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The Child

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The Child · *George Keithley*

In my dream the brooding child
I was ten years ago leans back
far, tilting his kitchen chair,
to hear the Chicago Symphony
of the Air. No one else is home
until the strings and horns grow still.
A sudden crowd swarms the room—
grey-eyed uncles and aunts, and father
and mother. My sister Julia, too.
It might be every holiday reunion.
If I were younger I would guess
my First Communion. It's not,
though someone has invited Father Tein,
who thought he was a friend of mine.

Their faces are flames that glow
without the weight of guilt.
Their voices know my name—
“Gerhardt!” they cry. Or simply
“Gary!” if it's my sister. Always
I look as if I'm listening.
Now they command my attention,
their mouths form an important shape—

“You can be anyone you want.
Anyone at all!”

I smile.
They blaze into ordinary air.
Why should they stay? I recall
their message vividly. They dare
not fester in restless sleep
like some hallucination out of hell.
Mostly they're my family, you see.

And because I was taught every dream
is a delusion, telling you this
just now I smiled.
Though in the dream I understand they mean
what they say: "Be anyone at all"

but not that child.