



S O U T H E R N  
W O M E N ' S  
R E V I E W

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POEMS • STORIES • PHOTOGRAPHY





# SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

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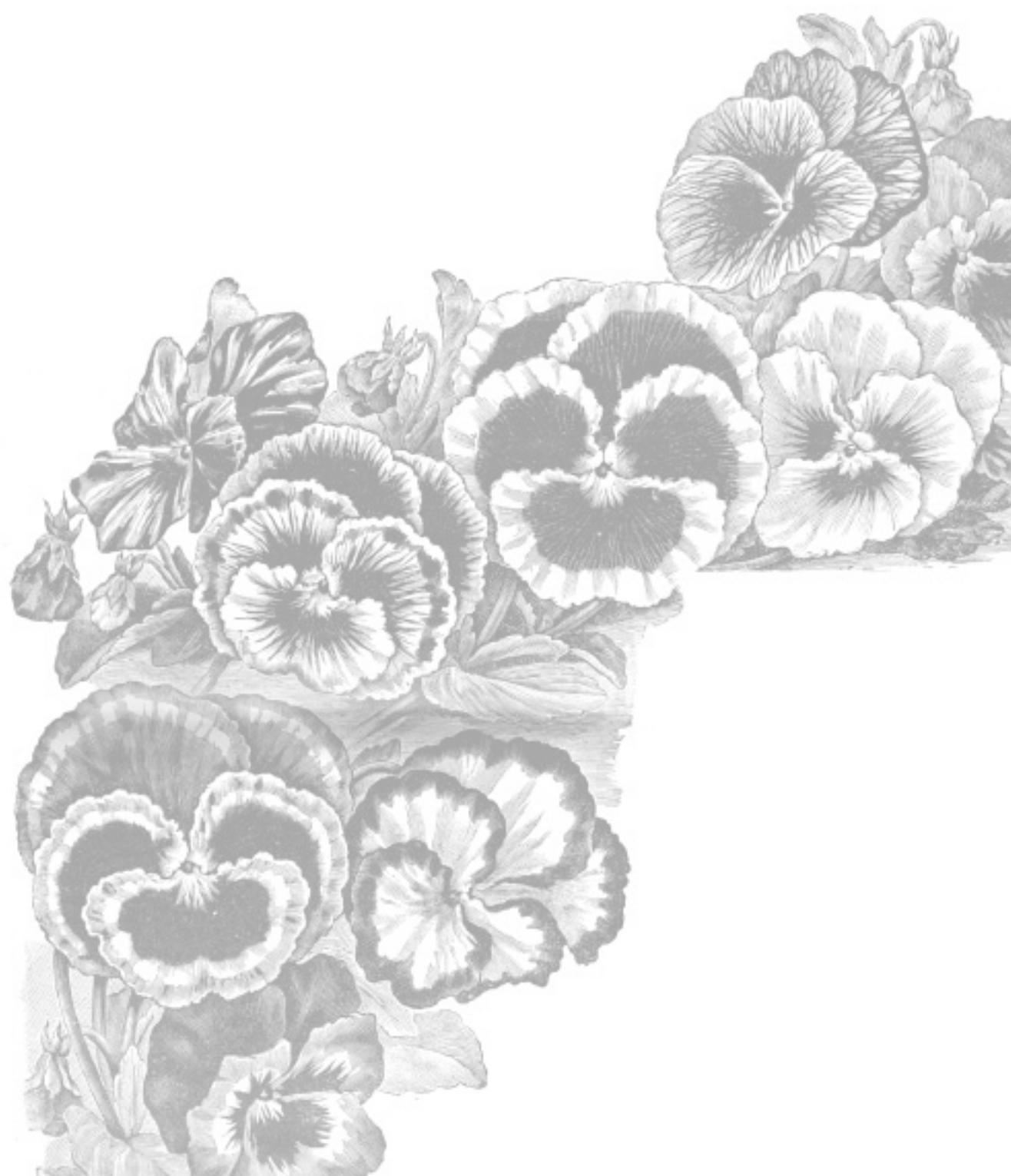
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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**LILLIAN MCCARTER BATARSEH**, retired South Carolina teacher, participated in the Swamp Fox Writing Project and the Advanced Institute at Francis Marion University (Florence, SC) and continued to steep herself in poetry while working as a part-time instructor at FMU. In April she was given third prize for her poem “Apostrophe to Catherine” in the Sidney Lanier Award Poetry Competition, as judged by North Carolina’s Poet Laureate Cathy Smith Bowers.

**JENNY BILLINGS BEAVER** is a native Charlottean, with a MFA in Creative Writing in Poetry from Queens University of Charlotte and a BA in English from Wake Forest University. She lives in Charlotte, NC currently with her husband, Justin, and teaches English at Rowan Cabarrus Community College. Her work has appeared or is to appear in Referential Magazine, Poets for Living Waters, Girls with Insurance, vox poetica, The Dead Mule and Writer’s Advice.

**DM BENNINGFIELD** has recently completed her first poetry chapbook *The Zen of Tea*, is working on her first novel, and is an adjunct composition instructor at Eastern Kentucky University. She currently resides in Lexington, KY.

**SHERRY CHANDLER**’s work has received support from the Kentucky Arts Council and the Kentucky Foundation for Women and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her poems have appeared in many print and online magazines and anthologies, including *Quarrrtsiluni*, *Kestrel*, *Umbrella*, and *Louisville Review*. Her first full-length collection of poems, *Weaving a New Eden*, will be issued by Wind Publications in the spring of 2011.

**LARESSA DICKEY** is a poet, dancer and teacher working with diverse communities to increase access to movement and writing. She holds a MFA in poetry from the University of Minnesota. She grew up on her family’s tobacco farm in rural Tennessee.

**LISA DORDAL** received a Master of Divinity degree from Vanderbilt Divinity School in 2005 and is currently enrolled in Vanderbilt’s Master of Fine Arts program for Creative Writing (in poetry). Her poetry has appeared in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal*, *Poems & Plays*, *Georgetown Review*, *Cave Wall* (forthcoming summer/fall 2011), and the *New World Library* anthology, *Dog Blessings: Poems, Prose, and Prayers Celebrating Our Relationship with Dogs*. She lives in Nashville with her partner, Laurie, and their two retired greyhounds.

**A.M. GARNER** writes on Southern culture at [www.amgarner.blogspot.com](http://www.amgarner.blogspot.com) and [www.amgarner.com](http://www.amgarner.com). She teaches fiction writing at U of N Alabama and is the author of the collection of short fiction, *Undeniable Truths*.

**JOANNA GRANT** currently teaches for the University of Maryland University College as a Collegiate Associate Professor and Wandering Scholar stationed in the Middle East. She has published a critical study, *Modernism’s Middle East: Journeys to Barbary* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and one of her poems was nominated for inclusion in the volume *Best New Poets 2010*. Her creative work has appeared in *Guernica*, *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *The Southern Humanities Review*, *The Southern Women’s Review*, and elsewhere.

**BRIDGETTE E. HAHN** is a transplanted southerner living in the Pacific Northwest among the lavender fields and Olympic mountains. She graduated in 2003 from Central Washington University with a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in the *Aurorean*, *The Orange Room Review*, *Pear Noir!* and others.

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**PAULETTA HANSEL** is the author of two collections of poetry, *Divining*, published in 2002, and *First Person* (Dos Madres Press, 2007). Her third collection, *The Lives We Live in Houses*, will be released by Wind Publications in Fall 2011. Her poems are in publications including *Wind*; *Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*; *Appalachian Journal*; *A Gathering at the Forks*; *Old Wounds, New Words*; *Motif: Come what May* and *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*. Pauletta was born in southeastern Kentucky; she has lived in Cincinnati, OH since 1979. She graduated from Queens University's MFA program in January 2011.

**AUTUMN HAYES** is a freelance writer, creative writing teacher, and poet; her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Black Voices*, the University of Southern California's African-American student literary journal, as well as *Defenestration* and *Cuento*. Born and raised in Houston, Texas, she minored in creative writing at USC and has taught upper-level ELA, drama, and public speaking in the Mississippi Delta. She currently lives and writes in Houston.

**JENNIFER HORNE** is the author of a collection of poems, *Bottle Tree* (2010), the editor of *Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets* (2003), and co-editor, with Wendy Reed, of *All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality* (2006). She received an Alabama State Council on the Arts Literature Fellowship in 2008. She currently teaches in the University of Alabama Honors College. "Business or Pleasure" is part of a collection titled "Land of Opportunity," stories in the voices of Arkansas women.

**WYNNE HUDDLESTON** is a board member of the Mississippi Writers Guild and a member of the Mississippi Poetry Society. Her poetry has been, or will be published in the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *THEMA*, *Raven Chronicles*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Gemini Magazine*, *Enchanted Conversation*, *The Shine Journal*, *From the Porch Swing - memories of our grandparents*, *Waterways*, *The Stray Branch* and others. Her website is <http://wynnehuddleston.wordpress.com/>.

**DEBBIE ANN ICE** Debbie's work has appeared in several online and print journals, such as *Fence* magazine, *Night Train*, *elimae* and *Smokelong Quarterly*. She has completed two novels and is currently seeking representation for both. While she is originally from Savannah, Georgia, she now lives in Connecticut with her family, which includes a husband, two sons and two daughters (her English bulldogs). She writes and reads in the winter because it is too cold to do anything else. She runs outside and praises the sun in the summer.

**LIZ JONES** was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina and attended Duke and High Point Universities. She taught English for many years at St. Genevieve of the Pines, Asheville Country Day, and Newfound School. Her novel *Bright Wings Broken* was published in 1996, and her stories were published in a multitude of journals, including "Experientially Speaking," a winner in the Red Rock Reviews Mark Twain contest. For several years Liz chaired the Blue Ridge Writers Conference in Roanoke, VA.

Liz was the mother of three accomplished sons and adored her three grandchildren. She was married to Larry Jones for 31 years until his sudden death in October of 2008, which precipitated her return to Asheville to be near family and friends. Only a few days after moving back to Asheville from Stowe, Vt., Liz was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in May of 2009. She died September 9th, 2009. Among her many loves were gardening, things of beauty, birds, two cats, one dog, and thousands of books. \*Submitted by Marni Graff.

**JULIE KANE** A native of Boston, she has lived in Louisiana for 34 years now. Her most recent poetry collections are *Jazz Funeral* (Story Line Press, 2009), which was David Mason's choice for the Donald Justice Poetry Prize, and *Rhythm & Booze* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), which was Maxine Kumin's selection for the National Poetry Series and a finalist for the Poets' Prize. She has had poems published in journals including *The Southern Review*, *The*

# CONTRIBUTORS

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Antioch Review, Prairie Schooner, Louisiana Literature, and Feminist Studies, as well as in Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. A former George Bennett Fellow in Writing at Phillips Exeter Academy, New Orleans Writer in Residence at Tulane University, and Fulbright Scholar to Vilnius Pedagogical University, she teaches at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana.

**NANCY KEELING** is a poet, playwright, & multimedia artist. Her art and photography have been featured in: Calyx; Juked; Anderbo; Flutter; Visions; Stirring; Meadowland; Tulane Review; Poetry Salzburg; Whiskey Island Review; Wisconsin Review; Ascent/Aspirations & South Loop.

**ALLISON PARLIAMENT** was born in Orillia Ontario Canada then moved with her parents to the USA in 1999. She is a photographer and writer who has gone southern, there is just something about Southern Comfort that captured her heart. She is a full time Psychology student at Auburn University Montgomery in Montgomery Alabama. Photography started out as a hobby and quickly flourished into a great love. Allison has been previously published in the SWR and is hoping to continue getting her photographs out there. Allison is also one of the full time writers for a new and upcoming website.

**EMILY PHILLIPS** Born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley. Successful transplant to the West Coast. Heart transplant not possible. Lover of words, the outdoors, food, and teaching writing to kids. Sometimes she blogs here: <http://windfallchef.blogspot.com>.

**HELENE PILIBOSIAN's** poetry has appeared in such magazines as The Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, Louisiana Literature, The Hollins Critic, North American Review, Seattle Review, Ellipsis, Weber: The Contemporary West, Poetry Salzburg Review, Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies as well as many anthologies. She has published the books Carvings from an Heirloom: Oral History Poems, the Writer's Digest award-winning At Quarter Past Reality: New and Selected Poems and History's Twists: The Armenians (honorable mention). Her early work has been cited in the Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature. She holds a degree in humanities from Harvard University.

Formerly she was an editor at an Armenian-American newspaper where she wrote editorials, articles, news reports and book reviews. Now she is head of Ohan Press, a private bilingual micropress which has published ten internationally recognized books of both prose and poetry, including her recent memoir My Literary Profile.

Helene says of her poem SEA CEREMONY: I loved Virginia Beach in the early morning when the sun turned the water silver and gold and the dolphins played far off or when I stood between the warm Gulf and the Atlantic in Florida.

**K.M.A. SULLIVAN** grew up wandering the hills and salt marshes of Truro, Cape Cod. She now sits in a brine of her own making in Blacksburg, VA. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in PANK, Pearl, Night Train, Cream City, Potomac Review, and elsewhere. She is the editor of Vinyl Poetry. A few of her thoughts can be found at [www.kmasullivan.com](http://www.kmasullivan.com).

**JENNIFER TAYLOR** is a book critic, editor, and writer based in Atlanta. She is a co-founding editor of damselfly press, an award-winning online literary journal devoted to publishing fiction, poetry, and nonfiction written by women. She is a reader for Tin House Magazine. Jennifer received a MFA in Fiction and Nonfiction from Chatham University.

**AMY SUSAN WILSON** lives and writes in Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma. She observes and writes about the lives of women in rural Central Oklahoma. She has recently published in Westview, The Red Dirt Review, and The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature. She holds an MFA in poetry from Columbia University. When not writing, she is working with several animal rescue groups in the area.

# CONTRIBUTORS





## SOUTHERN COMMUNICATION ADVANCEMENTS

*by Laressa Dickey*

Telegraph. Telephone. Tell-A-Woman. Tommy's joke. Lord, every time I saw him, he was saying this stuff to me. Let's screw around with the little girl. Everybody calls me sweet, sugar, or worse. Nobody teaches me how to stand up for myself. I shut myself in my room and call my friends on the telephone. We talk and talk but don't know why or to what end. Mr. Pardon tells us about Mr. Edison and the telegraph. That's the same day we thought he cussed us out in class, saying in complete exasperation to some kid who needed a definition, *Oh, go look it up in your Funk & Wagnalls!* We thought he was a bad man. Tell a woman, but I'm not a woman, I'm a girl and I don't like Tommy. But nobody tells me I can't like Tommy. And I don't stray far from my dog pen or my collar. If they say, jump.



## HOMICIDE

*by Laressa Dickey*

What we store inside: old weightlifting equipment, rusted tools on nails in the sitting room. Two tombstones from Charlotte Ann and William Ray's graves. Early logs date from 1831, but who built this house? Once the doctor disjoints the oldest logs, once the house is gutted in this way. What we call it: homicide.

In the kitchen, the paint peels in strips like tall grass. This is what we will forget: the births of this house, my grandmother's collection of small porcelain shoes, aunts and uncles, 7 dogs, 21 cats, various chickens, feeder pigs, four horses: Old Cole among them.

The house will suck in, fall apart. Remember the rosy wallpaper. Keep in mind the winding steps to the secret room. That tub of lard. Under the sink, newspapers from 1903. The old TV in the far corner. Remember the crooked man peering over his horn-rimmed glasses and puffing a pipe: my grandfather. See the smoke rise up and circle his head?



## MEN WHO LOVE REDHEADS

*by Julie Kane*

You can pick one out in a crowd  
by the way he jerks his head  
when an Irish setter passes,  
drawn to that shade of red;  
or the pickup line he utters  
even to Raggedy Ann:  
“If all your freckles merged,  
do you know you’d have a tan?”

There are times you miss the clues  
till you wake up after sex  
to behold the nightstand photo  
of his red-haired kids and ex;  
then you know, for all of your charms,  
he was only caught in the pull  
of that least-known force of physics,  
as a red flag draws a bull.

Some obsessives like girls plump  
or without a limb or two,  
but the men hung up on redheads  
are the men who prey on you.  
Compared to men as a whole,  
their numbers are very small,  
yet without their kind in the world  
you might never get laid at all.



## BIRCH THOUGHTS IN LOUISIANA

by Julie Kane

*When I see birches bend to left and right,*  
shedding their bark in black and silver rings,  
I think of martyrs being skinned alive.

Saint Bartholomew comes to mind,  
holding, grim Santa, his sack of skin.  
*When I see birches bend to left and right,*

someone in the family must have died  
to get me on a plane up North again,  
happy as a martyr skinned alive.

Here's the secret to a happy life:  
Go where what's outside you fits what's in.  
*When I see birches bend to left and right,*

silhouetted in December light,  
bent over double, deathly thin,  
I think of martyrs being skinned alive.

Winter, I think, is a long, dark night  
of the soul, and snow is the wages of sin.  
*When I see birches bend to left and right,*  
I can't believe I made it out alive.



## Granddaughter of Make-do

*by Wynne Huddleston*

I am the sturdy granddaughter of brush brooms,  
apron strings, caramel icing, well water, fresh cow's  
milk, green pastures, cornfields and pea patches,  
red dirt roads, peaches—right off the tree,  
hard childbirthing at home, Bibles, hell-fire  
preaching, hugs and kisses, soft peppermint  
from the peddler's wagon, squealing pigs,  
squawking chickens, pallets with cousins  
on the floor, front porch swings with guitars,  
fiddles and singing, swept yards, make-do  
attitudes, country stores, letters to politicians,  
hard work for little pay, feet soaked  
in a porcelain bowl, homemade clothes,  
European immigrants, bare feet, fireplaces,  
no air conditioning, outhouses, checkers,  
snuff, and wishes blown away on a dandelion.



## My mother's closet

*by K.M.A. Sullivan*

Bed pads, adult diapers, a painted jewelry box purchased as a Christmas gift for my daughter three years ago pull me back to mornings filled with my mother's bed pans, valium suppositories, and tangled oxygen tubes. For the YMCA, I bag up her polyester scarves, a beige purse with gold buckles, L.L. Bean duck boots, an Evan Picone blouse, a pleated tennis skirt. Into the trash, I throw cotton underwear, collapsed walking shoes, nightgowns slit up the back, a drawer full of socks. I keep the travel clock, travel purse, travel umbrella, passport case, and an embroidered vest my father wants me to have because he loved how my mother looked in it. An art historian for three decades, she brought me to Rome and let me discover the Ecstasy of St. Teresa for myself. For a two-hundred lire coin and the push of a button an electric candle burns. I keep colorful silk scarves and her plush ruby bathrobe my children will turn into a queen's coronation gown or the smoking jacket of an eccentric film director. But what do I do with the velveteen purse I'd forgotten I'd made for my mother when I was twelve? It was high up on a shelf, sealed in plastic so that its pink rosettes and black satin cord and beige Velcro might be preserved. Whose treasure is it now?



## Speech Before Gathering The Pitchforks

### (Something Ain't Right II)

*by Autumn Hayes*

Walnuts fall from her pockets when she walks,  
shelled and toasted, from the dryer  
with her socks,  
scattering themselves on linoleum floors,  
to gnarl their roots and spring up acorns,  
and, see,  
there's something not right  
'bout a woman like that.

A woman like that  
should be a witch,  
her presence accompanied only  
by mutterings and cats,  
nutshell clutterings, soft hats;  
we've got barefoot rambles through riverbanks of brambles  
for her kind.

But somehow, her hardiness,  
the tang of wood to her skin,  
her scent of rusted Cadillacs and leaves,  
lures men in,  
finds them crushing walnut hulls underfoot  
to her den,  
and, see,  
there's something not right  
about creeping in the night,  
knocking, waiting, wheedling,  
for some woman  
like that.



## That Winter, Fifteen

*by Pauletta Hansel*

I ate mostly oranges.  
First my teeth  
would tear  
through rind—pith,

bitter chalk  
on tongue—careful  
not to break too soon  
the inside. Fingers

peeled away  
the rest. I'd pull  
apart the segments,  
each to be its own

small meal, then bite  
through fragile  
membrane; pulp  
and juice released.

By spring my flesh  
lay light  
against my  
bones.

That was the winter  
I let him tear me open.  
I would have told you then  
the choice was mine.



## Wedding

*by Lisa Dordal*

As if the past were present completely  
in the laden air of that June day, molded  
by the unyielding stone walls of the sanctuary,

I walked, as my mother had taught me,  
down the aisle, my body  
pressed into taut, pallid lace. Her own.

Even the tightly folded note my mother  
slipped to my bridesmaid to tell her  
she was holding her flowers wrong,

was a summons from the past  
to get things right. And the look  
I gave my Maid of Honor, straight

into her eyes during the spoken vows,  
was a calling forth, a calling out.  
*You don't have to do this*, followed by:

*But you do*; all of us – grandmother,  
mother, daughter – there in that moment  
of keeping and quiet, quiet breaking.

And the Gospel – slinked in by the preacher –  
an appeal to rightnesses of the past, above  
the muted aching of our female bodies.

As I said “I do” with almost every cell  
and, in the process, began to die  
the long and tight-lipped death of my mother,

who taught me how.



## Susannah Boone Speaks of Fidelity, 1775

*Trot father, trot mother, how could you expect a pacing colt?*

—attributed, Daniel Boone to his son-in-law, Will Hayes

*by Sherry Chandler*

Why is it that I should not trot?

If Will Hayes cannot keep the pace

I see no need to take the bit.

Why is it that I should not trot,

kick the traces, buck and strut?

A filly sometimes leads the race.

Why is it that I should not trot

if Will Hayes cannot keep the pace?



## When Crows Fly

by *Debbie Ann Ice*

My neighbor, Mr. Bailey, tried to kill crows and fish--the former out of anger, the latter out of love. Everyone would much rather Mr. Bailey kill fish than crows, because fishing rods couldn't do damage beyond the fish. When Mr. Bailey brought out his gun, we all got a little nervous. Not because of the gun. Everyone on our island had guns; a few, like my daddy, even killed crows on occasion, which made Mr. Bailey mad. It made Mr. Bailey mad because as often as he shot at crows he never hit one. The reason Mr. Bailey never hit a crow was what made us nervous. Mr. Bailey liked to participate in his two favorite pastimes--trying to kill crows and fish--after he had consumed about a pint of Jack Daniels.

Mr. Bailey lived behind a fence my Mama referred to as The Great Wall of Marsh Island. This Great Wall hid important information--like where Mr. Bailey aimed his gun. We heard gun blasts and slurred cussing, but we had no idea where he was standing or what direction the barrel was pointed.

Mama had a strict rule. It didn't matter where I was, if I heard gun shots, I had to hit the deck. "And, Mary Louise, that means flat on your belly, not just sitting down. You understand?"

"Patsy, he's aiming that gun in the sky. Those bullets aren't gonna hit anyone on the ground," Daddy said.

"I don't care. We don't know what that crazy man's doing. It's best to stay on the ground till the shooting stops. And after five o'clock, you stay in this house." Mama pinched her lips together for emphasis.

Mr. Bailey didn't start shooting till cocktail hour. But on weekends, there was no telling when Mr. Bailey would grab his gun. I loved to mud walk, and there were more than a few occasions when I wandered home, looking like a black person from the front and a white person from the back. Mama never got upset. She'd just motion to the out-door showers and whisper, "Look like you hit the deck real nice, Mary Louise, real nice."

Everyone tried to stop the war on birds but it was useless. When neighbors paid Mr. Bailey a visit to discuss his shotgun activity, he'd throw a fit, sometimes while holding the gun in his hand. Mama even got her preacher to come say a few words, although none of us thought Mr. Bailey particularly cared about what the Lord thought, given the only time he said God was as the first syllable of the adjective goddamn. My daddy even went over there and threatened to call the police, which seemed to frighten him and stop the drinking and gun shots for a few days. But everyone knew my daddy would never call the police on a neighbor, which made the threat powerless.

We thought that Mr. Bailey had moved on to a better life when we saw the big boat tied to his floating dock cleats. It simply appeared one day. It was about twenty feet long, with a fat middle and sunken stern. Long poles, rusty cables dangling from their ends, stuck out from the back rail, like antennas of a cockroach. Paint--a dirty, mucous yellow--was peeling off several places, and the cabin windows were cracked and broken. Since Mr. Bailey's floating dock was small, it looked tied to the boat.

Mr. Bailey seemed like a new person. He didn't have to putt-putt down the creek in his tiny Bateau to fish anymore. He could now fish in the inter-coastal waterway, even wander out to the ocean if he wanted to. That boat went up and down the creek several times before Mr. Bailey moved on to deeper waters. He wanted to make sure that all four families that lived on our island were aware of his possession. We were. My friends noticed, too. The marsh hens looked up. The fish jumped in the large boat's wake. Oysters seemed to stop spitting when it chugged by. And the crows surely noticed. I saw the crows study that boat.

Unfortunately, Mr. Bailey liked to drink Jack Daniels before he drove his boat. I supposed he figured that the fishing started as soon as he stepped into the boat, thus the Jack Daniels. There were several near misses as Mr. Bailey's boat weaved up and down the creek.

So Mama had a second rule. When Mr. Bailey was driving his boat I had to get off the floating dock.



Mr. Bailey was beginning to truly interrupt my day.

Mr. Bailey started to take a certain pride in the appearance of his world. He repaired the walkway to the dock. He busied himself working on the exterior of the boat. Every weekend, Mr. Bailey was on that boat or dock doing something. He sanded the entire boat and then painted it bright white with red trim. The clutter in the boat and on the dock disappeared. He even worked on the engine and managed to tone down its loud chug to a more acceptable glub.

I enjoyed watching Mr. Bailey change right before my eyes. Of course when the engine started, I moved to the upper dock and watched the bright white boat weave down the creek. He actually waved and talked to me on a few occasions.

“Hey Mary Louise. How you doing today, my lady?” It sounded like  
heymarylouse, howyadointodaymalady?

“Fine Mr. Bailey. That’s a very nice boat.” I lied a bit. It was OK, but not great. I was a little scared of Mr. Bailey.

“Mary Louise, do you have any friends out here? I see you by yourself too much.”

“Yes sir. I do have friends but I like to sit on the dock by myself sometimes.” I didn’t tell him about the hens, fish, porpoise and crows. I would never mention the crows.

“Well come on a ride with me. I’ll take you fishing. You like to fish?”

Mama didn’t have a rule about that, but I guessed that if she knew he’d ask, there would be a rule.

“No sir. I have to catch some crabs for dinner.”

It was late Monday afternoon, just after cocktail hour, when it happened. Daddy was on a construction job and Mama and the rest of the neighborhood were at some church function. It was one of those days when the afternoon met the evening in color. The only sounds were the murmur of the creek, whisper of marsh grass and trickle of distant water breaking for a fish. Out beyond the waving marsh, a large freight ship slipped over the glimmering inter-coastal waterway. The tide was low and all the ramps fell down to the docks. Mr. Bailey’s floating dock looked particularly funny sitting on that mud with the boat’s hull looming several feet above it’s edge.

Most folks ran for the air conditioners when the water went away. The low tide held the humidity and tossed it over everyone like a wet blanket. But under that water was cool, soft mud that surfaced and beckoned my feet. No air conditioner cooled as lusciously as mud that carried life deep below its surface. Even though it was cocktail hour, I broke Mama’s rule and went out to enjoy a mud walk. When the tide went down, the porpoises sometimes left the Atlantic Ocean and swam up my creek to play in the mud, eat stranded fish, and pay me a visit. I wanted be there in case they stopped and played a while.

I started my walk to the water’s edge, my feet sinking deep into fiddler territory. I enjoyed the tickle of life under all that darkness. The mud was soft and slurpy, which slowed my journey, but I managed to yank my feet up and slap them down at a nice pace, at least until I sank to my knees. Once you sink to your knees, you are in for quite a mud-sucking experience--a dirty but refreshing exercise on hot days. I paused a moment to gather strength.

And then I noticed the crows.

One crow flew over to Mr. Bailey’s boat and sat on the bow. About half a dozen perched upon his dock roof; one by one, they headed for the boat. After a while, the boat was filled with those black birds, their heads jerking back and forth like they were planning something. I sensed they were up to no good. I hadn’t heard Mr. Bailey yet and hoped he was working late. Perhaps the birds would fly to the garden, get their fill and leave. But I just had this bad feeling about that moment. I was only about ten yards from our floating dock, which wasn’t really floating anymore, just sitting on that mud like some big block smashed in black Play-Doh. I decided if I was going to hit the deck I sure would rather hit wood than mud. I made it out to the dock and pulled myself up just in time. When the first crack hit the air, I was glad I left that mud.

I watched the scene as I lay on the dock. Not one crow flew to the garden. They stayed, all of them, on the boat. The shots sounded closer and closer, then stopped. Mr. Bailey appeared on his walkway, cradling his gun, shouting at the crows. His voice



was a mess, his words all muddled and smashed together. I was kicking myself for not following mamma's rule.

"Get off ma boat ya goddamn pees of shit!" Mr. Bailey moved the rifle to his left hand and waved at the birds with his right hand. The crows didn't move. Mr. Bailey's gun looked different today; it had two barrels, just like Daddy's shotgun. He pointed it up at a crow that was sitting on the top of the cabin. The boom caused a flutter, and bullets ricocheted off the far piling. One crow flew off the upper dock and joined his friends on the boat.

"I'm gona kill evey goddman one of ya!"

Mr. Bailey stumbled a bit as he walked to the upper dock. Another crow landed on the floating dock. Another loud crack. Bullets splattered the mud, sprinkled the water. The crow flew up then back down to the boat. Another shot. The birds fluttered and flew away. Mr. Bailey broke open his gun and put in more shells as he turned and walked back down his walkway. When he was only a few feet down the walkway, a crow dropped from the sky and landed upon the boat's side rail. Mr. Bailey swiveled around, ran back, stumbled down that ramp, wobbling and tripping so much I was sure he would be in that mud. He reached the boat and pointed the gun at the crow, but when it went off, the bar-rel dropped and the buckshot didn't go anywhere near the bird. The crack of wood sounded just like the time the wind snapped our old pine out front.

The next morning the high tide lifted up all the boats, but it left Mr. Bailey's fishing boat behind.

We still heard Mr. Bailey shooting the crows, but not as often. He became a quiet presence on his dock, and when he did cuss, it didn't sound the same. I was a little concerned about Mr. Bailey. I liked being able to stay on the floating dock but missed his rides up and down our creek. I had enjoyed the battles--the thrill of fire, the feel of the mud or warm wood on my belly when I hit the deck. And I missed my crows; they mostly stayed away from Mr. Baily now, once again staring at us from their distant pilings. The boat looked as sad as I imagined Mr. Bailey felt. It was almost completely underwater at high tide, and since it's ropes were still tied to the floating dock cleats, the rest of the dock was pulled underwater, too. When the water went back to the ocean, the mud pushed the boat up, exposing its dirty cracked wood that now attracted barnacles and seaweed.

There was all kinds of speculation as to what happened to Bailey's boat. Lindsay Hopkins said lightening hit it. Daddy wondered if something fell from the upper dock, maybe an anchor. Rick Whalen, who lived on the other side of Mr. Baily, said a speed-boat mostly likely came through and rammed it. Most people thought that sounded reasonable and so that explanation stuck. No one asked me so I didn't say anything. I had no business being on that floating dock at cocktail hour.

"I know he's crazy," Daddy said to Mama at dinner. "But it pains me to see a man's boat sink like that."

Mama shook her head. "Maybe now he'll put that whiskey away and stop saying the Lord's name in vain." Mama thought God sunk the boat. She always thought terrible things happened to people who said goddamn. She told me once that God sent those crows to annoy Mr. Bailey. I didn't think those crows came from heaven. They didn't look like angels to me.

It was a particularly hot afternoon when Mr. Bailey came out and sat like a statue on his upper dock. His head kind of drooped and every so often he would rub his face and then clasp his hands behind his head and stare out beyond the marsh grass. I had finished setting up my crab traps and was taking a swim before getting down to the real business of catching crabs. I had never seen Mr. Bailey sit still like that. He was always either working, cussing or shooting. He didn't look big anymore, but kind of small from where I was, like his whole body was pulled down with that boat. I swam real slow and cautious just in case he yelled or something. Once I reached his dock, I looked up at him and our eyes met.

"You can swim by here. I'm not gonna bite you," Mr. Bailey said. He didn't smile or frown, but kind of looked at me like he didn't really want to talk.

"Can I take a look at your boat?" I don't know why I asked that.

"I don't have no boat anymore Mary Louise. Not anymore." He looked over at the half-sunk vessel that was starting to pull the floating dock under with it.



I took that for a yes and climbed up on the dock. It was a few hours before high tide so the boat was not completely underwater. I balanced myself on the lopsided floating dock and stared at the soggy boat, wondering what it would take to patch that hole. Mr. Bailey didn't say anything. I had never been on Mr. Bailey's dock and never imagined I would get this close to him. I didn't know what to say so I kept quiet.

"So bet you got a kick out of ole Bailey shooting his own boat," Mr. Bailey said like he didn't care, but I figured he cared.

"Are you going to fix it up Mr. Bailey?"

"Now how am I going to do that, my lady? I'm a joke, Mary Louise. Always will be a joke. I didn't much like that boat anyway." He let that sit a while, waiting for me to agree, but I didn't say anything. "Bet the whole neighborhood got a laugh out of Bailey shooting his boat, right, Mary Louise?"

"What makes you think everybody figured you shot that boat, Mr. Bailey? I heard tell it was a motor boat got out of control and rammed your boat into the floating dock. That's what everyone else says. Isn't that what happened, Mr. Bailey?" I looked straight into Mr. Bailey's eyes, waiting for the smile.

My uncle owned a crane. He did work for construction sites in the city. Mama didn't want Daddy to call him, but she didn't pinch her lips. She told Daddy that if his brother brought the crane out and the neighborhood helped fix that boat, she wanted Mr. Bailey to promise not to say the Lord's name in vain anymore. Daddy said he would talk to him. I kind of wanted Mr. Bailey to stop the shooting, too, but I supposed the most important thing was to stop offending God.

All the neighbors who lived on the creek, and a few who lived inland, came out to help Mr. Bailey. Mama and some of her friends made lunch for all the men who worked on the boat every weekend. It took several weekends to get the boat floating again. It was a sight to see--big straps around the bow and the stern, the boat completely out of the water, its hull looming over all of us. It looked helpless and weak with its undersides sagging. It didn't look like it was worth saving to me.

Everybody seemed to know what to do. The wood was repaired and the outside was sanded again. When they started painting, I talked Daddy into letting me help, which made me feel like Tom Sawyer, up there with a fat paintbrush in my hands, all my envious friends peeking at me--the crows gathered on pilings, the marsh hens tipped toeing around clumps of mud and grass, a few porpoises slipping by.

When the boat was put back in the water, we all celebrated with a crab boil. I took my Bateau out to my secret crab creek and captured three dozen crabs. It was my best catch of the summer. Mama made potato salad and Lindsay Hopkins brought her special cole slaw. Mr. Bailey actually laughed with the other men at the party like he was a part of things. I didn't hear one cuss word.

Weeks passed and Mr. Bailey seemed to be a proud man again, chugging up and down the creek in his boat, not weaving once. I didn't have to move to the upper dock when he started that engine, and he even stopped by my dock once to show me his new fishing rod. He seemed to glow when he held it in his hands.

Mama thought Mr. Bailey was a new man because the Lord had finally found him. Mama always thought the Lord was up there trying to find all of us. It was just a matter of time before he plucked us up. Daddy didn't think God cared. He just thought Mr. Bailey decided to change his life around. "Sometimes an accident changes you, Mary Louise. It just takes a boat ramming you one day to wake you up."

I kind of knew things wouldn't change that easily. No matter what, I could always expect to see that marsh hen peek out at about the same time every day. And the crows never stopped sitting out there on those pilings. And as much as I wanted the porpoises to stop and notice me, they always kept moving upstream. So when the crows flew by me one afternoon and that shot cracked the air, I hit the deck and hoped that the Lord was closing his ears.



## Fetish

by Amy Susan Wilson

It should have been a big clue that Jake had real deal problems when I saw that his house was loaded up with pistols 'n too much toilet paper. You look in the kitchen cabinet for Campbell's Bean with Bacon or toothpicks 'n all you see are those little white rolls of Charmin. Try the screen behind the fireplace in the den; loaded up with clean dependable one ply, 24 packs. Stupidly, I let all of this go. I let it go that he had five 24 packs of Charmin Double Rolls at the foot of his bed, red 'n brown bears dancin' on each package as if in some type of religious ecstasy state, or just really glad to have their butts cleaned out with something other than twigs 'n pine cones from the forest. I let all of this go. No red flag, not even a speck of red. TP even piled so high in the master bath shower you can't use it and just one person, him, livin' in that house.

Now the guns I understood. After all, Jake teaches Gun Safety Protection at our Shawnee Gordon Cooper Vo-Tech on I-40. And he is half owner of Jake 'n Pete's Family Shootin' Range just outside Shawnee.

"These rifles 'n pistols 'n such, are they loaded?" I asked the first time to his house.

"Just the ones I keep locked up in cases. Alla the guns in cases are kept in the hall closet or under my bed," Jake assured. His hands were thick as plywood and manly. Rough fingertips, calloused even, as if he'd driven spikes into the railroad in the nineteenth century. I couldn't wait to feel his hands—intertwine my fingers with his digits.

Jake didn't drink, so the guns seemed a-okay. 'N Jake could hold a conversation. He was a retired Oklahoma Highway Patrolman 'n owned a home. He did not have a picture of John Wayne hangin' over the fireplace in the den and yes, Jake is twice divorced but who isn't these days? He was kind to his cocker spaniel, Boomer, maybe even fed him too much Snausage cuz he loved that dog so much.

"Boomer came to me one day. He was limpin' in the middle of Dill Street on the north side of the house so I put him in the truck, said, 'C'mon buddy, you're livin' with me.' Goin' on nine years now," Jake said, first date, pickin' up his cell phone he forgot, Boomer lickin' his hand.

What is really shallow of me, but what really fooled me 'n sucked me in is that Jake looked normal, even handsome. He did not look like a toilet paper hoarder 'n sexual freak, oh no. He worked out every morning five to six a.m. at St. Gregory's gym, which is where I met him. For a fifty-six year old man, he had a physique of a buff forty-five year old. He had short black hair with grey short sideburns, black eyes, 'n he wore an OU t-shirt or OKC Thunder t-shirt with sleeves to work out in with Nike shorts, knee length. No tattoos or pinkie rings or gold chains or goatee or gray armpit hair hangin' out of an orange tank top. There were jus' no signs of aberration.

Because he seemed so normal at first, I went out with him for a little over a month, the life cycle of a junior high romance, 'n this is okay when in eighth grade. But, at fifty, 'n divorced five years this August, I would like to have a bit more long term relationship. I don't care about roses 'n candy, but just some little bit of long-term normalcy would be nice. On the other hand, I count my blessings it only lasted five weeks.

"That's why you didn't notice the clues. I mean, he's a closet toilet paper hoarder, but he knew how to hide what he was hoarding," my best friend Patsy offers. "Then the sexual fetish freak thing crept up on ya outta the blue. Nothing led up to letting you know it was gonna happen, and really, no woman would've noticed the signs--not even Marg from CSI," Patsy says.

We are loungin' in my new Lowe's chairs on my backyard deck at dusk drinkin' a lil'ole Peach Zin and watchin' tweens walk down Emmet Street while textin'. One tween wears a grey knit ski hat in the dead of July and carries a boom box, a real retro deal these days with the kids. My pots of petunias are bloomin' their heads off 'n if I buy one more gnome, gazin' ball or birdbath, my lawn will get major-gaudy.

"Did you know Jake even had cases of toilet paper stashed in his little blue Ford Escort he parks up in his yard? You'd open the door, any of the doors, 'n rolls just cascaded out like boulders tumblin' down a foothill at Lake Arbuckle. He didn't have any TP in his Ford Escape, but that Escort was loaded like Fort Knox or the Charmin factory. TP in the laundry room, cases in



that garage, even toilet paper stacked at the foot of his California King waterbed," I whine to Patsy.

"How did that make you feel?" she asks, as if Dr. Phil himself.

I've known Patsy twenty-two years. We've taught at Shawnee Middle School together for that long 'n she just lost her husband in a car wreck a year ago then turned fifty-one alone last month, so I don't tell her she sounds annoyin', imitatin' the TV psychologist. She wants to get a master's in Counselin' at East Central University and become a Bereavement Therapist by the time she hits fifty-three.

"I am just so embarrassed," I tell her. "There I was datin' a hoarder of recycled 'n not recycled TP with a clear foreplay fetish to boot involvin' toilet paper 'n I'm instead thinkin' he's Andy Griffith straight from Mayberry. I mean, here I am, a certified middle school librarian in the Shawnee School District, a 1998 Teacher of the Year nominee with two master's degrees from East Central University over in Ada. Lord 'n Cain's Coffee, how did I get into the sack with him all naked 'n get myself in the position of almost lettin' him wrap me up head to toe like a mummy with TP?" I ask Patsy.

I tell Patsy as I pour more Peach Zin, "I am usually a capable person. Did I ever tell ya' that I once steered a Cessna in rain while my X, Randy, used his asmatha inhaler? I do my own taxes without error even though I am a language arts person not a math person. My People-Detector is not really broken, it works well, usually, but not this time," I sigh. I look down at my feet housed in my blue flip flops; red polish chipped off my left big toe.

Patsy is silent and touches my hand with an empathic therapy gesture, a technique she has no doubt learned in one of her ECU graduate counseling courses. The fireflies dart through the dark humid air avoidin' the tiki torches and bug zapper I won out at Atwood's. The moths drawin' into the light, into the machine, sound like radio static.

"Remember when I spotted that shoplifter at Drug Warehouse and the security guard apprehended the Junior Service League looking thirty-something gal who stole Aveeno 'n V-8? I spot weirdoes usually from a mile away," I insist.

"Well, ya know Michelle Weaver six years ago from our Ladies Hand Bell group at church?" Patsy asks. "She was really smart. A Pott County Mensa member. But remember that new guy Peter from her Sunday School class who said he'd moved here from Dallas to get back to small town livin' and lower property taxes? He took her for steak at San Romeo's then asked her for \$5,000 to invest in his prosthetic limb company. She gave him \$3,000 then he left town as fast as he came to town. Flim Flam. At least ya didn't get hooked into someone like him," Patsy offers. "Michelle moved to Phoenix to be near her grown son."

I stare at my neighbor's clothesline that they really use, 'n stare at my giant back yard magnolia tree. "But I don't remember her," I answer. "Or was she the one with red hair who was a speech therapist at Unity Hospital?"

Patsy slaps a mosquito off her ankle then we switch from the Zin to Diet Cherry Dr. Pepper that we drink outta coffee mugs. Hers is the John Wayne cup and mine is the Starsky guy from Starsky and Hutch. At 9:00 I have the yawns and am almost ready to hit the hay.

"So tell me one more time. When he got you all naked in bed he tried to wrap you in toilet paper like you were a mummy?" Patsy giggles.

I have been explaining this to her all day long. First on the phone. Then she came over 'n I told her in my den mid-morning then at lunch again today at Cracker Barrel and now, this evening.

"Yeah, he did. I can't make it anymore clear. I was flint skin naked; he wasn't drinking I wasn't drinkin' and he says, while I'm sloshin' around on his waterbed, 'Hey, honey, stand up. Lemme put somethin' on you,'" Jake whispered.

Her eyes bug out like pug eyes, as if she's never heard it before.

"I thought he was gonna put baby oil or lotion on my thighs 'n neck. But he 's standin' there all naked holdin' a toilet paper roll, the big double size kind and he wraps my neck in the TP!" I exclaim.

"That's just plain nuts. Does he have a mental health history? I mean not depression but hard core insane stuff in his background?" Patsy blurts out.

Patsy has been takin' Abnormal Psychology and Psychology of Middle Aging courses over at East Central University on talk-back TV at our Tri-County Gordon Cooper Vo-tech this summer. She is a third grade teacher 'n unofficial counselor.



“So he just wanted to wrap you up like a mummy with that toilet paper?” she giggles.

“‘Hold out your arms like a scarecrow,” he said. “I’m gonna make ya my mummy-gal’,” Jake whispered. “Then he started breathin’ real hard, like a spray-paint huffer or Blue Heeler that has been herdin’ sheep too hard on a hot summer day.”

Oh gosh, his bedroom was so normal looking. The walls were painted beige and there was a big picture of ducks flyin’ over cattails placed above an oak headboard. The carpet was beige and vacuumed ‘n the room smelled of neutral Febreeze room deodorizer. The curtains were beige, the bedspread pine green. Then Boomer nappin’ on his brown pet bed next to that glider rocker.

Somehow, in the almost dark of the bedroom, that one pine green candle flickerin’ on top of that nightstand, I ripped that toilet paper ring off my neck and found my shorts ‘n tank top and purse which I had thrown on that glider rocker in the corner of the normal looking bedroom by the normal looking dresser .

“Got a yeast infection! It burns too!” I blurted. “Lotsa pus squirtin’ out!”

I said that standing there butt naked holdin’ my pink bra with butterflies sewn to each cup.

“Huh?” he said, and made a face like he ‘d just swallowed a horse pill that didn’t want to go down.

“So, call me when it’s over? A few days from now?” he asked, the green candle still blazin’ a tiny stream of light.

“Will do Mister,” I said as I hauled ass into my undies ‘n shorts ‘n blue tank top.

It was only 9:30 p.m. I had never really thought about it before, but I thought strange sex acts took place in the dead of night—not when the normal were eatin’ spaghetti while watchin’ a Netflix movie or playin’ a little late night ping pong in the garage. I said the pus thing cuz I once read to say ya gotta pee or somethin’ gross to detract a rapist, even though he wasn’t rapin’ me.

Jake put on his shorts and walked me out to my little Grand Am parked by the curb in front of his house like a perfect gentleman. He opened my car door for me ‘n pecked my cheek as I sprang into the driver’s seat. Then he said, “if not you tonight then another, Sister.

A shiver slithered like a black snake all the way down my spine.

“You just never can tell, can you?” Patsy says, eyein’ the gnome by my birdbath who carries a lantern that glows in the dark, solar-powered.

“Do you think he was one of those officers who played with women’s vunerability when givin’ tickets? Ya know, sexually groped them if they looked illegal Mexican or too poor to pay a speedin’ ticket?” Patsy asks.

By now it is totally dark outside and people drivin’ by Jake’s house over on Dill Street right now have no idea that he is a toilet paper sex freak, nor can they see all the rolls piled in that little blue Escort parked up in his yard.

“Have you thought of getting some counselin’? I mean you might feel better since it appears you now doubt yourself about men and suffer some self-esteem issues,” Patsy offers, practicin’ her therapist of the future voice.

“Oh Lord. I just made a mistake any divorced woman could’ve made and I will forgive myself for bein’ an idiot. And ya know, I’m lucky. With all those guns, who knows what he could’ve done to me. Now I gotta go tinkle,” I say in my almost pissed off tone though I’m tryin’ not to be mad at myself any longer.

I remember thinkin’ I would never get over a divorce after twenty-four years of marriage, but I did. I’ll battle this too. Randy found someone on the Internet. A LPN nurse from the Philippines in her late twenties. There he was fifty-nine, lookin’ like Grandpa Walton with Asian Mary Ellen. In my Divorce Care Workshop over at First Christian, two other people were left for Internet mates. ‘N this is just in lil’ ole’ Shawnee, America. Stoppin’ for milk at Braum’s one day after work, I told myself, “Sister, you’re not the only one to get left, you’re not so unique.” Two years later and I really am okay about it. I tell myself now, “Lookit, you’re not the only woman to encounter some strange guy durin’ the AARP era, jus’ let this go.”

“Sorry to be so self-obsessed today,” I apologize to Patsy as I slap a mosquito off my ankle.



“Hey I would’ve thought the guy was normal too. Especially since he’s in Lions Club ‘n heads up the lobster fundraiser for autism each July,” Patsy offers. “And think how weird he could’ve become if you hadn’t gotten outta there! You’re lucky he didn’t get rough.”

As I walk from my deck into the house, I think, “Oh Lord, please let me learn to spot the weird men out there ‘n Lord, please lemme focus on service work ‘n don’t lemme become a lady who wears Depends in middle age. These days, since the TP incident, I havta’ pee alla’ the time ‘n I have hardly any ability to hold—I just have to get it out!”

“Trauma, it is trauma,” Patsy keeps sayin’. We were out at Penny’s this afternoon at the Shawnee Mall lookin’ for Skeechers walkin’ shoes ‘n I had to go not more than havin’ gone ten minutes earlier when we ate chicken salad lunches over at Cracker Barrel.

Seated atop the new, soft-flush toilet in my newly painted peach bathroom, I turn the light off ‘n the fan on. I pee in the dark ‘n do not look at the white two-ply rolls stacked just like it by the foot of his California King, those pistols underneath, loaded, Lord only knows, waitin’.



## Business or Pleasure

by Jennifer Horne

I got into O'Hare late and took a taxi to my hotel. There'd been no food on the airplane, of course, and I was hungry but too tired to find a late-night restaurant. The hotel restaurant had just closed and room-service was over, but the desk clerk told me I could get something at the bar. I stuck my carry-on in my room and went back downstairs. Normally I don't go into hotel bars alone—it's just too much trouble trying to make it clear that you're really really not interested in male attention. I don't have a boyfriend, so I am free to choose, but I generally find it's better not to mix business and pleasure. I'm much more comfortable in my room anyway, propped on the bed at ease in my nice pajamas, laptop on my knees, papers spread out around me.

I sat at a table near the bar and ordered a nacho salad and a light beer. While I waited, I browsed the headlines of the paper I'd picked up in the lobby. "Heavy Storms in Southeast" caught my eye in the weather section. Great. I was likely to have trouble flying back to Little Rock. I was only in town for a day, to take a deposition in a big case I'd been working on for months. This was one of the last pieces we needed to finish our preparations.

As I glanced up, a man sitting at the bar caught my eye and smiled. I smiled back with what I think of as my public-impersonal smile, acknowledging but not encouraging. I don't like to be rude.

"Long day?" he said, in a sympathetic voice.

"Yeah. Late flight, all that."

"Where from?"

"Little Rock."

"No kidding! I've been dying to get down there to see the Presidential Library and museum. Have you been?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's great. You like Clinton?"

"Always did," he said. "Smart guy. Just couldn't keep it in his pants, you know? Too bad."

I've never really liked that phrase. My face must have betrayed me.

"Sorry," he said. "That was crude. I'm a geologist, been around a crew of guys up in Alaska for three months. I've forgotten my manners."

The waitress brought my food out at the same time his order arrived.

"You mind?" he said, picking up his plate as though to bring it over, but not pushing.

I hesitated, then said, "Sure."

He was outdoorsy cute, with short brown hair, a tan, blue eyes that looked like an airline pilot's. I guessed he was maybe thirty, just a couple of years older than me.

"John Bartlett," he said, putting down his plate and beer and holding out his hand.

"Sarah Bailey," I said, shaking his.

"So what do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a lawyer," I said, waiting. I took a bite of my salad, avoiding the sour cream.

"Great," he said. "Great. My ex-wife is married to a lawyer now, actually our divorce lawyer. You'd think that would be unethical or something, but there it is."

"Um," I said.

"But we have a great little girl. Jessica. I hope she can grow up to be independent, confident, have a good job. That's so important for women."

"Yeah," I said, "my parents always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted."

We talked a bit about where we grew up, where we'd been to school, that I was on business for a case and he was spending the night in Chicago after a bad connection made him miss the last flight to Texas, where he had another job.



"Hey," he said. "Change of subject. You are a beautiful and charming woman, and we're both alone here tonight, and I'm sure you never do this kind of thing, but would you consider spending some time with me?"

I looked down at my plate. I was attracted to him, it was late, I was a little lonely, he seemed nice. Just last week my friend Betsy had been kidding me about being absolutely unspontaneous.

I looked back at him. His head was cocked slightly, and a questioning smile played across his face. If I said no, it would be okay, would be no big deal, which is why I said yes.

"Come to my room in ten minutes," I said. "543." I stay at this hotel whenever I'm in Chicago, and I didn't want them getting ideas about me.

He smiled. "See you soon."

Riding up in the elevator I felt a kind of nervous energy in my veins, as though I'd had way too much caffeine. Was this OK? Was it? I had "just-in-case" condoms in my overnight bag but couldn't remember how old they were. That was a deal-breaker for me, but I somehow didn't think he'd refuse.

I took a bottle of scotch from the minibar and poured a drink. Brushed my teeth. Peed.

The knock on the door came, and I answered it, and he stepped inside and kissed me, then stepped back.

"Just wanted to get that over with," he said, not smiling now. Suddenly it felt serious, not like in the bar.

I stood by the window, sipping my drink, and he sat down on the bed. "Let me see you undress," he said.

I did, and that sort of broke the tension, and pretty soon we were in bed with the lights out and both of us undressed. With the curtains open, a dim city glow barely lit the room, like a false twilight.

He took his time, kissing and touching me, and when we actually began to have sex, he moved slowly. There'd been no argument about the condom. He took both my arms and raised them behind me, holding my wrists with his hands.

"You like that?" he said. I did, but I hadn't known it.

He moved harder, tightened his grip. "Like it?"

"Yes," I said, because I had already said yes once. My wrists hurt a little, and a part of me wondered if it would leave bruises.

He leaned down and bit my ear, hard enough to pinch without breaking the skin. "That's how you like it, isn't it?" he said, whispering into my ear.

"Yes," I said, but a little bolt of fear ran through me.

His voice in my ear continued, still soft: "That's how all you bitches like it, you tough career bitches. Bitch in the boardroom. Slut in the bedroom. Tell me you like it, Sarah. Tell me." His hands were hurting my wrists.

"I like it," I said, but I was no longer sure. I was a confusion of emotions. Turned-on, scared, hot and cold at the same time.

He moved even harder, pounding against my thighs and pelvis. When he finished, he rolled off and lay on his back with his hands behind his head. He seemed satisfied with himself, relaxed and at ease.

We lay there long enough for the air conditioner to come on and go off again. I was worried he would fall asleep.

After a few minutes I spoke. "I have to get up really really early," I said. "So . . ."

"Sure," he said. "Use me up and cast me aside. Ha ha." He looked at me so that I knew he was thinking about what had just happened. It wasn't a warm look, more like a triumphant one.

I sat up in bed with the sheets pulled over my breasts.

He got up and pulled on his clothes. "Until we meet again," he said. "I'll let myself out." And then he was gone.

When the door closed I got up and put on the extra lock, then got back into bed. I was shivering uncontrollably and pulled all the covers over me.

What had happened? Something wrong, but I couldn't say what. From a legal perspective, there was no way you could call it rape. I had invited this man into my room for consensual, adult sex. I had let him into my life and into my head.



He had wanted to dominate me, and he had. What should I call it? “Bad sex”? “A bad sexual experience”? Bad judgment. The shame of being turned on by his domination of me.

I suddenly remembered something a woman in my book group had said, talking about a group she was counseling, women she referred to as “fresh rapes.” I hated that phrase but didn’t say anything at the time. To me it sounded as dehumanizing and objectifying as the rape itself. “They’re feeling out of control,” she had said. “The world as they understood it has suddenly changed.”

I went into the bathroom and took a very long, very hot shower. Then I took the extra blanket from the closet and sat in the chair staring out the window, thinking of nothing. Hours passed, and I watched the skyline until the first silhouettes of buildings began to appear in the dawn light and pink-orange streaks spread across the sky.

I kept thinking that something would come to mind, something that would comfort me, a childhood memory perhaps, but nothing did.

I dressed, went down to the executive center, and worked there until it was time to take a taxi to my deposition. I did not want to be in that room in daylight, and I did not want to risk seeing him in the breakfast room.

I have taken the deposition, and it went well, and now I will get on the plane, and go home, storm or no storm, and see my dog, and try to forget that this ever happened. I’ll try to shrug it off, like Betsy would, a story you tell after a few drinks with the girls about the jerk you let pick you up in Chicago. Maybe I’ll talk to the Reverend Liz at my church; she knows how to listen without instantly offering a solution.

I’ve always thought of myself as having good judgment with men. It occurs to me now that I’ve hardly exercised any judgment at all, never taking risks, never exposing myself. Here’s what the live oyster feels like when it’s opened: quivery, defenseless, so thoroughly out of its element.





## Slack Tide

*by Jennifer Taylor*

A man's voice woke me up. Through the cocoon of darkness, I fumbled for a wire coat hanger that I tucked under my arm and crept toward the sound. On hands and knees I negotiated the distance to the living room where I saw his silhouette against the moonlight.

He sat on the screened-in back porch in a lounge chair. A TV show I had seen said if you could surprise the perp it bought you seven seconds. I tried not to think of the word victim, but envisioned Walter returning from his business trip to find my lifeless body on the floor.

Brandishing my weapon, I moved to the door and flipped the light while fumbling with the lock. It was hardly a surprise when I stumbled onto the porch wielding the hanger above my head like a sword.

"Good morning, Iris," said Cecil Rathmore, our seventy-something neighbor who lived three houses down on the left. He wore a navy bathrobe and matching slippers. I didn't see a gun on the table next to him. "You might want to turn the light off. It'll wake up Betty's dog and you know she'll start barking."

"What are you doing here?" I kept the hanger raised. I'd read enough newspaper stories about older neighbors who turned out to be killers behind an innocent facade.

"Do you want to lower your hanger?"

"Not until I know you don't have a gun," I replied.

He stood up and lifted his hands to ear level. "I'd raise them higher if it weren't for the bursitis."

"Turn your pockets inside out."

The search turned up a piece of navy blue lint.

"Can I sit back down?" he asked.

I nodded, and stepped inside to turn off the light, self-conscious in my tank top and pajamas. I looked out at the salt marsh that glistened beyond our backyard like a prickly pool of silver under the moon's glow. The spartina alterniflora, or marsh grass, slowly rustled in a slight breeze. I thought of the life teeming under the water's surface: crabs, turtles, and fish. A plumed heron perched down by the water's edge balancing on its long, delicate legs.

Everything belonged except for me.

"I never thought I'd scare you. I'm just an old man, you know."

"You're just lucky we're northern liberals who don't believe in guns."

"I can see the headline in *The Brunswick News*," he said. "Geezer Shot Over Back Porch Invasion. Don't you work at the paper?"

"How'd you know?" Even though I had years of reporting experience, my new editor forced me onto desk duty, answering phones while I 'got the feel of the way things work here,' so the paper had yet to run an article with my byline.

"Word travels," he said.

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Cecil had been among the crush of people who showed up at our doorstep after we moved to the island a month ago. But unlike the others, he didn't stop by with a platter of fattening food. Instead, he wanted to talk about the yard.

"You have sod webworms."

"What?" I asked, wondering again how much of a mistake we had made relocating from Chicago to Georgia's coast. Cecil said the yellowed out circles in our yard was due to the work of a crafty worm. I felt pints of my blood sucked away by thousands of mosquitoes and no-seeums while I stood in the doorway, listening. That was the longest conversation we'd had until tonight.



"This always was the prettiest spot in the neighborhood," he said shifting on the lounge chair. "I can't see the water from my house. That's something just for you folks with money."

"You've been here before?"

"Oh, sure. It took about four years before this house was actually finished, you know. But after Betty sold the land, the builders went right to work on the framing. This porch was here long before anyone thought of moving in."

I knew the original owner spent his loan money on unnecessary plans: a central vacuum system that was too expensive to maintain, a sunbathing balcony for his daughter, custom birch cabinets with a multi-tone finish, and tabby exterior made up of little crushed bits of shells. The family went bankrupt and the builder couldn't afford to pay his contractors, so the house just sat unfinished.

"Muriel knew she could find me here late at night or the early morning."

He kept looking at the water. After the mention of his dead wife I wasn't sure what to say. She had died not long after we moved in. Loretta from across the street had come over with the news.

The first time I met Loretta, she brought a pitcher of martinis. When I opened the door, she shook the glistening pitcher at me.

"Drink time," she said, a broad smile on her chubby face. With her silver hairdo framing her face in a ruffled halo she reminded me of a chow. I wondered if her tongue was purple.

"Why don't we sit out here?" I suggested, pointing to the Adirondack chairs on the front porch. "It's such a lovely evening."

We sat there and sweated, downing the drinks. Loretta called out to neighbors by name as they passed by. My next-door neighbor Betty barreled down her driveway on her motorized scooter toward the main road, holding onto her Dachshund's leash.

"She's the resident Gestapo," Loretta whispered around her drink. "You've got to watch her."

I giggled.

"The only job she's ever had was a military nurse, so she runs her life – and everyone else's that way. But you have to be nice to her because she knows everything that goes on around her. And she listens to the police scanner."

"I didn't think we had a police force on the island." I swirled the last of my drink, feeling the gin wash over my teeth.

"We don't. She listens to the one on the mainland."

The next time she came over, Loretta wiped a layer of sweat away from her broad forehead and panted before she could say anything.

"These steep steps are gonna do me in," she said. All of the other homes in the neighborhood were older and built closer to the ground. Ours alone rose above the rest of the houses because of newer zoning laws.

"Cecil's wife passed away," Loretta said. "You must've known she was sick, right?"

I shook my head.

"She had stomach cancer. Poor Cecil. I wonder what he's going to do now."

I had taken a casserole over later that day, a mixture of cream of chicken, shredded cheese and Ritz crackers – what Walter called my specialty. The front door was open, as if the neighborhood was invited into Cecil's pain. I walked in the front door, calling out a hello over the din of the TV that was switched on somewhere in the house. Cecil appeared wearing a frayed cotton sweater and pants that drooped from his slight frame.

"I'm sorry," I said, thrusting the casserole toward him.

He had accepted it, then asked, "How are those webworms?"

I had avoided him after that, made uneasy by the way he moved effortlessly from death to lawn maintenance.

"I've had insomnia for years now," Cecil remarked, stretching his arms out over the sides of the lounge chair. "The building crew left a couple of chairs out here, probably so they could sit out here and smoke, so Muriel and I would sit here watching the marsh."



We sat in silence. I heard a fish splash somewhere out among the spartina creating a ripple.

"Most of these women in the neighborhood see me as an eligible bachelor now."

"Really?" I asked, turning toward him.

"Don't sound so surprised. I've got a pulse. That's about all they're looking for along with a pension." He grinned.

"Has anyone asked you out?"

Cecil laughed.

"Oh no. That's not the way it works. They just show up with food and expect me to invite them in for supper. One time Doris was already there, and then Betty showed up with some terrible jell-o pretzel salad."

I raised an eyebrow. "Betty?"

"Yeah. That old gal would kill me for sure."

That gave me an idea.

"Want to know the secret of the house?" I asked.

"Yes, I think I would."

"It's upstairs," I said, leading the way. He followed along behind me, his slippers slapping up the stairs. I opened the door on the left. Moonlight cast a silvery glow over the unmade bed, pictures, and boxes of books left to unpack on the floor. This is where I had carted up the items I didn't know what to do with, most of them belonging to Walter. I rationalized it was because I wanted him help set up the house, but knew it was simply passive aggression that he had spent more time on business trips than in the house with me.

"Can you see okay?" I asked.

"Yep."

I walked over to the window and knelt down. Cecil crouched next to me. I lifted the curtain tacked over the window and we looked down into the house next door. A set of floral pillows ringed the bed. My neighbor slept with her arms above her head in an arc, mouth open in a slight snore.

"Well that's Betty's room," he said.

"Yeah. Sometimes when I can't sleep at night, I come up here and watch her."

Cecil laughed. "That must be the only time that woman is quiet. Do you know why that dinky little fence is there?" He pointed to the ineffective three-foot fence in the yard between our houses.

"Why?"

"Because she wanted to pretend your house wasn't there," he said, laughing, a raspy sound.

I moved back from the window and sat on the bed. "Yeah, I had gotten the feeling she wasn't thrilled when we moved in."

"Honey, no one was. We thought you were going to have loud parties and park your cars in the yard."

I laughed.

Cecil watched her sleeping for a few minutes and then stood up. "I need to move around some," he said. "These joints act up on me."

We headed back downstairs and stood by the back porch door.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked, realizing I didn't know anything about any of my neighbors. In Chicago that was just how things were, but here it was different, or it was supposed to be, anyway.

"Nearly 40 years."

"That's a long time to be in one place."

"That's the way we old folks do. We move in and settle down and then retire. You young ones are always on the move."

"You're welcome to keep us on your list of places to visit during the night," I told him, leaning against the door-frame.

"Really? You wouldn't mind?"



I shook my head. "As long as you try not to talk too loudly."

He held up three fingers in a scout's salute.

"Promise. I had been scaring off a raccoon earlier. I guess that's what you heard. So you don't care if I sit out here for a few more minutes before I go home?"

I opened the door for him.

"Go ahead. I'm just going to lock up behind you."

I waited until he was settled back onto the chair.

"Good night," I said.

"Night, Iris."

Back in bed, I thought about Cecil looking back over the years and watching over me.



## **Back to the Mainland**

from *The Abilify Sonnets*

by *Joanna Grant*

There's a rooms for rent place next to the American base called "Last Chance House."  
Our van almost takes out its sign; the Toyota Noah doesn't fit in its lane. We almost run down  
a tiny Japanese couple walking a tiny white dog. Space is precious in these tiny islands.  
Kevin wonders about retirement plans—will he ever have enough money saved? I worry about  
Getting my prescription refills six thousand miles from home. Nick complains about an  
Argentinian ex who calls him collect from a British jail shouting about her personal God.  
He wonders when she found Jesus and his home phone number. Teenaged Janina asks us all  
why none of the American boys she likes can handle a mature woman who's righteous and strong.

Heather misses her husband, who's off on a ship somewhere to the south of Guam;  
I miss the pills I took too much too fast. Kevin misses what he lost in the crash.  
Nick misses his ex. Yumi wonders out loud if she'll die right here where she was born  
at the edge of the world. Marvin the driver says let's not be talking about doing no dying.  
He puts in Sights and Sounds of Arizona. We soak up America on DVD with orchestral soundtrack,  
adrift in our ark, dreaming of RVing into the golden West, if we can ever get back to the mainland.



## Memories That Aren't My Own

*by Emily Phillips*

In August, he and I recruited ourselves like deer to a small island off the coast of South Carolina. We took the summer ferry there and abandoned the truck on deck to walk to the stern. We leaned over the railing, shouted into the wind, but the churning water ate our words and we couldn't hear what we said. I felt something raw growing between us; the seagulls fought over the subtext. At night by the fire, I eyed his naked lips and wondered if he was as cold as I. We drank wine and champagne to celebrate our reunion, privately plotting to stay on the island. Why are we running from the truth? I asked. It's just not the right time, he said. I've never known there to be such a thing, I said and he took my hand gently and led me to his beat up old truck. We drove to the beach, the road empty save for sand that drifted across the blacktop like ash. We lay ourselves in the surf and let the ocean's breath roll our bodies back and forth. We reminisced about how when we were seven we stuffed wads of sand down my bathing suit until I was fat and lumpy like a harbor seal. We'd laughed with big guffaws and snorts as we lolled on the sharp broken sea-shelled sand with only our flippers to ground us. He rolled back and forth on top of me, crushing me and I laughed until I couldn't breathe. I asked him did he remember how he'd nestled his head in the crook of my neck, took my flipper in his hand, looked deep into my eyes and told me he thought I was funny? We were inches, bare breaths away. I felt myself falling into you and that, I said, was the first time I fell in love with you. So what happened? he asked. I waited for it to come true. He nodded and took my hand, placed bits of phosphorescence like glowing stars in my hair. He was so pretty and I was so drunk. I wasn't sure if it was real. Our stolen kisses. Our expensive souls decanted back and forth like cheap wine. The wanting broke the wet night apart and around us it fell, the sand crumbled beneath our knees. I pulled myself away. If only this were real. If only we could give it a chance to live. He lay there a stiff stranger, holding his breath. We both knew we had gone too deep, too far. Inches, bare breaths away. The catch always just beyond our grasp. But it's not true. It's not ours. It never happened. This moment belongs to the ether.



## My Mother's Life

*by Bridgette E. Hahn*

The garden we planted survived a few seasons,  
watermelon, squash, sweet peas.  
On the kitchen counter  
my tin of blackberries waits  
for the crust to be smoothed out  
into a full moon.  
I craved the moments in the car,  
your fingers braided with mine,  
your maternal affection insistent  
on its own time.  
Cool quick hands on a feverish forehead.  
The moments we sat,  
two terra-cotta people on sand dunes,  
and I competed with the landscape  
for your attention.  
I know you were trying to give me freedom,  
not knowing it would add up to more than I could do,  
like our garden,  
breaking open seed packets-  
planting nasturtium.  
My unrealized independence unearthed,  
enfolding seeds one by one,  
eager in my waiting.



## SEA CEREMONY

*by Helene Pilibosian*

Sea salt grabbed at the air  
like the gelatin-germ  
of all hidden fairness where  
the sea made a constant floor.

More than swordfish adored  
the scroll of that blue lyric  
even with the seaweed braving  
the undersea platform of morning.

The nets tried to catch dawn,  
elusive try of the trawler  
and the chants ranting of hunger  
or the raking of many bets.

Humanity, fins provide a fund  
spread like a thin instinct  
on the bread of your days,  
marinated or filleted.

Humanity, fish  
have eyes that can't see  
the line that pulls toward sun  
to represent tradition.

The sea wrinkled like foil  
when hit by light  
that reflected home and plenty  
of toil to render the pan

hot enough to satisfy  
the made-to-eat theory  
and the appetite journey  
called the daily catch.



## Jane O'Lantern

*by DM Benningfield*

emptied out

seeds and guts  
now compost

face carved,  
same tired grin

someone light my candle  
the flame's gone out.



## Harvest Eve.

*by Jenny Billings Beaver*

I remember I was Cleopatra once.  
Tiny fingers peeking  
out from black and purple  
silk, tied with golden rope;  
even a head piece.

Each year, we'd see Moses, Mary and Joseph.  
someone always dressed as Jesus  
though none of us really knew what he looked like.

We didn't trick-or-treat, we harvested  
our candy from the church gymnasium  
that smelled of warm basketball rubber.

We did the same things you did on Halloween  
just called them something different,  
more church appropriate.

We bobbed for apples in red buckets  
mouths open, eyes closed  
until we could feel the filmy peeling  
on our lips. Missing the first time.  
Trying again, taking that sinking bite,  
juice and water dripping down  
our necks under our costumes  
as we rose victoriously.

No one checked our apples for razorblades.



## True Grits

by Lillian McCarter Batarseh

Grandmother Ford has been flurrying through my mind lately. For a long time there was a drought—no “visitations” from her.

She certainly was there for me from my very beginning on that frigid January day back in the early '40's, when I surprised the world with the arrival of my three-pound self during Mom's visit to her parents' drafty farmhouse. When the summoned Dr. Marshall Neal, observing the particular shade of blue I turned, pronounced, “She has a fifty-fifty chance of surviving,” Grandmother harrumphed, “We'll see about that!” Then she and Aunt Mary, after giving an inaugural bath, lay my shivering doll shape on a pillow in a tiny basket on the fireplace hearth and placed jars of hot water all around for an improvised incubator.

Elizabeth Louella Holland Ford. She broke the mold. Shaped by an orphan mentality (Her mother died, and her father, unable to cope alone, farmed the children out to various relatives.), she had always been acutely aware of the need to earn her keep. Perhaps this stoked her phenomenal energy level—whether she was engaged in chopping cotton, boiling the family laundry in a big, black wash pot over an open fire, baking Damson pies for the twenty-six grandchildren who might well happen by on any given Sunday afternoon, planting her beloved “glads” and zinnias in strict Presbyterian rows, or raising up eight of the ten children she bore—no doubt, during her spare time.

Notation #1:

For Grandmother Ford, Ira and Julia, the two children who died in infancy, were just as “real” to her as the remaining eight. From her I learned that love is very elastic.

Notation #2:

In my sixtieth year I learned incidentally from my Mom that at some point Grandmother had moved from the conjugal bed into the children's room. Ah.

My grandmother's routine was rigorous. Up with the sun and to bed with the chickens. Once, spending time with her as a five-year-old, traipsing along with cousin Ray up and down the crop rows as she worked all day, the blistering Southern sun beating unmercifully down on our heads, I willed myself not to collapse, looking forward to listening at day's end to a favorite radio program called “Dr. Christian”. (Surely Grandmother could not have a problem with that.) Finally, supper over and the sand from the fields washed off our tired bodies, I turned the radio dial to the desired station. “All right, children,” said Grandmother. “Turn off the radio. Time for bed.” I swallowed my disappointment. Somehow I already knew that I must be old enough for my wants not to hurt me.

Grandmother certainly knew all about that when she and Granddaddy were bringing up their brood during the depression, that time when for months on end the family fare might consist of potatoes, cabbage, and cornbread, with an occasional plucked and singed chicken for Sunday dinner. Even then, Grandmother always claimed preference for the bony chicken neck so that other family members could eat the meatier pieces. This became so ingrained that later, when times improved—you guessed it—Grandmother insisted on being served the chicken neck.

Both she and Granddaddy generously shared whatever they possessed with anyone in need. Had there been a contest between them, however, Grandmother would have won hands down. Why, folks from miles around knew that she would give



you the shirt right off Granddaddy's back!

When she wasn't busy "doing" for other people, "Miss Lou", as they called her, could be counted upon to entertain us youngsters with her varied eccentricities. For example, when visiting at the same time as our friend and Georgia Tech physics professor Knox Pursley and the subject of possible moon exploration came up, she snorted-much to Knox's gentle merriment-that everyone knows the moon is made of green cheese.

"They" also knew that Coca-cola should be avoided because it contains "dope".

Grandmother was equally certain that movies are sinful, going to see only one during her entire life-Bing Crosby's *The Bells of St. Mary's*-to her everlasting regret.

Somehow though, this prohibition did not extend to the watching of television. And so it was that during her twilight years "Miss Lou" viewed a lot of TV while she rested her bones. One afternoon, knowing that Grandmother was alone during the work day, Mom phoned to ask how things were going. "Bill is on the roof," she said excitedly. Though Uncle Bill lived in Gastonia, not York where Grandmother was ensconced, Mom assured her, "I'll be right there," piled us kids in the back seat of the car, and hightailed it the ten miles to York, where the mystery was soon solved. "Bill" was indeed on the roof-in a soap opera.

Even the indomitable "Miss Lou" could not stave off the inevitable. At age eighty-six she became so ill that her physician recommended hospitalization. Grandmother demurred repeatedly. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to call an ambulance." Grandmother would have none of it; she was gone before the ambulance arrived, dying as she had lived-according to her own lights.



## My Father Was Perry Mason

by Liz Jones

*"I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life . . ."*

*--Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary*

When my father asked me to write his story, I didn't take him seriously. He stood outside the back of the wood-shingled house in Mt. Airy, North Carolina, holding onto a rail, leaning forward. His salt-and-pepper crewcut topped his lined forehead, the swarthy skin craggy. His red golf sweater, blue camp shirt, and gabardine pants were a uniform as much as the one he'd worn in the army. A Lucky Strike dangled from his free hand. Every few seconds he raised it, taking a long drag that satisfied him. A life-long smoker, no nagging from Mother or cajoling from anyone could force him to quit. After all, he had given up drinking for the teetotaler he married. He intended to hang onto something that could kill him.

Cigarette smoke inevitably brings my father back. I remember it from car trips the family took to see relatives. He preferred Gauloises, which were not readily available in the United States; that intrigued me. Where had he found them? He must have gotten satisfaction from that French smoke, redolent of lost love, that other woman he sacrificed to the altar of fatherhood, the holy state he could not desert, though the husband part was dispensable.

I liked the smell of Gauloises transforming the car into a den of musty black walnuts, like those on the ground rain under my grandmother's prized tree. Later, Mother would blame Daddy for her breast cancer. She let nothing go. I thought it had as much to do with her negative attitude and fat-laced Southern cooking as any second-hand smoke did. The evening before my sixteenth birthday, the first episode of Perry Mason premiered. Daddy and I sat in the dark, hooked the moment the thrilling trumpets started their provocative pauses. Then the sexy sax swam in on a wave of strings, followed by the cool jazz piano announcing "The Case of the Restless Redhead." In stark black and white, Perry drove to the scene of a shooting. Mesmerized, Daddy and I collected clues. In the end, we pointed our fingers at the guilty party, just as Perry did in the courtroom. It was our only shared mutual interest. Wherever I was, in college or marriage, he would call to ask if I had solved the crime, to share his solutions.

I was thirty-five the first time Daddy—as all three children called him—asked me to be his biographer. "Write my story," he said. For years I called him Daddy, but I don't think of him by that name anymore. It became too intimate for this man who let no one in.

"What is your story?" I asked. I thought, What was there to tell? He had run away to the army, then built a second career with the North Carolina State Employment Security Commission. He married my mother and had three children—two girls before World War II, one boy after. That fact would take on much import in his attitude toward his son, Mother's consolation prize.

He spent years away from his family during WWII and Korea. He loved to play golf and watch television, liked sports and board games, insisted on winning at everything except his own happiness. He and Mother were not well suited. Mother refused to do the things he enjoyed, nor did she have a hobby. She cooked, cleaned, obsessed.

Rather than tell me his story that day, my father said, "Walk to the garden with me."

I accompanied him and persisted. "Why me? Why not write your own story?"

"I want you to do this for me," he said. He seemed breathless, as he frequently did now. We walked through the field, around the woods to the manicured space in the small forest clearing of his garden. In it were tomatoes, okra, string



beans, cucumbers, and corn. We picked.

"The German Pink tomatoes," he said, "are the best, not too acid, not too sweet. The Country Gentleman corn, white and yellow kernels on the same ear, should be cooked in boiling water for two minutes, no more, no less. If okra is hard to the touch, throw it away. Half Runner beans have the fullest, deepest flavor."

Long after my father died, I plant exactly the same vegetables, hoping to taste his story, the story he never told. I bite into a whole tomato, just off the vine. The juice spatters, and I lick it from my fingers. The flesh is soft against my tongue; I want to grow full eating only German Pinks. Each spring I look for the best plants. I refuse the Beefsteaks and Better Boys proffered by eager farmers at the open-air markets. No German Pinks? No sale. Never heard of them? Somebody has. I will travel miles to find them.

I seriously doubt after twenty-five years, three grown sons, two marriages, and a teaching career, I would crave the taste of German Pink tomatoes if: 1) my father hadn't died and saved me from my first marriage, and 2) I hadn't learned something about my father many years after his death I hadn't known while he was living. I regret I was so self-absorbed I never pried his story from him. Now I must weave it into a tapestry from information gleaned from relatives, hearsay, public records, and my imagination.

\*

One sunny July morning in 1974 I was in Hot Springs, North Carolina, on a beautiful piece of countryside, once a Cherokee Indian campground protected by a natural spring, a mountain and a national forest. I picked green beans, unprotected from the hot sun, not my father's Half Runners. These were planted by the man I'd married to escape my birth family. By the time I squatted on my haunches in that field, I had a college education, one marriage and two children, and was a teacher. My husband, well educated but conflicted, could not hold a job for more than three years. He had been a Methodist minister, a guidance counselor, a high school teacher, and a whole lot more I was not dealing with by that day.

Picking the beans was an obsession. I did it carefully, completely, cleaning every vine. I would can them, put them on shelves for my family to eat, as though we would starve if I didn't work this hard. I would share them with friends, and be proud of what I had done with my hands. This manual labor represented an accomplishment for someone who lived in her head. Made dizzy by the blazing sun slicing into my fair skin, I picked and ruminated.

I was so engrossed I ignored two men in faded jeans and tight tee-shirts who strode toward me and repeatedly called my name until they were practically on top of me.

"Liz," Elmer Hall said, "your father has had a heart attack. Stop."

I continued picking beans. What this man said could not be true. Why was he telling me something more awful than his very presence in my life? My hands trembled in the sun. I couldn't look at him.

He had joined our family in early June, bringing with him the issues of the back-to-the-farm types populating universities, churches, and bars of the '70's. Elmer had been fired as head of Duke University's Student Union for inciting campus riots against the Vietnam War. In a blaze of glory with his righteous stand against the war, he opened the first natural-foods restaurant in Durham, "Somethyme," a gathering place for college students, professors, and hippies of all proclivities. Unlike my husband, everything Elmer did professionally was a success.

They had been in undergraduate school together and met again at a conference earlier that year. They shared college memories and realized they had more in common than an alma mater and being ordained ministers. My thirty-some bookish years had not prepared me for the throes of their relationship.

My husband spoke up. "Stop, Liz," he said, sharply as always, irritated by my single-mindedness.

I stood and wiped my brow, feeling faint. I shoved the beans at Elmer. "Take care of these for me. I'll go dress."

In many ways, this heart attack saved my sanity and my life. My father yanked me out of that bean field, and I never went back. Of course, I didn't know that at the time.

\*



I stood in the dimly lit hospital room, looking at wires, IV's, and monitors drawing mountains and valleys, spitting out numbers. Blood coursed through Daddy's veins like a river flooding rain-soaked banks. His face was ashen, the lines on his forehead so deep they formed cornrows. The monitor wrote indecipherable code about his heart.

A tinge of fear touched my spine. I tried to memorize this cell: the electrical impulses of the monitors, the gurgle of the IV, the hospital clamor. With my pale face, oversized brown eyes, springy reddish-brown hair, grey dress with pearl buttons down the back, and black heels with criss-crossed straps buckled at the ankles, I was dressed for the occasion

I shivered with dread and cold, in the same situation I'd known with this man: watching a TV show, searching for clues. I stood vigilantly, watched a twitch of the eyelids. Did he know I was there? His hands made scooping gestures at his sides, gathering wool. The thick, black hair on his arms looked like tangled wires, disconnected from their power source. I thought he never understood my need to escape--or had he?

I put my cold hand into one of his overly warm ones. This is the closest I will ever be to you, as well as I will ever know you. He closed his fingers through mine. Our finger knitted together, a tight, fitted glove.

Suddenly, his eyes opened. He mouthed my name; this silent man couldn't speak. I detected the word on his lips: Libby. I'd changed my name to Liz, but he didn't recognize his daughter in that crisp single syllable. I picked up a pencil and yellow legal pad. He could barely hold the pencil; he wrote in a wobbly slant down the paper: "I love you."

I wrote, "I love you, too." He didn't take his eyes off me as I wrote. This was important. I knew from relatives he didn't think I loved him, after criticizing him for insisting my mother cook from a wheelchair with a broken ankle. Now he smiled around a plastic tube.

Then I talked to him. I told him he would help me cultivate a garden. He opened his mouth again. This time I didn't understand the silent words, nor did he attempt to write them down. I babbled a torrent of words from deep inside me, about my mother, how her agitated, whirling-dervish behavior—clean, cook, worry, protect—had overshadowed my childhood, wrenched it out of me. I'd playacted her with dolls, a mother diminished with fear over her own health and everyone else's, endlessly warning about sex, mumbling her demons to life in word and deed. Visualizing her, I realized I had reproduced my parents' marriage in my own; ironically, I had wed my mother, not my father. Something was dawning on me.

"And you," I said, "never told me your story."

Daddy reached for the pencil, scribbled, "You'll . . ." but the pencil fell. He closed his eyes. I looked at the monitor over the bed. The lines wrote words I clearly saw, as certainly as I read vowels and consonants and joined them together: You'll never live with Randall Lanier, Sr., again. I felt insane.

The message flashed over and over. Situation urgent. A buzzing bleep blasted my ears as people rushed into the room.

He saved my life.





**Gears** *by Allison Parliament*



This was laying on the ground outside of the Cotton Gin Factory.



**Historic Prattville** *by Allison Parliament*



The Cotton Gin Factory is a key part of Historic Down town Prattville Alabama.



## turkey barn

*by Nancy Keeling*





## Miz Pearl

*by Nancy Keeling*





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