



Sestina for Edith

Maureen Clark

The children have chosen the word: apricot
from the big envelope. I am teaching them to write sestinas. Now they choose: burn
They start to squirm in their seats for the next word.

Edith stirs the jam with a wooden spoon.

Next they choose: gate

The thick smell of fruit brings back her ghost

The children want ghosts
to be sheeted and scary, not my grandmother, and not apricots
But I am a child suddenly and the gate
is open between here and then. What can you do with six words if you have to burn
in every stanza? *Come and lick the spoon*
grandma pantomimes from the window. The important word

is any word since the stroke. We work without words
the way we always did, like mirrored ghosts
stirring and stirring the hot syrup with our spoons.
This was before I learned that apricots
came from Arabia, before I burned
jam in the kitchen in Fargo setting off the smoke detector. The gate

is open. I spend hours swinging back and forth on the gate
between my house and grandmas. I give her all my words
but it doesn't help. Her speech has burned
away, but she is not a ghost
yet. I bring her apricots.
We dip them in the hot water one by one with a round spoon



*just the right size, a slotted spoon
so we can lift them back out quick and peel off their skin. I can hear gates
opening among the children. Apricot
with its three even syllables is a magic word
now. And I am my grandmother's ghost
braiding things together out of nothing. She burns*

*trying to say my name. See how her freckles are burned
into the backs of my hands. We take up the spoon
to stir the jam. Ritual always brings out the ghosts.*

Inside the children gates
are opening. They choose six words
from the envelope. *I can smell apricots.*

Edith is always at the gate with her spoon beckoning me.
The children write quick with their six words.
The room is burning, full of apricots and ghosts.

