

JEFFREY D. CLAPP

Return

Why did she look so sad
the children wanted to know
the stick lady on the cane
whose rheumy eyes bled tears
as she looked out their kitchen windows
toward the pasture and the elms
that were dying.
She lived here once a long time back,
the children's mother said.
This was the house where she grew up.
But that was hard for them to fathom then,
that anyone had ever lived there
but them.

Later,
they saw her standing on the flat.
Her son had driven her to the gate
and she had hobbled in
as far as the lime pile.
They couldn't see her face
but saw her bend a few arthritic inches
to touch the heads of timothy grass.
Doubtless that same flat had been cut
for hay, back when.
It would explain the haybarn's age,
its hand-shaved beams and iron hook
hung from a rope they swung on.

And that yellow bureau in the shed
whose drawers they had pried open
to find mouse droppings
and one long gold-headed pin
(for pinning hats to women's hair,
their mother said)—
it might have been her bureau, once.

And they might have guessed she'd slept
in the old north bedroom in the big four-poster bed
rising early one morning in September of '22
to comb the snarls out of her waist-length hair
and pull on a petticoat and dress
to take the train to Springfield
where she'd taken a job as a bookkeeper
in a dry goods store
not to return (at least to *live*)
to that old farm
in Hancock, New Hampshire
any more.