

Handkerchief

MARGARET HASSE

A constellation of small hearts
embroidered on a white linen square
was inside a box with a red bow
and transparent plastic opened
by a girl still eager for white gloves
and the frill of lace on layers
of petticoats that made her bob
like a bottle in the midst of sea froth
as she danced *do-si-do* at the Saddle Club.

No way to know this Valentine gift
from her father would be a handkerchief
that survived despite daubing blood
from a paper cut and wiping mascara
from her wet eyes, would continue
to be used, washed, ironed, even though
Kleenex was easy and cheap.

The girl learned to tuck the hanky
into her sleeve when without a purse,
to bind a baby bird with its shroud,
to cry into it in the company of onions.

She lent it to her mother
at her father's funeral, his ash
in a vase because no one could stand
an open casket with his cold hands still
that were in life rough hands, but the kind
of hands that would have known
how to reach down to the children
with the man's own clean cotton handkerchief
smelling of moth balls and bleach,
and say, as if to a storm of grief, *Now blow.*