GRANDMOTHER GRACE

I didn't give her a good-bye kiss
as I went off in the bus for the last time,
away from her house in Williamsburg, Iowa,
away from her empty house with Jesus
on all of the walls, with clawfoot tub and sink
with the angular rooms that trapped all my summers.

I remember going there every summer—
every day beginning with that lavender kiss,
that face sprayed and powdered at the upstairs sink,
then mornings of fragile teacups and old times,
aftemoons of spit-moistened hankies and Jesus,
keeping me clean in Williamsburg, Iowa.

Cast off, abandoned, in Williamsburg, Iowa,
I sat in that angular house with summer
dragging me onward, hearing how Jesus
loved Judas despite his last kiss,
how he turned his other cheek time after time,
how God wouldn't let the good person sink.

Months later, at Christmas, my heart would sink
when that flowery letter from Williamsburg, Iowa,
arrived, insistent, always on time,
stiff and perfumed as summer.
She always sealed it with a kiss,
a taped-over dime, and the words of Jesus.

I could have done without the words of Jesus;
the dime was there to make the message sink
in, I thought; and the violet kiss,
quavering and frail, all the way from Williamsburg, Iowa, sealed some agreement we had for the next summer as certain and relentless as time.

I didn’t know this would be the last time. If I had, I might even have prayed to Jesus to let me see her once again next summer. But how could I know she would sink, her feet fat boats of cancer, in Williamsburg, Iowa, alone, forsaken, without my last kiss?

I was ten, Jesus, and the idea of a kiss at that time made my young stomach sink. Let it be summer. Let it be Williamsburg, Iowa.

—Ronald Wallace