

Masthead Logo

**The Iowa Review**

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Volume 27  
Issue 2 *Summer/Fall*

Article 40

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1997

# A Poem for Grandmother

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## Recommended Citation

Hoskote, Ranjit. "A Poem for Grandmother." *The Iowa Review* 27.2 (1997): 101-102. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4908>

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## A POEM FOR GRANDMOTHER

A door. A stair. And two steps inside that dark,  
the straight-backed chair my grandmother sat in,  
a lace net draped across its mahogany arm.  
And on the table, a volume of stories  
open at the flyleaf, its tissue quill-scarred.

The photographs seal her in a shell of relations:  
the sepia corset would have her no more  
than an empress delegating domestic chores;  
in this room, imagine her gravely accepting  
tributes of porcelain and sparkling brass  
or setting tiger lilies afloat in bowls, or stocking  
pots of pickled mango in the attic of summer.

But the wrong word kills, and *empress* is wrong,  
an acrid graft on a delicate stock. Empire  
was never her creed: grandmother had to learn  
the principles of governance from practiced hands.  
She had to whet the brusque words of command  
on waspish crones in the inner courtyard,  
had to tame the peacocks in the garden  
and dry the raisins of tact with aunts-in-law,  
invalids who ruled from brass-bound chests  
and serene beds of illness.

She grew up with her children, kept house  
in a city of merchant ships and parade-ground strife,  
made a home in the rain-gashed heart  
of that world in whose lanes stowaway Chinamen sang  
the praises of their silk, and coolies peddled  
cartloads of spices plucked for colder ports.  
Like the poets of that city, she wrote in two languages,  
spoke a third in polite company, the lines enjambed  
over the trellises, the words trapped in porous stone.

She died giving birth to a daughter  
on Armistice Day, 1931.  
She grew into the earth, then, a storied fig tree  
whose roots shot to heaven and branches burrowed  
so deep they seeded a forest.

Giving consumed grandmother. Connected to her  
by nothing more substantial than a spiraled thread  
of protein, I wake some nights to find her eyes  
staring at me from the mirror:  
grandmother when she died, younger than I now am,  
cut in half by the streetlight's glare.

Hoard your powers, she says, do not give  
from the core, my son, do not give.  
Giving spites the flesh, corrodes intention.  
Most unreliable of barterers, most memorable of sins,  
giving kills. My son, do not, like Karna,  
rip off the armor that is your skin.

## GROUP PORTRAIT

The afternoons shuttle by, slides in the magic lantern  
behind his eyes. Waking at teatime, he will neglect  
the flavor of mint, brush the sandwiches aside.  
First, he must compress his lore, replace each slide  
with the true chronicler's unhurried finesse  
in its allotted tray. And as they fog,  
the old man wipes his half-moon lenses  
with the soft cloth of evening.