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## A Family Portrait

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## A FAMILY PORTRAIT

*Let's pose you all like this:  
the two youngest, Yates  
and Fern, you in the center,  
flanked by Grace and Sarah.  
Father and Mother (if I  
may, Charles and Katherine),  
you'll have your family near you  
forever. For the back row  
now, Laura and Leila,  
Albert, Cora and Evanda.  
The focus: Father's left eye—  
where else? And shadows every  
angle I care to look from.*

When driving past a farm  
someone I knew once worked,  
I get the shivers.  
Machines chew up the dirt.  
In spring, blackbirds claw out  
the seed, poisoned to help  
it grow, and you find them  
days later—those broken birds—  
punctuating the straight  
green rows. Here's another scene:  
Fall: The family fanned out  
across a pasture,  
chasing cattle. For a  
moment, I can see them all  
in color, the girls awkward,  
caught up in long blue jumpers,  
sticktights and milkweeds. Yates  
and Albert drape themselves  
with green. Katherine's absent.  
Sky merely huge. And Charles,  
his habit, decked out in black,

as though he knew I  
would someday watch this drama.  
The children don't see me.  
They scream at the cows  
who have ruined Sunday lunch.  
I am older than they are  
now in the portrait, this scene,  
the air itself, and behind me...

Andrea, daughter, when you  
are old, I want you to sit down  
some night and listen to wind  
humming perfect and sad under  
the eaves. Allow your eyes  
to think for your great  
grandmother's portrait when  
she was eight, the age you were  
the night I wrote this. She wore  
ribbons in her hair. Blue,  
she told me one time long after.