In Praise of Famous Men

Caroline Patterson
IN PRAISE OF FAMOUS MEN

I met my grandfather in the Smithsonian, American Art Archives — West. Framed, covered with dust, they had to set him upright. Like the Depression years, when Wurlitzer pianos didn’t need his commercial art. He grabbed the nearest job: Hamilton, Montana, painting ticks. For posterity: Paint the Flatheads. Show the folks back home how the last few buffalo skins are scraped, the berries crushed for pemican. How when life gets hard, you get up, say you are going to the store for bread. Years later, your family gets one postcard: hello, good-bye.

In this painting, Saturday Night Dance, the dancers strike up polkas, red swirls against the black Montana night. A woman’s skirt flies up, she turns around. Her partner watches the redhead in pink across the room. Their faces sweat, the music is getting louder. In the muddy background, a man leans up against the wall, stares at the dancers, his only hand in his pocket. That man is you, Tom Moore. The heavy wooden door opens into the smoky room, out to a night speckled with stars you could never paint.
A girl with long, black braids swings in, her dress brushes her bony knees. She is calling you home. You are already turning away.