

the HARLEQUIN

William Woolfitt

George Gudger Asks Walker Evans for a Family Portrait

I so clearly see George's red body, already squat and knotted like oakwood.
– James Agee, 1941

Not here, George tells the picture-man, not the porch
with its lard buckets, broken plow-frame, cans of nails,
could you bring your camera this way

to the house's side, to lilac, snowball bush, day glories,
though beetle-eaten, wilted, hail-bruised, still plenty
of blooms, healthy leaves, *one of us at these bushes*, Annie

and their girl lathered at the basin, now in pattern dresses,
hair ribbons, crescent combs, their boys he lined up,
their faces and arms he scrubbed with lava soap,

a feedsack towel, himself scrubbed and shaved,
one boy in overalls one in sunday shirt and pants one
in his cleanest dress, *too much sun* the picture-man says,

George won't hear it, lifts the youngest onto the bench,
puts his arms around Annie, their girl, hides his palms
from the camera's devouring eye,

fingers that fumble cotton bolls, snag on burrs,
fingers he jammed when he fell on coals as a boy,
now the grown-back skin is smooth, the wrong color,

almost waxy, almost see-through.

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