

JOÃO DE BRITO

Golden Meadows, 2018

Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

NILS PETERSON

Bless Me

In June, back to the chauffeur's summer cottage,
we'd drive to town, then try Snake Hill, Dad
showing off the new car that could almost make it
in third gear, honking at every curve, as one did.
At the top, we'd turn off onto the road to Helen's house,
passing by the meadow of Bless Me, a mare, dapple-gray,
too old to carry even the smallest child, left now
to crop the tall grasses along the white-railed fence,
or stand in the green tenting of trees still and quiet
as the first afternoon everyone is gone from the house
and you hear, at last, yourself. Helen was the daughter
of the gardener of the richer brother of my father's boss
and the only girl I knew to speak to for the first ten years
of my life. Once we pretended the roof of an old root
cellar
perched in a field was a ship. We sailed her as a steady
summer wind roiled tall grasses about us like the sea,
and we swung beneath a sky burning in a great
blue bowl. The old horse was several meadows
and some fences away, but "Bless Me,"
we called to her, "Bless me," as we sailed by.

I do not know where you are, Helen. Our fathers
are as dead as the rich men who thought they owned
them.

You could not have been more than ten when yours died;
I, a year younger, tried to imagine what it was like
not to have a father. I was shy to speak to you, sure
that somehow such a thing transformed, and you were
someone else. Perhaps I was right. The year mine died,
I got a job, got married, and began my own fathering.
I write you, because as I awoke, I felt my face heavy
against a solid, sweet-smelling flank. Then I was with
you,

aware of your father strolling through paths of flowers,
and of mine, still in third, stuttering up Snake Hill,

And we called out, as we sailed by, "Bless Me."

Nils Peterson is professor emeritus at San Jose State University, where he taught in the English and Humanities Departments. He has published several chapbooks and two collections of poems, *The Comedy of Desire*, edited and introduced by Robert Bly, and *A Walk to the Center of Things*. In 2016, he published *Air Earth Fire Water*, a collection of poems, each illustrated with a watercolor by Lorraine Capparell. A new collection, *All the Marvelous Stuff*, will be published in 2019. In 2009, Peterson was chosen to be the first poet laureate of Santa Clara County.