Spring 1981

A Family Portrait

Robert Sims Reid
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,
captured in long blue jumpers,
sticktight 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.