wished.  
They say what they mean.

Niceties are for knickknacks  
and funerals and conversation

is an overdressed picnic guest.  
So talk above the fan blowing

history in their ears.  
Remember they were better

than they think they were.  
Give them time

with their little things,  
which is you.

Say the words they wished.  
Say what you mean. Repeat it.

Save niceties  
for knickknacks and funerals.

## Guilty

He left me for dead  
at 5:37  
with a pillow under my head.

The room went soft into autumn.  
Bare light overheard itself  
unnecessary.

How still  
can a body lay, waiting  
for him to come back  
and check my breathing,  
our faint pulses blending.

This is what I want,  
not every time – I want  
to want it every time –  
not to have it every time.  
I am delirious.

You are oblivious,  
meticulous,  
cleaning your weapon.  
I thought  
you left me for dead.

You wrapped me  
in daylight instead.  
Silver streaks  
the pillow under my head.