**My Sister Taught Me**

Claire Scott

I saw her walloped with a brush,

whipped with a belt for blasting Buddy Holly,

for muttering *blockhead*

under her breath. I saw her banished

to her bedroom and lose her allowance

week after week. My mother couldn’t stand her.

I washed the dishes, swept the floor, cleaned

my room, made turkey sandwiches

for school and studied head-down hard.

My sister taught me.

 I knew my mother’s love was in there somewhere,

 under the rage, behind the bottles, next to

 the orange vials of pills. I wanted some of that love,

 the comfort of soft wings. Someone to tell

 that Susan laughed at me and said no one wore

 pigtails anymore. That Mr. Willoughby

 said I should stand in the back row

 and mouth the words to *Silent Night.*

 Each day after school, I knocked on her bedroom

 door. *Not now* she said. *Next time* I thought.

My sister rarely opened her books.

She jabbered on the phone and watched TV.

I could hear *Hi Ho Silver* while I carefully

arranged numbers in perfect columns.

My sister played hooky with her friends

sneaking down to Parvin’s Pharmacy

for milkshakes and M&Ms. She stole

money from my mother’s purse,

took the beatings stolidly and stole again.

My red-headed sister, daring and defiant,

taught me *not now* meant *not ever*. She

showed me how to live when a mother

is too broken to love.