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Family Script

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Family Script · *Anne Blackford*

*But not far away was the Big Swamp—the
“trembling earth,” the American Indians called
it—and I was aware of the existence of this
swamp from my earliest years . . . I was told
that there was no solid foundation of rock under
its surface but only mysterious waters which
flowed ceaselessly from an unknown source . . .*

—Lillian Smith

I

I know the script
and what it calls for:

hushed voices, the thick green
baize of the forest floor,

an inability to walk far
without tripping

The roots have all grown here
much larger than real life

I could say “like a dream”

I could say—interrupting the script—
that this is not real

This is the scene where the family
is called for

to plead for absolute loyalty

the myth where the eldest daughter
sacrifices herself

Iphigenia reciting her speech
before her father’s troops

younger than me at fourteen

imploing the gods
to stop the murderous anger
between mother and father

And these are the younger children:
my dark-eyed little brother
my younger sister who would avenge me
padding softly over the forest floor
They've slept with me
all their lives in this tangled overgrowth
In the mosquito-damp night
I gradually count away
the terrors of their dreams

II

Cut off from each other—
from ourselves— we move steadily
toward the heightened climax
No one's called this murder
but it is
This bay at Aulis soaks up
my voice like rain
None of them have questioned
what we are doing here
Blood sacrifice— even of one girl—
seems the only necessary sign
Now I pace over the stages
of this hallucination— rain forests

alive with buzzing insects,
moist green leaves, dazzling birds

I have to invent my lines
as the script keeps veering

I have to keep imagining
when to throw myself between my parents
to implore for peace

III

This script is a weapon:
a way out as well as a death sentence

Being a victim
of human sacrifice,

I have to choose my real identity
to survive the last act

My little brother
comes up to kiss me goodbye

His child's arms
encircle my neck tightly

Sunlight slants
from the roof of twisted vines;

leaves swarming with gnats
gleam emerald-green

I've had to plead with my father
for the right to grow up

I've had to fight all this time
for my own body

This is the script
I've come back to act
to rehearse the familiar cycles
of retribution and anger
Whatever traps I have to face
leaving this script
I can't go back to claim
my sister and brother
I've come back here
only to really leave
to scrutinize the variant texts
under the handwriting
This ground is treacherous
sunken with quicksand
and rope-thick roots — I walk carefully
over the moss-grown floor
I can't afford to trip this time
Nobody speaks
for my voice except me
thousands of years after I
took back my life
I'm still just inventing
what needs to be said
after I throw the script away