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Margaret Randall

“Above the Colors of a Dirndl Skirt”

She was a big woman, heavy breasts
filling peasant blouse
above the colors of a dirndl skirt.
Today she would use pants
but we all wore skirts back then
cinching our yearning waists
to a lying destiny.

I never knew if she was my parents' friend
or mine:
she and her husband,
artists with a couple of toddling kids.
Memory no longer assigns
a measure of generations.

Alice and Jack. Jack and Alice,
university couple
painting and shaping clay,
asking questions
beyond my awkward reach,
trundling their little ones behind.

Until one day Alice was sick and no one
could name the illness
come to claim those breasts,
open and close her hands,
whispered hospital stay,
relieved homecoming,
sudden death.

No one knew. No one could say.
Silence floods drifting images
as those voices rise once more
in make-believe phrases
like "she was just beginning to make it"
or "what a shame."

I left town.
Alice's shattered family stayed.
Jack visited us in Mexico
huddled on our stoop
a bottle of beer in his deflated hand.

Years later I came home to search
for the murals my parents said
graced every floor
of the First National Bank Building:
success too late
in a life cut short.

I went with a friend, announced
we wanted to see
the walls I'd imagined for years:
paint dripping from Alice's brushes
pure color coming home.

The receptionist's blank smile told us
there were no murals
in this building,
"Sorry," she said. "I should know,
I've worked here for years."

Images painted over
like my town's beautiful family
overcome by the picture-perfect demands
of a decade dripping hypocrisy,
rancid silence and lies
when even art
couldn't beat the odds.