

# The New Criterion

Poems April 2005

## Ethel Taylor

by Timothy Steele

Bookkeeper for a small firm that made dyes,  
She boarded at my grandparents' and loved  
But had an allergy to strawberries.  
Strawberry imagery adorned her note cards;  
On her wall hung a still life of a dish  
With strawberries, three apples, and a lemon;  
Her teacups had a strawberry motif,  
Red fruits and green stems twining round their bowls.  
Such was her predilection and good nature  
That she seized chances to help others savor  
What fate and her physician had denied her;  
And on snow-muffled evenings when I shoveled  
My grandparents' front walk, she'd have me in  
And serve me strawberry preserves on toast;  
Or in the summer when I mowed the lawn  
She'd hull fresh berries for me and present them  
With shortcake and great dollops of whipped cream.

Having no relatives except a brother,  
A railway mail clerk over in New Hampshire,  
She shared her birthdays and her holidays  
With our extended family and attended  
With friends subscription-series plays, recitals,  
And concerts at the university.  
Whether from pre-lapsarian innocence  
Or post-lapsarian calculation, she  
Had found and filled a niche that suited her;  
And though that time was hard on single women,  
She never seemed to rue her lot or wish

That she had had a family of her own.  
She wasn't Robinson's Aunt Imogen,  
Nor was I a Young George, whose boyish charms  
Could pierce a spinster with her childlessness.  
However patiently she lent herself  
To news of school and church-league basketball,  
My volubility sometimes fatigued her;  
And, following one garrulous report,  
She set her cup back coolly on its saucer  
And said, "Aren't we a chatterbox today?"  
Making a blush spring hotly to my face

For having, in my vanity, imagined  
That I'd been entertaining, when I'd merely  
Been spraying words about, much in the way  
That an untended hose, flopping and thrashing,  
Jets water here and there at everyone  
And everything in its vicinity.  
The only sign that lack might haunt her life  
Came when her company moved to Brattleboro:  
She went with them, but, the next year, retired  
Abruptly and returned to Burlington  
And the familiar second-floor apartment  
My grandparents kept set aside for her.  
In retrospect, I realize how attached  
She was to them and Burlington itself—  
Its Church Street shops, its hillside situation  
By Lake Champlain, and its broad views across  
The water to the Adirondack Mountains.

Even four decades later, I can still  
Picture her sitting room—the overstuffed  
Armchair and sofa with lace doilies draped  
Upon their arms and back; the ottoman,  
Which proved the safest place for me to perch  
Because remote from her framed, standing photos,  
Her table lamps, and porcelain figurines;  
The corner cupboard, which, designed to fit  
The space where two walls met, enchanted me  
With cleverly triangular shelves and drawers;  
The Persian carpet upon which a sun beam,  
Dispersed in passing through the windowpane,

Might print a watery-prismed patch of rainbow;  
The elm that overhung the roof and spattered,  
After a rain, a second storm of drops  
Down from its drenched and gust-swept foliage.  
And thinking of these things, I feel a certain  
Affectionate responsibility  
Since, having been among the very youngest  
Of her acquaintances, I may one day  
Be the last person who remembers her.

In any case, whenever, in the summer,  
I pick fresh strawberries and gently crush one  
Against my palate with my tongue, and taste  
The sunny warmth of the sweet pulp and juice,  
I see her standing in her kitchenette  
Some cricket-throbbing evening in July,  
Neatly extracting, with a paring knife,  
The calyxes from berries, or removing  
The beaters from her mixer and suggesting  
That I lick clean the whipped cream on their blades.  
And of the duties that a lifetime gives us,  
One of the happiest of mine has been  
To listen as she chatted of her brother  
Or of canoe-and-camp trips she went on  
When young—this woman I did not know well,  
But for whom, for a time, I served as proxy  
In the enjoyment of forbidden fruit.

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**Timothy Steele's** latest book is *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing* (Ohio University Press).

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