

1972

Birthright

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Recommended Citation

Schramm, Richard. "Birthright." *The Iowa Review* 3.2 (1972): 18-18. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1339>

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B I R T H R I G H T

When the census-takers set out
on their vast journeys
after the famine
I conceal myself in their belongings
shapelessly I put on a look
of forlornness and try to pass
as their castoff

In a few days
I discover how easy it is
to confuse them I try new disguises feign
different deaths each day and come back
at evening asking to see them
entered

When they are asleep
I leaf through their folios taking out names
a few villages I look up their ancestors
and misplace their province of birth
I acquire names for the stillborn
and give them each a small list
of events

All along I have
robbed their provisions in the early light
hurrying ahead I feed the next village
and show them how to appear
fewer

We lower the children
into the well we lie down in fields
while they count the infirm
leaving little signs
of annoyance behind them
until we come out of hiding
our arms drenched with children
using our names
and we keep them darkly among us
the unnumbered