

Exile

Volume 40 | Number 1

Article 37

1993

Marietta

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Recommended Citation

McDonough, Craig (1993) "Marietta," *Exile*: Vol. 40 : No. 1 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol40/iss1/37>

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Marietta

Just as she's not supposed to, Marietta lets go, and the screen door without springs Slamslams behind her. Her feet go clip go clip go clop on the weather-beaten wooden ersatz step, one two three outstretches her arms like tiny wings and leaps, the silver queen silk of her hair flapping, lands with both feet and Puff! Makes a scatter-cloud of August dust and when the dust settles, has all settled down, the sky is watercolor blues and purples and pinks, her mouth squinted into a smile and that voice, those voices, are left inside somewhere. Finally.

Marietta. Who is ten, which is nine plus one, which is five times two, which is half of twenty, and who in thirty-eight days becomes eleven, behind her Coke-bottle glasses looks through the heat that is like opening the oven door when mother bakes corn bread, counts one-two-three willow trees doubled over with laughter, two-four-five sycamores hands folded and waiting, nine red impatiens seven white ones potted in the shade, one iron gate painted black to hide the rust, which has worn a rut into the ground, one snaky-long tangly-bush whose name she hasn't bothered asking, one dirt path, three steps, one farm house with chipped paint, two voices within which have started again like a sputtering motor. And one Marietta.

In the red red dress which she has still still still not grown out of, Marietta takes exactly three and fifty steps slow as a northwesterly thunderstorm to the edge of the cornfield stalks. Taller than fathers. As many as millions and millions. Reaches the dirt road surrounding the field, and with whisk of fingers, picks her poppy-red dress above her knees, kneels to meet the ground, and once again the angry bumble-bee sound in her ear of the two voices inside has been brushed away.

Marietta, with skin the color of peanut shells, a nose she will have to grow into, chin like a dulled paring knife, an underripe husk of a body and kernels of breasts underneath her dress, etches in the dirt with her forefinger a circle which is like a bounced rubber ball, a flattened zero, the two ends meeting like a bud. Unties the string and upends the bag, lets loose foureighttwelvetif teen six teen sun-catching violet ones and indigo ones and jade ones, milky pink and lemon and turquoise and crimson ones. Makes a loose fist, nub of her thumb tucked under the first finger, with the great big crystal ball one resting on top, flicks it with a snap and begins the game.

—Craig McDonough '94