

MILLER OBERMAN

Who People Are

My mother's people came from France,
from Germany, came from money, came
to New York, to Philadelphia,
went to San Francisco, to Alaska, were
furriers, left us photographs, lithographs,
tintypes of tiny ladies in huge hats,
of bearded gentlemen standing up
straight in Union blue, little girls
in ermine, bear, elk, seal, who sat
in huge chairs with flashing eyes,
who died young. They left us stained
glass windows in synagogues, left
graves off the Jackie Robinson Parkway.

You wanted to be a window washer.
I wanted to ride in horse races
across the desert. We met in the city.
We met in a graveyard. We met
as my father's body was cooling.
Our eyes locked in the yard
as his body was washed and shrouded,
as crockery was shattered, two
blue shards laid over his eyes.

I was nearly a corpse, white-bellied
fish floating down the James.
You were a bear, I was a wolf,
you were a lion, one minute satisfied,
starving the next. I was a mossy place
to kneel on, you were a candle,
you were a singer, I was a river,
I was a soldier, I was a black suit,
you were a black shawl, I was dust
in the sun, you were a window washer.