

Pygmalion**I**

I a young man at loose ends, and she
my sister's baby with whooping cough.
Taking turns at her crib, jerking her
upright each time another fit started
we saved her — and so she caught me.

Three: climbing my lap, all ears
under my jacket, hearing the thump,
Five: riding behind me, arms tight
round my waist, as far as they reached,
Nine: skin over bones, all dark eyes
but not quite so intriguing
with a son of my own.

Fourteen: just starting to make people
notice — we drank tea from one cup
and I said there's true love but
she knew it was only a half-joke.
Seventeen: I talked, talked, while she,
only half understanding,
heard in that same language.

Nineteen: roles reversed, listening
to her talk, talk, hearing confessions,
lending advice I hated to give
not quite out of the battlefield
she had just entered.

Twenty one: I gave her away and she
left me for good, taking me with her.

II

It had something to do
with saving my life or
that was what he said.
He was childless but
loved children, so I
was an obvious choice
when you think about it.

But all I remember
is my big solid uncle
catching me up in his arms
as I ran to him
squeezing the breath
from my cracking ribs.

Riding double behind him,
lemonade and cookies
at roadside cafes.

Taking trains
to reach him and
listen to monologues
on life, love, the nature
of things, all heart
and only half mind.

Then, in love, always asking
does this one
measure up to that image
I have of what a good man
should be, meaning him.

In time I relaxed and I left him
but he lives with me still
and sometimes he comes
between me and contentment.

—*Maria Jacobs*