



**GREAT GRANNY  
WEBSTER**

CAROLINE  
BLACKWOOD

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**HONOR MOORE**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
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## GREAT GRANNY WEBSTER

CAROLINE BLACKWOOD (1931–1996) was born into a rich Anglo-Irish aristocratic family. She rebelled against her background at an early age and led a hectic and bohemian life, which included marriages to the painter Lucian Freud, the pianist and composer Israel Citkowitz, and the poet Robert Lowell. In the 1970s Blackwood began to write. Among her books are several novels, including *Great Granny Webster* and *Corrigan* (both available as NYRB Classics); *On the Perimeter*, an account of the women's anti-nuclear protest at Greenham Common; and *The Last of the Duchess*, about the old age of the Duchess of Windsor.

HONOR MOORE's most recent books are *Darling* (poems), which was a finalist for the James Laughlin Award, and *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margaret Sargent by her Granddaughter*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Her play *Mourning Pictures* was produced on Broadway, and its British production was broadcast on BBC radio. She teaches in the graduate writing programs at New School University and Columbia.

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## INTRODUCTION

IN HER FIRST book, *For All That I Found There*, Caroline Blackwood published a short memoir that predicts the writer she will become. During the war, Blackwood had been sent for safety to a boys' school, and the central character of her memoir is the school bully, "gingery-haired, near-albino, with a snout-like nose." "Piggy" is about the interplay of sex and power, something Blackwood, a great beauty, knew about. By the time she wrote the story in her forties, she was an old hand at navigating the minefields her allure for men had set, having served as muse to Lucian Freud, whom she married and who painted her, and Walker Evans, who took spectacular photographs of her. Her turn from journalism to literary prose had followed her marriage, in 1972, to the poet Robert Lowell, and the inspiration of his life studies can be felt in hers.

"Freakishly over-weight," Piggy McDougal holds sway over prepubescent Caroline and her male classmates by violence and intimidation, and so, when he takes her out to a rhododendron grove and directs her to remove her clothes, she does it. The little girl is "mortified and humiliated," but the adult narrator turns boy to pig as coolly as Circe:

The nervous blink of his white eyelashes became far worse than usual. His mouth was slack and trembly. He kept fidgeting with his hands. . . .

"Have you had the curse yet?" McDougal's porcine face, usually so florid, was ashen . . . Instinctively I

sensed that I must not tell him that I had never had it. . . .

When I refused to answer, my silence seemed to chill him, for I noticed that his teeth were chattering like those of a winter swimmer. . . .

Blackwood followed *For All That I Found There*, a collection of fiction and nonfiction, with a short novel in which she engages what will become one of her central themes, the turbulent, involuntary ties between women. In *The Stepdaughter*, an enraged, self-absorbed woman is saddled with the sullen, cake-addicted daughter of the philandering husband who has abandoned her. In *Great Granny Webster*, Blackwood treats a related subject, once again with the cauterizing diction that distinguished "Piggy." Here she takes a writer's dive into the material with which, as a raconteur, whiskey in hand, she famously enchanted and mesmerized her friends.

Blackwood, like Robert Lowell, belonged to a tradition of troubled artist aristocrats whose bloodlines coursed the veins of imperial viceroys, Harvard presidents, Anglican bishops, closeted aesthetes, and vengeful daughters passed over by primogeniture. Rising incendiary from august genealogies and privileged with huge dark houses, unfettered inheritances, or boundless land holdings, these descendants, before burning out in a harsh glee of liberation, may mark the crawl of history—their addiction or madness outdone in its display by their art. Blackwood counted among her ancestors Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Restoration dramatist, whose drink and debt induced a plummet from affluence but not from the firmament of English playwrights.

Drink was leagues ahead when Blackwood emerged from the motherhood of four daughters, a youth of beauty in Hollywood, New York, and London, and a short career as a magazine journalist to become a writer to contend with.

Seriousness would have been hard enough for such a woman to achieve without the early loss of her father and a mother like Maureen, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, in her youth one of the Golden Guinness Girls. The marchioness, neglectful and critical of her children, had disapproved of her daughter's marriages to Freud and the composer Israel Citkowitz, but when Caroline married Robert Lowell, she foraged the Guinness genealogy and found Lowells: "Do ask Cal," she wrote her daughter, "if we were already his kinsmen."

Blackwood and Lowell had met for years in New York literary circles, but the *coup de foudre*, between the married American poet at the height of his fame and the married Anglo-Irish noblewoman, took place in London, and, after eighteen months of hectic courtship, the birth of their son, and sad, hurried divorces, they married. If Lowell, hobbled by manic-depressive illness, considered himself reborn as a poet when he fell in love with Blackwood, the alliance transformed her from an occasional writer to a committed one. It is sweet to imagine them settled in her house in the English countryside, Lowell at work on *The Dolphin* for which Caroline was his muse, and Caroline, writing across the room, her entranced husband sneaking an occasional look. Lowell later described the scene:

Winterlong  
 And through the fleeting, cool, Kentish summer—  
 obstinately scowling  
 to focus your hypnotic, farsighted eyes  
 on a child's pale blue paper exam book—  
 two dozens . . . carpeting an acre of floor,  
 while a single paragraph in your large,  
 looping, legible hand exhausted a whole book . . .  
 [from "Runaway," in *Day by Day*]

The work exhausting blue books was *Great Granny Web-*

*ster*, a compressed virtuosic gothic whose young woman narrator seeks to unravel the curse of her female inheritance as a way of encountering her father, who died fighting in the Burma campaign when she was nine. The Scottish great-grandmother of the title, like Blackwood's own paternal great-grandmother, is the mother of a severely disturbed daughter (based on Blackwood's grandmother), who has a psychotic break and tries to murder her grandson, the narrator's father, at his christening. *Great Granny Webster* is only 108 pages long, but literary London greeted it as the coming of age of a significant voice. A finalist for the Booker Prize, it lost to Paul Scott's *Staying On*, the decisive vote cast by Philip Larkin, who reportedly insisted that a tale so autobiographical could not stand as fiction.

It seems strange now that the issue of verisimilitude could keep a book from a prize, but the forces of literary innovation move slowly. Blackwood, perhaps defensively, once remarked that *Great Granny Webster* was "probably too true," but twenty-five years later, its truthfulness can be likened to the accuracy of true north. The book is a distilled work of literary imagination that anticipates not contemporary American memoir, in which a reader's interest is often summoned merely by a writer's striptease of dysfunction, but the slim, intense novels of our time that transmute from actual people and places narratives so true to their tellers they cannot seem other than fiction to anyone else.

Like the young female narrators of Marguerite Duras and Jamaica Kincaid, the narrator of *Great Granny Webster* is revealed in the sensuality with which she re-creates her own powerful sense of place and in her reluctance to indulge sympathy for her characters at the expense of her own absolute accuracy. While Duras and Kincaid evoke the colonized tropics, Blackwood hearkens back to the environs of the colonizer, her narrator a latter-day Jane Eyre fearless in handling the gothic excesses of her material—a line of women, each

of whose madresses fits inside that of her predecessor like a nest of painted dolls.

It is as if the writer Caroline Blackwood had devised for her unnamed narrator, whom we assume to be a version of herself, a path home through a gauntlet of gorgons and furies, into a maze. Will she freeze into the miserly stoicism of her great-grandmother, a woman always dressed in black who (literally) spent her days sitting in a straight-back chair staring "silently in front of her with woebegone and yellowy-pouched eyes," venturing out only to creep along the seashore in a hired, chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce, her sole companion an osteoporotic one-eyed maid? Or will she be seduced by the sensual blandishments offered by her father's sister, her Aunt Lavinia, who attempts a suicide as garish and colorful as Great Granny's old age is monochromatic? Most frightening, will she inherit the kinetic madness of her winsome and sinister grandmother, whose retreats into delusion lurch from fantastical to murderous as she loses herself in a maze of terror and rage?

The maze is made physical in Dunmartin Hall, family seat of the narrator's father, for which the model was Clandeboye, where Caroline lived as a child. Vehement close-up observation, insistence on reporting that does not flatter, and a preternatural ability to communicate the feel of real cold are elements in Blackwood's description of the house where, as one character remembers, there "always seemed to be a bat trapped in his bedroom," and the cold was such that "he often found it easier to get to sleep lying fully clothed on the floor-boards under a couple of dusty carpets than in his un-aired bed." In these descriptions, Blackwood is Merchant Ivory from hell, ripping into what they would score with a gavotte: a vast, stone manor house, its wings torn down and rebuilt as fortunes wax and wane over centuries; its leaks that prompt the retinue of resentful footmen to wear Wellingtons to serve table; its pheasant reheated daily in rancid lard—

its filth, its wringing wet sheets, its lunatic mistress screaming in the belfry, its bankrupt master thinking only of his poor, dear wife. Dunmartin Manor threatens long after one finishes reading, an objective correlative for inherited personal terrors that roil beneath the comely surfaces of hereditary wealth, landed culture, and empire.

As Blackwood worked on *Great Granny Webster*, her relationship with Lowell fell apart. The vertiginous squalor she ascribes to Dunmartin Manor must have been inspired by the powerlessness she felt in the chaos of their last months, and her limning of the grandmother's insanity suggests a source closer at hand than the nether regions of family myth. Blackwood drank and drank, and Lowell drank with her, his hallucinatory manic episodes exacerbating her anxiety and fear, her tirades frightening, provoking, and finally enervating him. As she infused her novel with the energies of their distress, Lowell sorrowfully chronicled the dolphin's transformation into a mermaid who

weeps white rum undetectable from tears.  
She kills more bottles than the ocean sinks,  
and serves her winded lovers' bones in brine . . .

By the time *Great Granny Webster* was set to be published, Blackwood and Lowell had finally separated. Lowell, diagnosed with congestive heart failure, had decided by the autumn of 1977 to return to New York and to his previous wife, the writer Elizabeth Hardwick. He died in the taxicab that brought him from the airport to her door, a Lucian Freud portrait of Caroline in his arms.

In Freud's portrait, Caroline, hair golden, lies on her side under white sheets, her eyes enormous and ocean blue, a woman languorous and uneasy. But there was little languor in the Caroline Blackwood who emerged from Lowell's death, a woman who, alcoholism undiminished, produced six books

in the eighteen years before her own death from cancer in 1996 at the age of 65. Her final book, *The Last of the Duchess*, is once again the portrait of a woman in thrall. Wallis Simpson's marriage into royalty forced a king's abdication and rocked the British Empire, but once a widow she surrendered her freedom and died under virtual house arrest, her woman jailer the lawyer she herself paid.

The graveyard ending Blackwood devised for *Great Granny Webster* is no less ironic, but its final scene turns on a striking poetic figure. The officiating priest's skin becomes "bright violet blue" with cold as he recites the burial prayers, and Great Granny undergoes a final and unexpected transfiguration. The narrator, survivor and witness, stands musing in the freezing air, the only other mourner her great-grandmother's maid, one eye obscured by a black patch, the other weeping.

—HONOR MOORE