

WHAT I REMEMBER

—*Old Woman Saying Grace*, Nicolaes Maes (1656)

On a plain tablecloth,
a broken loaf of crusty bread,
ceramic pitcher of water.
Old woman bends over the table.
She bows her head, covered
in simple white cotton cap,
presses gnarled hands together in prayer.
The print hung on the dining room wall
throughout our childhood.

My brother and I missed our parents' point—
a model of gratitude for meeting simple needs.
We giggled, instead, at the wrinkled face,
hooked nose, manly chin of the peasant woman,
waited in anticipation for the kitten,
claws hooked into tablecloth,
to pull pitcher and bread to earthen floor.

Today I revisit.
What I had forgotten—
her meal includes
a wheel of cheese,
plate of fish,
bowl of – perhaps – porridge,
bread not yet broken,
all awaiting *amen*.
Paring knife teeters
on table edge, prepared
to cut to the truth.
A ring of keys dangles from a nail.
In the niche beside her
an open Bible,
upturned funnel,
hourglass with sand spent.
This pious prayer
possesses so little.
Time is running out,
nevertheless, she holds
the keys to the mystery—
a corner of darkness
illuminated
as if from within
the old woman.

—Janet Ruth, published in *The Ocotillo Review* (Summer 2020)