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## Grandmother

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## MARNE KILATES

## Grandmother

It is when the mind pokes idly,  
Then rummages through the past,  
The past a tumbled pile of clothes  
At the bottom of an *aparador*, musty  
And odoriferous with camphor balls,  
The clothes out of fashion or stiff  
With patches of mildew, reeking  
With stale air: thick belts  
Padded shoulders, gabardine and sharkskin,  
Forgotten stripes and faded pastels,  
A *terno* with its butterfly sleeves,  
Obsolete costume for a school dance  
Or stage play, browned pages from a notebook,  
An aunt's poems, undone beads, silverfish—  
It is then I remember you, Grandmother,  
Tenderly now, although I know  
How my mischief never failed to ignite  
The glint of temper in your eyes,  
How I nursed my secret glee  
As I broke your rules or upset your day,  
How the back of a slipper would land  
On my bottom if a look or a twit  
From your scrawny fingers did not suffice  
To rid or remind me of my childish sins.

After a time you faded, Grandmother,  
Shrinking in your chair by the window,  
Smoothing your thinning hair  
With a comb of tortoise shell  
(That imitated the afternoon with its  
Hand-worn nacre luster), as you watched  
Your life and your complaints  
Pass irretrievable with the dying  
Of the *tambis* tree in the yard,  
(The ants filing neatly as they mustered  
Their morsels among the dry stumps of branches,

Along the limb twisted into splinters  
By a part storm). Grandfather I did not know.  
How you remembered him I can little retrieve  
From the stacked shelves of the mind:  
The friars' *escribiente*, occasional writer  
Of Gregorian masses, held his drink  
Quite well, they say, of a gentle disposition,  
Talked about kindly in the town,  
Died of rupture during the War.  
Mother said you were strict, brought them up  
In the manner and admonition of the elders,  
Had some misgivings sending the girls to school.

You faded, Grandmother, shrinking  
In your chair by the window,  
Smoothing your thinning hair  
With a comb of tortoise shell.  
You could not read your Missal now,  
Nor ascend the stairway to the church on the hill  
(Where Grandfather had pedalled the bellows  
Of a reed organ in the hush of an afternoon Requiem,  
As our neighbor the old sexton tolled  
The Plegaria's baritone bells)—  
An uncle would not send you the right grade lenses  
Unless to you consented to spend sometime in their home  
To mind the children, or take some rest again,  
In fact to keep that exchange going with the young,  
The handing down of memories,  
The sustenance of the old.  
You faded, Grandmother, as I grew.  
The youngest son of your eldest daughter,  
I always knew or told myself I was  
Your grandchild apart. When you died  
I was away learning to be fully separate  
(Our home now torn asunder by our constant  
Moving), learning a certain poetry of living  
That I fear you would not understand,  
And learning to write poems.  
And it is only now in this poem  
That I am again near you.