

First Book of Alone

Joanne M. Riley

My children are dressed for Sunday.
We walk the polished aisle smelling of old hymnals
To a pew about halfway to the altar.
Light bleeds through color and all the saints
Pity us. Still, I hold up my head,
My ceremony of alone. We kneel.

Prayers start to rain. Readings march out
While only the candles listen.
Then it begins, the slow ache, the humiliation,
As my eyes take them in:
The couples side by side, shoulders touching familiarly,
And the similar children.

I have no husband, no man. I am no-hope-old.
My girls sit on either side, lost in their own yearnings,
My beautiful girls who look
A whisper like me and a lot like no one.
I've no hand to join in blessing them,
No gospel, no creed
And certainly no communion.

Slowly, as always, the tears form.
At first I can stop them with a passing thought or finger.
But then the love is too much: the church-love and
The memory love. I weep and weep

And the younger girl asks: "Mother, why are you crying?"
And louder: "Mother, why..."
The older one leads us out.

Outside, I can breathe. We get in the car
To go home. Like every Sunday, I gain a few prayers,
But still no grace. I envy even Eve.