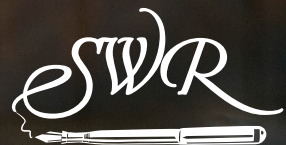




SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

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POEMS • STORIES • PHOTOGRAPHY





SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

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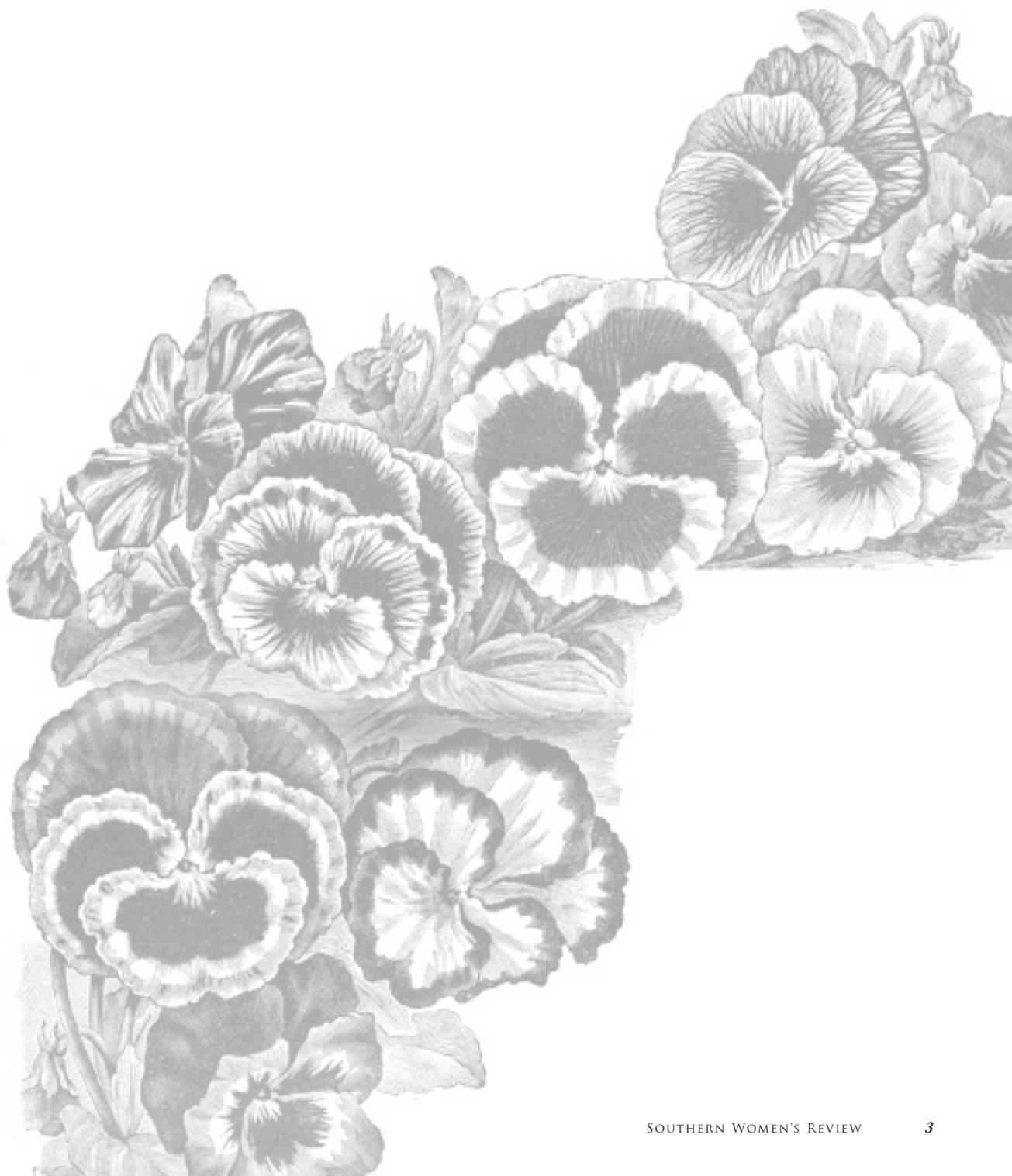


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ANEESA DAVENPORT'S mother drove from Charlotte to Berkeley for a California vacation in 1967 and never looked back. Aneesa has been back, however, spending her summers in the humid chiggery woods, warm ocean waves, and cold air-conditioned buffet restaurants of Myrtle Beach. Her work has appeared in Fringe, Fanzine, The Santa Barbara Independent, The South Carolina Review, and elsewhere. Find her at <http://paragraphed.wordpress.com>.

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JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN enjoys writing about her 1960's upbringing in a milltown in Western North Carolina, where she still lives. Her latest book is a rerelease of her novel *Drops of the Night* (March Street Press, 2011). Her poems have been collected in two books (*At Dusk* and *An Endless Tapestry*) and published in scores of literary journals. Her poem "My Mother's Elm" was recently named a winner in the Joyce Kilmer Poetry Contest.

LAURA EKLUND has published one book, *Pine Needles*. She has two books coming out in the summer of 2012, *The White Ibis*, with Ara Pacis, and another book with *Wind*. She's most recently published poems in *The Single Hound*, *Plain Spoke*, *Trajectory*, and *Switched on Gutenberg*. She lives in Olive Hill, Ky. with the poet George Eklund. She teaches art history and design. You can view her work at <http://www.lauraeklund.com>.

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LINDA HEURING grew up on the Ohio River in Southern Indiana, as close to Kentucky as you can get without getting wet. After living on both coasts and a few places in between, she settled in Georgia on the Savannah River in the late 1990s and moved across the river into South Carolina. She's now temporarily living along the shore of Lake Michigan outside Chicago, uprooted "kicking and screaming" due to her husband's consulting business. Still she writes about the South in her fiction and non-fiction.

Her most recently published short story, "Victim of Circumstance," can be found in *Rosebud's* issue #48. A more complete bibliography is available at www.lindaheuring.com.

KATE LADEW is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. A Louisiana native, she now resides in Graham, NC with her cat, Charlie Chaplin. She is currently working on her first novel.

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DELIA LEWIS was raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and cut her writing teeth in Hattiesburg, Mississippi at the Center for Writers (University of Southern Mississippi), and has been published in the Center's *Product*. She holds a Master's degree in 19th century British literature, with secondary studies in Poetry and African American women writers. She has spent 6 weeks studying in London, 6 years living in Madison, Wisconsin, and 6 weeks traveling in Belize and Guatemala. She is currently a Dean at an online career college, and has not yet given up her dream of building a tree house in Costa Rica, complete with pet monkey.

MEGHAN PALKO is currently living in eastern North Carolina and working toward her master's in English at East Carolina University.

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BETH SLATTERY divides her time between Seattle and Richmond, Indiana, where she teaches creative writing and Irish literature at Indiana University East. She has an MFA from Stonecoast at the University of Southern Maine. Though a native Hoosier, her corner of Indiana has a rich southern connection because of the people who migrated from Appalachia to find work in Richmond's factories. Her stories and essays often have roots in the South, and she has spent many happy days in the hills of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee.

CINDY SMALL Since Hurricane Katrina, she relocated to N. Alabama and decided that instead of pursuing a PhD, creating *Dragnets* was far more critical. A strange strain of cultures invaded her childhood in New Orleans, Louisiana as she quickly graduated into adulthood at a very early age. Drag queens were her best friends. Her childhood centered on platinum bouffant wigs, spirit gum, sequins, eyebrow wax and lots of marabou. Preferably turquoise.

She learned that nothing brings us closer to God than Aqua Net. Big hair makes one ready to face the world optimistically and gold Capri stretch pants are essential for a "casual" dress code. Her *Dragnets* are all about outrageous hair, messy make-up, Tammy Faye lips, eliminating the five o'clock shadow and sparkling personalities. If you're fussy about a bad hair day and pantyhose puts you in a bad mood, *Dragnets* will make you feel fabulous.

She graduated from Tulane University in New Orleans with an undergraduate degree in Journalism and Masters in Historic Preservation Studies. There was no Drag Queen 101 course being offered at the time.

CRYSTAL SIMONE SMITH can be found on most days in a bandana and flip flops, wandering about farmer's markets for southern essentials like a basket of fresh picked tomatoes or muscadines. She has published poetry in *The African American Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *Obsidian III: Literature in the African Diaspora*. She holds an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte and is a member of the Carolina African American Writers Collective. She resides in Durham, NC with her husband and two sons.

PIA TAAVILA grew up in Walled Lake, Michigan, and lives now in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Her B.A. and M.A. in American Literature are from Eastern Michigan University and her interdisciplinary Ph.D. is from Michigan State University in the fields of English, Sociology and Philosophy. She teaches literature and creative writing at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Her collected poems 1977-2077, *Moon on the Meadow*, was published in 2008 by Gallaudet University Press and *Two Winters*, a chapbook, is due out in October of 2011 from Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *The Bear River Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Comstock Review*, *Threepenny Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *storySouth*, *The Asheville Poetry Review*, *32 Poems*, *Measure*, *Ibbetson Street Review* and *The Southern Review*, among others.

PATRICIA THOMAS was born and raised in southern Alabama. She earned a B.A. and Master's degree from Auburn University and a Ph.D. from Texas A&M University. She has been teaching college composition and literature for years, including Loyola Marymount University, the University of Southern California, and Texas A&M. Her essays and stories have been or are about to be published in *Deep South Magazine*, *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal*, and *Front Porch Review*. She currently teaches writing at Fullerton College in California and writes mostly about the South.

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MOLLIE SMITH WATERS has a master's degree in language arts education and a second master's degree in theater from Auburn University Montgomery. She is a teacher of American literature, public speaking, and theater at Lurleen B. Wallace Community College in her hometown of Greenville, Alabama. Mollie is married to Ronald Waters; she has a son, Reagan, and a step-daughter, Katelin. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

ALLYSON WHIPPLE lives in Austin, Texas, where she works as an editor. An Ohio native, she earned a B.A. from Kenyon College and an M.A. from Case Western Reserve University. She loves the warmer winters in Austin, and appreciates the ways in which the multiplicity of Texas landscapes inform her poetry. Her work has most recently appeared in *Young American Poets*, the *Cleveland Review*, and the 2012 *Texas Poetry Calendar*. Allyson is currently at work on her first full-length poetry collection.





Roofline

by Pia Taavila

A woodpecker drills the gutter, relentless.
Her red head blurs as her beak, thin
jack-hammer, bores the hole more hollow.

She's on a mission, urgent, efficient.
I would love you in this way,
single-minded, sure-footed.

Her flecked feathers knit and fray
in winter's ice-laced wind. I hear her.
Obedient to nature's dictate, tireless,

she knocks.



Night Cereus

by Hannah Star Rogers

Foreign beauties are hopeless
without their companion moths,
mediators of their protestant sex lives.

Here, there is no possibility for seed.
Even the incestuous pollen grains
that might fall to waiting stigmas are thwarted:
there is no wind.

When I lie down in the damp grass,
a star aligns with the blossom.
If I switch elbows, the symmetry is gone.



In My Grandmother's Cupboard

by Julia Nunnally Duncan

My husband tells our daughter
not to eat raw spaghetti
that she sneaks from the glass canister
where he stores it to keep it fresh.
He says it will swell in her stomach
and make her sick.

In my grandmother's cupboard
on a shelf where she hid her Society snuff can
she stored old boxes of spaghetti.
These I discovered,
and from an opened box,
I sifted broken pieces of pasta
onto my palm
to slip into my mouth
and crack between back teeth.
I pulled out long, golden sticks
to crunch from end to end,
my tongue and palate
searching for a flavor.
Here I stood and nibbled like a mouse,
lost in my pleasure,
until my uncle found me in the kitchen
and shamed me with the name
Chow hound.



Faith of Our Mothers

by Hannah Star Rogers

My grandmother said
Jews are such nice people.
After all, one was the Mother of our Savior.
She had acquired a taste for Turkish delights
on a trip to the Holy Land.

Once she drove out West to see
the dinosaur bones for herself
and told Aunt Claudine not to be a ninny
that our God is big enough to make
any animal he chose.

So my mother was free to go away to school,
to study plants and the early things
that crept along the earth.
She even had a Catholic roommate,
that her mother announced was free
to come to supper anytime.

At the last, she asked me if I knew about
the bears in the Bible, I remembered
was that a prophet called down a curse
in the name of the Lord and two she bears came
out of the woods and mauled forty-two children.

But later, with her concordance,
I saw the proverb marked:
Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs
than a fool bent on folly.



S/m

by Allyson Whipple

Avocados weren't built
for Texas summer, the leaves
brown, torn, the roots
dead from thirst, no matter
how much water I
pour before work

I too was not made for
near-desert, the child
of devoted northerners,
leashed to their snow,
wedded to their seasons

It's love that allows me
to push through, live
amid the pleasures of
torture, the rush that comes
from knowing you've
endured another round

Love also, from my
sadist side, which attempts
to force avocados
up in this weather

But there's no safe
word, they can't tell
me when to stop, they
only give up, their
brown-bag stems
withering in dehydrated soil



In the Elk Museum

by Wendy Taylor Carlisle

2 mounted adults, 1 fawn,
moths, fossils, pelts, a Limber-
lost Monarch, a Scout master,
4 Scouts, tee shirts, 1 stiff
stuffed owl & maps, maps,
maps for sale on shelves
with postcards, key chains,
Ozark souvenirs for
city folk, a guidebook
& a dozen Army knives.



To a Dead Friend Who's Still on Facebook

In memory of David Shevin

June 1, 1951 – July 19, 2010

by Beth Copeland

How can we say goodbye when you're still here,
sitting at your desk as if you're waiting to update
your status: "I'm alive, folks. It was only a joke."

Your friends would click "Like" and breathe
a collective sigh. A woman named June keeps
writing on your wall as if you'll read it and reply:

*Darling, still wear my "David's star" for you
I knew you knew and I know you know ... I will
love you as long as my heart beats ...*

You used to drop by my house when we were
in school to read funny poems you wrote
or weird headlines from *The Toledo Blade*,

trying to make me laugh. Those were the years
I dressed in black and took myself so seriously
that people told Johnny Cash jokes

behind my back. You said your goal in life
was to be the oldest man alive; I believed you
could have done it. You weren't sick. Why

did you have to die? I told you stories
of my Southern Gothic childhood: the Bobo
girls and a boy who could turn his eyelids



inside-out while sucking on his tongue.
Your favorite was the one about "Spaghetti,"
an Italian carnival worker who was killed

while traveling through a small Southern town.
His family stiffed the undertaker for the funeral,
so he hung the body on display in the mortuary

window. You gave me *The Ponder Heart* for
my birthday and wrote, *This time ... Spaghetti*
looked different. He was dancing in celebration

and wearing Beth's boots. What the hay –
yelped Corny – dead men wear no spats.
Spaghetti tipped a tall Italian hat

and started to sing: Camptown ladies
sing this song: *HOO HA! HOO HA!*
(You wrote "hoo ha" instead of "doo da"

because my ex-boyfriend would yell
"hoo ha!" and draw a figure eight in the air
whenever a curvaceous woman walked by.)

Spaghetti is buried now, a few miles from
my door. Finally, someone paid to lay him to rest.
You're resting, too, dear friend, in your grave,

while we wait at the window for you to dance
and sing, spatless, hatless, your bald head glowing
on our monitors like a moon, our dandy, darling Dave.



Barn Cat: A Statement on Twenty-First Century Awareness

by Meghan Palko

Cat licks fur from her coat—movements
spun in pearlish light—and lingers
under motes carrying yesterday's breath.

Cat is a whore for temptation and sleeps
among battered rims of tires and trees
and netted songs of whippoorwills

before noon. Cat ignores the nearby rooster
strutting in grandeur, rust-red feathers
happening from his breast,

and the peacock sifting his cerulean
fan for the grey hen who sleeps
under the far corner of the barn.

Cat only moves for the sound her own breath makes
when it becomes too heavy, for the feel of her tail
flicking at an aimless fly in the air.



(un)real battle

by Jessie Carty

Who would win:
zombies or unicorns?

Both pale and at their base -
animals. Yet

the unicorn
is anthropomorphized

into being more human
than the formerly human

zombie and neither
can truly vocalize.

They each have a weapon:
teeth versus horn;

rock, paper, scissors.
Paper can cover rock.

Rock can crush paper.
Teeth bites off horn.

Horn cracks tooth.
What it will come down to

is luck, which one
lunges at just the right moment.



Brownie For A Day

by Mollie Smith Waters

They were the “IT” girls. Even at the tender age of eight, everyone in school knew who the “it” girls were. They had names like Amanda or Tabitha or Jenny. They were blonde, long-haired, and always adorned with lots and lots of ribbons. Even now I feel sure that they had enough ribbons to rotate them daily without having to repeat a set for at least two weeks. But it wasn’t just their cute sounding names or seemingly endless supply of ribbons that made them special. Not only did they play together—exclusively—at recess or P. E., but they always ate together—exclusively—at lunch. Even their lunches marked them as exceptional. They would sit enjoying their home-prepared meals from metal Dukes of Hazard or Barbie lunchboxes while the rest of us shuffled through the lunch line.

Yet they were different in another way as well; they were BROWNIES! And each Tuesday they came dressed identically in their mocha colored Brownie uniforms complete with knee-high socks and Buster Brown penny loafers. In fact, the only differences between them on this day were the ribbons, all various shades of brown or white—but still keeping in line with their uniform theme.

The Brownies got to leave class 45 minutes early on Tuesdays. They’d leave the 2nd grade hall and join any 1st grade Brownies out on the playground, where they would swing or slide or climb the monkey bars until the magical white van would arrive to whisk them away to their secret meeting place. I knew they played on the playground because I’d seen them do it; I’d stumbled across their revelry once during a trip to the bathroom shortly after their departure from class. While the rest of us were inside slaving away on our spelling or math, the Brownies were outside on that playground, unsupervised, having the time of their lives. I had seen their freedom and complete acceptance of each other; they exuded confidence and entitlement. They belonged. Right then and there, I knew I was missing out on something wonderful, and from that point on, my one elementary school goal was to BE a BROWNIE!

Becoming a Brownie would prove difficult. For one, it wasn’t cheap. My family was poor, so poor that the walls practically reverberated with the word “money” because there was never enough, which was a constant worry. Living in a trailer park and being poor were things you were acutely aware of, even at age eight. For me, “extras” were out of the question.

I also had another problem: none of the Brownies were my friends, so I had no one I could turn to with all my questions. And, boy, did I have questions! They ranged from the practical to the whimsical. Question 1: How much does it cost to be a Brownie? Question 2: Where does that white van take you once you leave school? I had no one whose brain I could pick, but fate intervened. In my reading group were two Brownies, Mary Ellen and Ashley.

Each day, I listened closely to these two girls as they discussed Brownie-related issues. Mostly, their conversations were mundane; I gleaned nothing from their banter about the cost. Clearly, these girls did not have to worry about where the money came from. However, I did learn where that white van took them and what they did once they got to their meetings.

Apparently, the “secret meeting place” was no secret at all. They met in the fellowship hall of one of the local Baptist churches. While that revelation was disappointing, their long list of activities more than made up for it. For Christmas, the Brownies had written their letters to Santa and had made stockings embossed with their names in glitter. On Valentine’s Day, they had made construction paper hearts full of syrupy sweet sentiments for their moms and dads. It was quickly approaching Easter, and I didn’t have a moment to spare if I didn’t want to miss out on that activity, too!

As it turns out, Easter coming so late in the school year is an opportune time for clubs everywhere to have recruitment meetings. Hence, each Brownie was encouraged to bring a classmate to the Easter outing. In a class of twenty students, only about half of which were girls and half of those were already Brownies, the pickings must have been pretty slim for me to garner an invitation, but that is exactly what happened. Mary Ellen asked me to be her guest.



The weeks leading up to the Easter event seemed endless. I was already in overdrive from the mere prospect of joining the Brownies on this momentous occasion, but Mary Ellen and Ashley fueled my excitement as they regaled me with the Easter meeting plans. We'd have a visit from the Easter bunny, we'd be hunting eggs, and we'd be making our very own construction paper hats that had two giant rabbit ears coming out of the top to make us all look like bunnies.

The day finally arrived. With my straw basket in hand, I was ready to set forth on my journey to become a Brownie. Class seemed to drag on forever, and for once, even recess was unusually slow. However, the moment arrived when the teacher made her weekly Tuesday pronouncement, "Brownies are dismissed for pickup." Oh, how my heart soared at those words, and for once, I was the one gathering my things and looking back at the few girls remaining in class who wore the same pained expression that normally adorned my face on Tuesday afternoons.

After our dismissal from class, we raced past the 1st graders on our way to the playground. Feeling more like an interloper than part of the group, I let the girls in mocha take to the swings as I stood back and basked in their glory. When a swing finally opened up, I got in it and pumped my legs as hard as I could. I was so caught up in my triumph of being part of the group that I missed seeing the white van pull up; Mary Ellen had to yell at me to hurry up before I got left behind.

The van ride was short. In fact, we probably could have walked to our meeting place in less than ten minutes; however, none of this mattered because I was there. I was with them. For once in my life, I was a Brownie!

Upon entering the fellowship hall, I was overwhelmed: the entire place was decked out in Easter decorations. Two long tables with enough chairs to seat about forty girls filled the room. A small box sat atop each chair, and on the table in front of the chairs were placards with each Brownie member's name. The adjacent chair had a placard with the word "Guest," so I sat down next to Mary Ellen.

Once we had said the Pledge of Allegiance, had roll call, and completed introductions, the afternoon began to unwind in a whirl of activity. First, we opened our boxes, which contained the necessary items to make our bunny hats. The troop leader demonstrated how to make the hat; then she turned us loose to make our own. One of my ears turned out shorter than the other, though no one seemed to notice. After making our hats, we got in line to have our picture taken with the Easter Bunny. With this formality over, we ate our snacks before going on the egg hunt.

The egg hunt was *the* event of the day. The area behind the fellowship hall had multiple trees and bushes on a sloped hill, and from our vantage point atop the hill, we could see slips of dyed yellow and green eggs peeking out from the undergrowth. All forty girls stood behind the starting line as the troop leader counted down from 10. She hit 3, 2, 1, then yelled, "GO!" A flurry of brown and white ribbons flew past me! A couple of first graders got tangled up and rolled to the bottom of the hill. Normally, this would've set off wails and screams as scraped knees began to bleed, but these girls had no time for band-aids or sympathy. That could wait; the race was on!

I began grabbing eggs as fast as the other girls. I had three, then five, then ten. But as quickly as the hunt had started, it came to a screeching halt. The eggs were getting harder to find; it was then that the leader called out, "Who's found the golden egg?"

This question sent us dashing back to the bushes! I ran to the nearest hedge, but there was no golden egg there. I darted behind a tree, still nothing. At this point, I caught a flash of gold twinkling above, so I looked up. In the tree closest to me, there was the golden egg nestled safely between two branches. Excitedly, I rushed towards the tree, but then I stopped. In all of the joy I had felt that day of being a Brownie, I had also still felt the keen awareness that I was not really part of the group. I was an outsider, and should someone who was not a real Brownie be the one to find the golden egg? No. Instead of running straight for the tree and pointing out the egg's hiding place, I simply hung back. I poked around in some more bushes and waited for the inevitable to happen.

After what felt like an eternity, Mary Ellen espied the egg, and she sent up a terrific yelp as she ran towards the tree and pointed skyward. The troop leader applauded; the girls ran forward to see the prize. Mary Ellen opened the egg with care, and inside was a pair of silver earrings shaped like rabbits. A collective murmur of "oohs" and "aahs" went up from the crowd, but Mary Ellen



faltered. She simply smiled, placed the earrings back into the egg, and said “thanks.” From where I was standing, I could see that her ears were not pierced; mine were.

The egg hunt marked the official end of the events, and now it was just a matter of waiting for our mothers to arrive. My mom was one of the first there, and as she walked down the hill to collect me, I ran to tell Mary Ellen thanks for the invitation and to tell the troop leader I was leaving. She nodded and handed me a piece of yellow paper telling me in the process to give it to my mom.

I glanced at the paper as I ran up the hill to meet my mom halfway; it listed dues for membership and prices for uniforms. I frowned when I saw the totals, and I shoved the paper to the bottom of my basket. My mom smiled as I took her outstretched hand, and asked me if I had enjoyed myself. I told her “yes,” but I said it wasn’t something that I wanted to do all the time. She seemed surprised but didn’t question me.

Already, I knew that asking to come again would be futile. We could not afford it, so what would be the point of even showing her the paper? I had enjoyed myself immensely, but the odds of my returning were slim to none. Still, the day had lived up to my expectations, and even though I knew that I was not destined to be a Brownie in the future, I had at least been a Brownie for a day!



Family Secrets

by Patricia Thomas

I woke up immediately as soon as the car turned off the paved road, and I heard the crunch of the gravel on the tires. My mind was on the alert. Something was not right. Having made this trip before, I knew there was no need to be on a dirt road—it was all black top from Auburn to Geneva. Uncle Arthur was driving, giving me a ride to my grandmother's house in Geneva, so I could be a bridesmaid in my friend Betsy's wedding. He had offered to give me a ride to Geneva and take me back to college on Sunday.

Uncle Arthur, my father's brother, had always been my favorite uncle. He was short and stout, built like a fire plug my mother said, and he loved dogs, cigars, and Virginia ham. He was the jolly uncle, always trying to get people to laugh and succeeding.

"When I die, just drop me off at the vet down the street. These other doctors in town don't know what they're doing," was one of his favorite expressions.

When I was young, every weekend my family gathered at my great-grandparents' house in Elba—all the siblings and their kids. Uncle Arthur would pull quarters out of all the children's ears and show us card tricks. With us kids, he was the life of the party. Best of all he always bought us popsicles, peanuts and moon pies, probably because he liked to eat those things too. Since he and Aunt Rachel had no children, he spent lots of time with me and my cousins.

Uncle Arthur and I had always been good friends. He had taught me how to drive my great grandfather's big, blue truck when I was 10, sitting beside me, coaching, while I swerved all over the road, screaming from fear and excitement. I was his biggest fan when he demonstrated the tricks he taught his dog, Samson, such as how to drink water out of a toilet. He gave me cool gifts that I loved, a twelve inch Mr. Peanut action figure (we lived in the Peanut capital of the world), a two dollar bill (when he worked at a bank), and best of all, a *Dogs of the World* book and record set. Each page displayed a picture of a different breed of dog who talked (on the record) and engaged in some stereotype-of-the-breed activity, such as a Dalmatian riding on a fire truck and a Boxer fighting in a boxing ring.

Once Granny and Papa (my great-grandparents) passed on, I didn't see Uncle Arthur very much. All the cousins became teenagers and wanted to be with their friends, not hang around with their relatives on the front porch, so we usually stayed home when we could get away with it. I saw Uncle Arthur and Aunt Rachel mostly on holidays, Thanksgiving and Christmas mainly.

After high school I went to Auburn University and Uncle Arthur lived nearby. He worked during the week at an insurance office in Opelika, Alabama and went home to Geneva on the weekends to the home he shared with Aunt Rachel, who I adored. Since he lived so close, I was not surprised when he started showing up at the dorm my first semester. He would bring me boxes of goodies--chocolate chip cookies, pound cakes, and tiny pecan pies, in pink bakery boxes tied with string, a step up from popsicles and moon pies. My roommates and I were grateful. He was the same old Uncle Arthur, always laughing and telling jokes about lawyers or doctors. So when he offered to give me a ride to my grandmother's I was happy to accept. It would be a fun trip.

At first when he picked me up, I talked and talked. It was a relief to talk to someone in my family, someone I trusted. I was bubbling over with my thoughts about college, my dorm mates, classes, and of course, boys. He listened politely, laughed in the right places, and then started listening to the radio. Eventually I fell asleep--until we pulled onto the dirt road. Then after a couple of miles, Uncle Arthur pulled the car to a stop. I looked around and saw no buildings. It was desolate--no cars, no houses, no stores, no people. The only sign of life at all was a small clump of green trees in the distance and a few cows milling around.

Puzzled, I asked, "Why are you stopping here? What's wrong? Is there a problem with the car?" I could think of no other reason to stop here.

"I thought you might be thirsty, since it's so hot. Would you like a drink?" Uncle Arthur said. "I'm not talking about coca cola either. Look in the green ice chest at your feet."



I had noticed the ice chest when I got in, but figured he was bringing fresh tomatoes to Aunt Rachel, who liked to can them. Curious, I opened the ice chest and saw bottles--- of bourbon, vodka, and gin, a bag of ice and jugs of orange juice, coke, and sprite. It looked like a full bar. My mouth felt dry and my heart seemed to pump faster and louder. This was not right. What made this occurrence even more disturbing was that no one in my family drank alcohol, not even for celebrations or holidays, not even a glass of wine. Since coming to college I had been to a few fraternity parties, so I was familiar with all the contents in the ice chest, but alcohol and Uncle Arthur did not go together in my mind, not at all.

The boundaries of my two worlds (at this point) were becoming confused and blurred-- childhood, fun, Uncle Arthur, safety (world 1) vs. college, boys, parties, drinking alcohol (world 2). These worlds had thankfully been separate for me until now, and that's how I had wanted them to stay. I honestly did not know how to respond. I looked at Uncle Arthur, and then I stared at the contents of the ice chest in disbelief. I looked around desperately. When I turned back to look at Uncle Arthur he had changed from being my jolly, laughing Uncle Arthur into a fat, sweaty, scary man. I instinctively knew I was in danger, and it was serious. He was breathing heavily too, not unusual since he was at least 50 pounds overweight, and staring at me.

My fight or flight instinct kicked in. I thought, "If I have to, I can outrun him, but where will I run to? There's nothing around here. I can kick and scream, but there's no one to hear."

"No, I'm not thirsty. I don't want anything to drink. Let's go. I want to go to my grandmother's house. Now," I replied as harshly as I could, which sounded much weaker than I had intended.

Uncle Arthur slowly turned around and started the car. He made a U-turn and drove the car back onto the black road. Neither of us said anything. I was starting to breathe normally and kept my eyes looking straight ahead. I tried to calm myself: "You're ok. You're back on the road. You're safe. Just pretend like you're asleep. Try to figure this out."

About half an hour went by, with Uncle Arthur driving, and listening to country music on the radio. I was pretending to sleep, when he reached over, grabbed my breast and squeezed. His touch felt like a hot branding iron on my body. My head shot straight up.

"What do you think you're doing? Get your hands off me," I screamed. I wanted to cry, but I did not have time for that. I had to think about how I was going how to handle this situation. First an offer of alcohol, which was disturbing enough, and now, much, much worse, Uncle Arthur was molesting me!

"I'm sorry. I wasn't grabbing you. I was just rubbing your shoulder. You seemed so tired," he said.

"Rubbing my shoulder! You were touching my breast, not my shoulder. Keep your hands off me!" I shouted.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help myself. Most women have breasts like oranges, but yours are like grapefruits," he replied. "Please don't tell anyone about this. Please don't tell your aunt or your father. I'm so sorry. It won't happen again."

For the rest of the trip, I sat there, silent, for three reasons. One, I was afraid of what he might do if I closed my eyes. Second, I did not know what to say to him. Three, I had to decide what I would do about this. If I told Aunt Rachel and my grandmother, they would tell my father, and that would be the end of seeing not only Uncle Arthur, which was fine with me at this point, but also Aunt Rachel. I didn't like that idea. It would be an ugly scene. Lots of people would get hurt, my parents, grandparents, Aunt Rachel. And it would be embarrassing. I didn't want to talk about this with anyone. He said he wouldn't do it again. If only he had not done this! But he did. You have to handle this. These thoughts were swirling around in my mind, until we pulled into my grandmother's driveway.

My grandmother rushed outside to give me a hug and gratefully started talking non-stop. "How was your trip, Sweetie? I'm so glad to see you. Betsy has been calling all afternoon to find out when you would arrive. Thanks so much for bringing her Arthur. That was so kind of you. I made your favorite, honey—fried chicken and mashed potatoes."

Uncle Arthur looked at me. I looked at my grandmother. I had not said a word.



"And then I said, "The trip was fine."

Uncle Arthur stared at me, mumbled a few words, and then turned around and got back in the car. As he pulled away, he rolled down the window to say that he wouldn't be able to take me back to school after all on Sunday. Something had come up.

I did not say a word to my grandmother or to anyone else for many years, deciding to carry this secret around with me, so as not to cause disruption in my family. And now, forty years later, I think my decision also had something to do with the feelings of shame and embarrassment. I didn't know how to come to grips with these events, how to reconcile my childhood feelings with these adult happenings.

Did I do the right thing? I'm not sure. Uncle Arthur and I never got back on a friendly footing. We hardly spoke unless we had to. I made a point of never being alone with him again. My sister became his favorite niece, and he left all his worldly possessions to her. I remained close to my Aunt Rachel until the day she died.

When Uncle Arthur died many years later, after a series of strokes that paralyzed the right half of his body, I went to the funeral and stood in the reception line with my family while everyone in town filed by, talking about what a wonderful man he was. I had always wondered what the reaction of my family would be if I revealed this incident. So, after we left the funeral home, when we were alone, I took that opportunity to tell my sister what had happened all those years ago.

I told the story and waited. "I've never told anyone. I wanted you to know. And I always wondered if maybe he had molested you too."

"No, he surely did not. Why did you tell me this?" she responded, in an angry, annoyed tone. My question was answered.



Master Manipulator With Sequins

by Cindy Small

The hot pink Cadillac barreled into the principal's reserved parking space at my junior high school. It was my ninth-grade open house and my mother Lil arrived with her best friend, Edna. Show time. Soft, convertible top rolled back on the Cadillac, my mother's leopard stilettos stuck outside the car, feet first. Edna, head cocked to the side, smacked her crimson lips and took a bountiful swig from a martini shaker. This was my glitzy SWAT team ready to check on my progress in school. Lil wore a lounging hostess ensemble, an exquisite version of a bouclé pullover, embroidered in gold, and trimmed in black and white. Gold metallic Capri stretch pants matched perfectly with her wavy medium-length hair, lightly dusted with gold. It was, after all, a casual Open House. She carried a small leopard clutch bag filled with painkillers, mood enhancers, lipstick and hairspray. Edna arrived in a hostess set from China in midnight-black brocade. It beautifully matched her two large black hair buns tightly pulled together on each side. No one ever knew Edna had a lifetime growth of stringy black hair that literally swept the floor. Her real hair remained a mystery throughout her life wrapped secretly underneath two tightly woven hair buns. Both women stepped out of the car, rearranged push-up bras, and entered my school.

Although classes were on the second floor, I knew they arrived. There were hushed, subtle, undistinguishable sounds in the stairwell. An open house at school always produced immense tension for me; my mother assumed I was a genius who produced spectacular work, whereas all other kids produced utter crap. Also, Mother noticed other parents heaping lavish praise on their little losers as she demanded to hear what a genius her child was. Lil and Edna would enter each classroom and sit at the head of the class side by side. Edna felt extreme tranquility after her last sip of martini in the car, simply totally at ease in the classroom. When infused with liquor, she would take her long, pointy red fingernails and dig them deeply into the buns of her scalp like a hunting expedition. It was so mysterious; I could watch her for hours, hypnotized as to what she could possibly pull out of her head. A handful of brains? Chocolate? A Barbie Doll?

Mother packed herself into a low-slung student desk, crossed her metallic Capri-clad legs and pulled a notebook from her beaded clutch purse. Always prepared for a possible future lawsuit, she had a habit of taking notes at all times, thinking this was a great terrorist maneuver. My teachers thought this detective-like move was strangely bizarre. Among a wave of parents in tailored linen Southern clothing were two spots of shiny sequins: Lil and Edna.

Next stop for Lil and Edna was the science classroom so they could inspect my yearly exhibit. They were immensely impressed looking at the giant board my mother previously had designed by an architect friend of hers. Her beliefs were always "hire the best and pay" rather than wear yourself out trying to make something from scratch. The elaborate board had dozens of small, glued laboratory bottles, each depicting in very fancy calligraphy letters how sugar cane was transformed into sugar. It was scientific, professional and definitely not the work of a ninth grader. Mother approached my science teacher Mister Roy, looked at the second-prize ribbon tacked on my project, and demanded to know why I was only a semi-finalist.

"Dahlink, why she doesn't have a ribbon on her project already?"

"Well, a semi-finalist is something to be proud of, Mrs. Small."

"Hell, no, only number one counts! Fog you!!!" demanded Mother in her Hebrew/Bavarian dialect.

Not happy with his answers, mother grabbed Edna's arm and off they went downstairs to visit my math teacher.

I was born with a math disability. A professionally-documented one that had been signed, sealed and delivered by a leading psychologist at Tulane University Medical School in New Orleans. My mother refused to believe it, feeling anything sliding from her womb had to be perfectly smart. Why not? Her vagina was also narcissistic. My IQ was a reflection of her immaculate Viennese DNA. Denying my disability, she continuously hired a math tutor, Miss Inez, who was as mean as a grizzly bear in heat and had Satan's temper on a bad day. This devil woman did not only think I was a tad bit delayed in the numbers department, her assessment was that I was clinically and profoundly retarded. Miss Inez arrived at my home Tuesdays and Thursdays after school, all dried

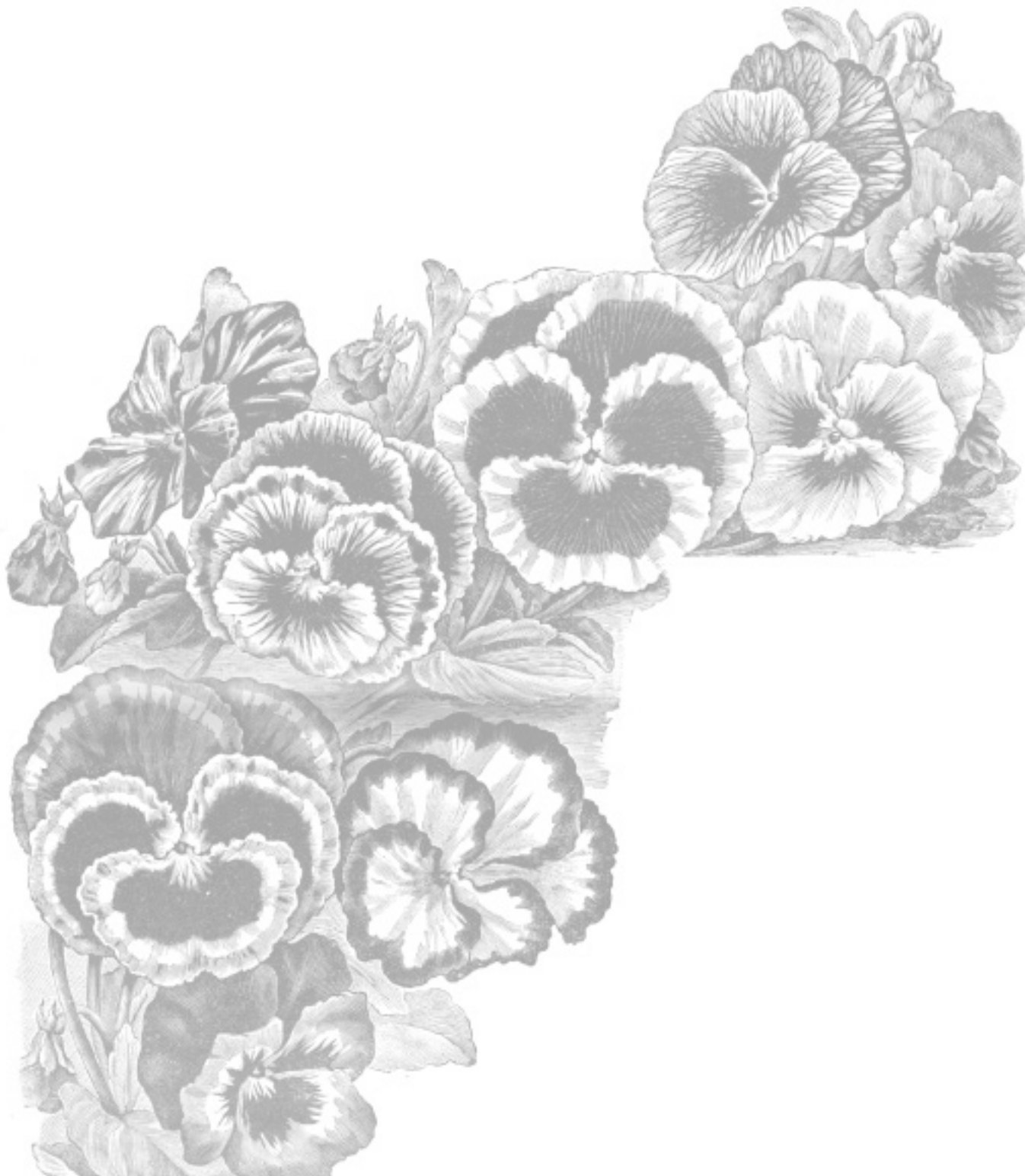


up and sour-faced. During our tutoring sessions, I had only one chance to get any answer correct. Of course, I was always wrong since figuring out mathematical formulas for me was similar to speaking and reading fluent Mandarin Chinese. When my wrong answer popped out, Miss Inez slapped her notebook on the desk, screaming "It's wrong, Cynthia, all wrong. Wrong, wrong and more wrong! What is it about math that you don't get? I'm staying right here all night until you give the correct answer. Got it?" Then she slammed her books on our glass table top. Well, I never did get it, didn't want to get it and felt my hands begging to rip her tongue out with an Exacto knife. Her eyeballs could have easily been included as well. My mother must have special ordered her FedEx from Hell. If ever there was a tiny glimmer of hope in my understanding numbers, Miss Inez destroyed it. Plus, God knows she never saw a sequin in her life. That alone was a fine reason for her ass to be delivered to the electric chair.

My ninth-grade math teacher, thankfully a sweet Fisher Price-sized lesbian named Miss Quida Williamson, watched in awe as Lil and Edna entered the room during our Open House. Miss Quida definitely never saw the likes of women like this in a lesbian bar. She was so enthralled at Lil and Edna that she told my mother I was doing "marvelous work." How could this be? I could hardly add and my work was good? Barely five feet tall, Miss Williamson was patted on the shoulder by my six-foot-tall sequined mother and told how "wunderbar" she was. At that precise moment I knew my future grades in math would be nothing short of an "A." Thank God for lesbians.

Edna felt she needed to throw back one more little sip of martini before visiting the last classroom, the principal's office. Arm in arm, they hurriedly clicked their heels toward the behemoth Cadillac. Edna sat in the front of the parked car, twisted off the cap of the shaker quickly and gulped vermouth. Mother chased a painkiller down with seltzer water, cleverly arched her lips with orange lipstick in the rear-view mirror, smacked them, and took a deep breath. Slamming the car doors shut, they headed toward the principal's office for the final visit. "Come, Edna. Try to look normal. Let's see what he has to say about our Cindy." The door opened and my mother immediately recognized Mister Meunier. She said to Edna, "Sweetie, he's the one who bought our best seller panty set last month, *The Pussy Cat*. Oh God, my principal had been a customer in my grandmother's X-rated lingerie shop. And he bought Pussy Cat panties!! Can it get any worse than this?"

Mister Meunier's eyes were big as a pizza pan. "Come in, Mrs. Small; your daughter is an absolute gem in our school," he said, lying through his broken yellowed teeth. At that precise, defined moment, I knew my academic career was engraved in platinum.







Reservoir

by Beth Slattery

I didn't know they were nuns when I hit their boat. It's not like their bodies—all black, white and heavy-laden—littered the water. Nuns look like normal people. I found out later when the reporter asked if I felt guilty. I didn't. No one was hurt, and I'm not even a Catholic girl.

Besides, it wasn't my fault. They were radiant with the sun behind them, and I was blinded.

We were in borrowed boats, but the parishioner who lent them theirs knew about the borrowing. I, on the other hand, have been charged with theft and reckless endangerment of eight nuns.

Some days I borrow boats and speed around the reservoir, skimming across the surface of what will later be Richland's drinking water. Waterfowl part and allow me right of way, sometimes taking wing. I'm envious; that's a mode of transportation I don't have.

I'm not the only foster kid the Biehls have, and they aren't my first foster parents. Tending other people's children is how they earn a living. Mr. Biehl damaged himself moving Lady Kenmores, and Mrs. Biehl is a member of a lot of clubs. It's time-consuming to belong.

The Biehls couldn't have kids of their own. Now they are too old. She says the six of us are her children, but she says it so you can tell she's used to giving the answer and doesn't think about what it means. Mrs. Biehl wasn't pleased when I called from the police station.

The cops haven't been so mean. If you are fifteen and cry in a wet T-shirt it confuses the male ones. An older officer sees me with my hands under my shirt, pushing it out to create some decency and he offers me an orange rain poncho. The coverage is nice even if it does smell of mildew. He tells me not to cry because he's sure the charges will be dropped. "Nuns aren't as vindictive as when I was in school," he says. He hands me a tissue. "You gave 'em a bump," he says. "They could swim. Though if they'd had on those heavy crucifixes, it could have been bad." I blow my nose and shove the tissue in my damp pocket.

"Yes sir, Vatican II might have saved you from doing time," he says, more to his desk than to me.

Mr. Biehl picks me up because Mrs. Biehl is home with Gus, a new croupy eight month old. Mr. Biehl sees me and bobs his head the way farmers do when they pass on the road to the grain elevator. No emotion. No words. No movement beyond the head bob. He has to sign papers, and I'm reminded that I'm goods being passed from one adult to another. I've exchanged hands five times since my parents died two years ago.

The silent ride home gives me plenty of time to figure out what I'll say at the inquisition. Mrs. Biehl is crankier than Gus. What would she like to hear? I know what she'll say. She's not getting paid to put up with bullshit like this. I'm headed for Juvenile Hall. Her voice will rise until the baby cries. When he cuts loose, she'll blame me.

I was right.

Along with the hollering, she slams a cabinet door and sighs. "Your father is never going to come get you if you turn into a juvenile delinquent," she says. She hands the baby to me and turns her back on the pair of us.

When I said my parents were dead, what I meant was dead to me. That is, Momma is dead. She killed herself a week after Daddy left when I was 13. She'd been sad for years, and when Daddy couldn't take the tears anymore, he hugged me and drove away. A week later, I found Momma in the tub when I got home from school. She'd left a note on the vanity: If I can't have him at least you can, sweet girl. She was sure he'd come back to get me as soon as someone told him I was on my own. Her plan was flawed. Even if there had been someone to tell him, no one knew where Daddy had gone.

I'm not mad at her. Him either. They were just looking for a way out.



Gus feels good in my arms and quiets down, even with the croup, as soon as I hold him. We aren't allowed to know why he's here, but Marcus, who's been here longest, says that Gus's mother was a crack whore and you can tell that Gus is addicted because of the crying. But there are other reasons Gus could be here besides drugs. Sometimes, while I'm rocking him, I imagine his mother is my age and can't take care of him properly. Rose Meyer, at my school, looked pregnant before Christmas and decidedly not in January. I look into Gus's old-man eyes and try to see bits of Rose, but he looks like himself. I want there to be an exotic reason he's here: a celebrity who has hidden him from paparazzi, or a crime he observed that requires him to be in Witness Protection. Not that he could tell anybody what he saw.

My theories are sometimes faulty.

Mrs. Biehl hands me a to-do list. It's longer than usual. I'm not Cinderella. We've all got responsibilities here, but the added items on the list are my penance. She takes the list back and under wash windows and rake, she writes one more thing and underlines it twice.

"Apologize to the Sisters, Robin. They've been good to us and they dropped those charges. Biehls aren't heathens; they need to know that."

The Biehls are Catholic, and they are trying to convert me. When I moved in, they pulled me out of public high school and enrolled me at St. Bridget's. She said I should be grateful; such an education doesn't come cheap. I happen to know that it doesn't cost them anything. We're a hard luck case and go for free. Marcus says we're a tax write-off. He's a senior; I've no reason to doubt him.

So I go to mass, dip my fingers in holy water and kneel when everyone else does, but it's nothing to me. It doesn't matter where I go to school either. I'm biding my time. I sit in the back, my nose in a book, and tug at the uniform collar that threatens to choke me. I never ask questions but somehow I end up with the highest scores on the tests, which isn't a problem unless there's a curve that calls attention to me. Even so, my classmates couldn't tell you my name if you asked. "The smart girl with the bangs in her eyes?" they'd ask.

That's me. Only I'm not really smart. I should have known not to steer a boat into the sun. And now I have to ask forgiveness for my bad judgment.

It's warm, so I take Gus with me as I walk to the brick house behind St. Anthony's where some nuns live. There's no way to know if they are my nuns, but I'm hoping that I can say my "sorry" to whomever answers and let her pass it along. Gus is heavy on my hip as I let the knocker clunk against the door. When I dream about leaving the Biehls, Richland, and my current life, I think about taking Gus with me, so we wouldn't be alone. But he's a fat baby and would weigh me down.

The woman who answers the door has her hair in a towel, so my first thought is that it's one of my nuns, still reservoir damp. My next thought is that I'm barging in on a real family because she's wearing blue jeans, and I can hear kids chattering behind her.

"Bring your baby in," she says, scrubbing her hair. "We had an upset with some milk." She points to her head and walks me toward the back of the house where the noise is loudest.

How did milk get on her head?

"He's not my baby," I say. Instantly I feel like a traitor for disowning Gus. He's as much my baby as he is Mrs. Biehl's. He belongs to no one. To us all.

The woman hasn't heard me anyhow.

Several pre-schoolers are finger painting at a newspaper-covered table. The nun tells me to sit and hands me a form. I sit at the low, messy table and ponder it while Gus grabs at tubs of paint. *Child's name* is written in the first block at the top. Would that be me or Gus?

"Fill it out!" she says, tickling Gus under the chin. "We have to know where to reach you in an emergency. Which school you going to, honey? You drive yet? Be sure to write it down." Gus lets out one of his coughs.

"He sounds like a dog," one of the boys says. I glare at the boy and lay the form down on yesterday's headlines.



"I'm here about the apology," I say abruptly, as if I'm here by some pre-arrangement, answering a classified ad requesting apologies. The nun's face wrinkles in confusion, so I explain. While I offer my story, Gus lets out a shriek and smiles at the boy who called him a dog.

The nun nods, and I start going into more detail than I mean to. I confess this is not the first time I've "borrowed" a boat. I tell her about the Biehls, my parents, how I fake my way through mass, and even how Gus's mother is a crack whore. I actually say "whore" to a nun. My mouth won't quit. Why am I saying so much? This nun doesn't need my life story. She'll think I'm playing on her sympathy. Instead, she keeps nodding, encouraging each new confession from me. The cops should hire her if she has this effect on everyone.

My words stop, as if the water spigot controlling them has been turned off. She pulls the towel off of her head. I wonder if I need to say something more. Perhaps she missed the apology. As I open my mouth to speak, she puts her hands on my cheeks, leans down, and kisses my forehead.

"Bless you, child," she says.

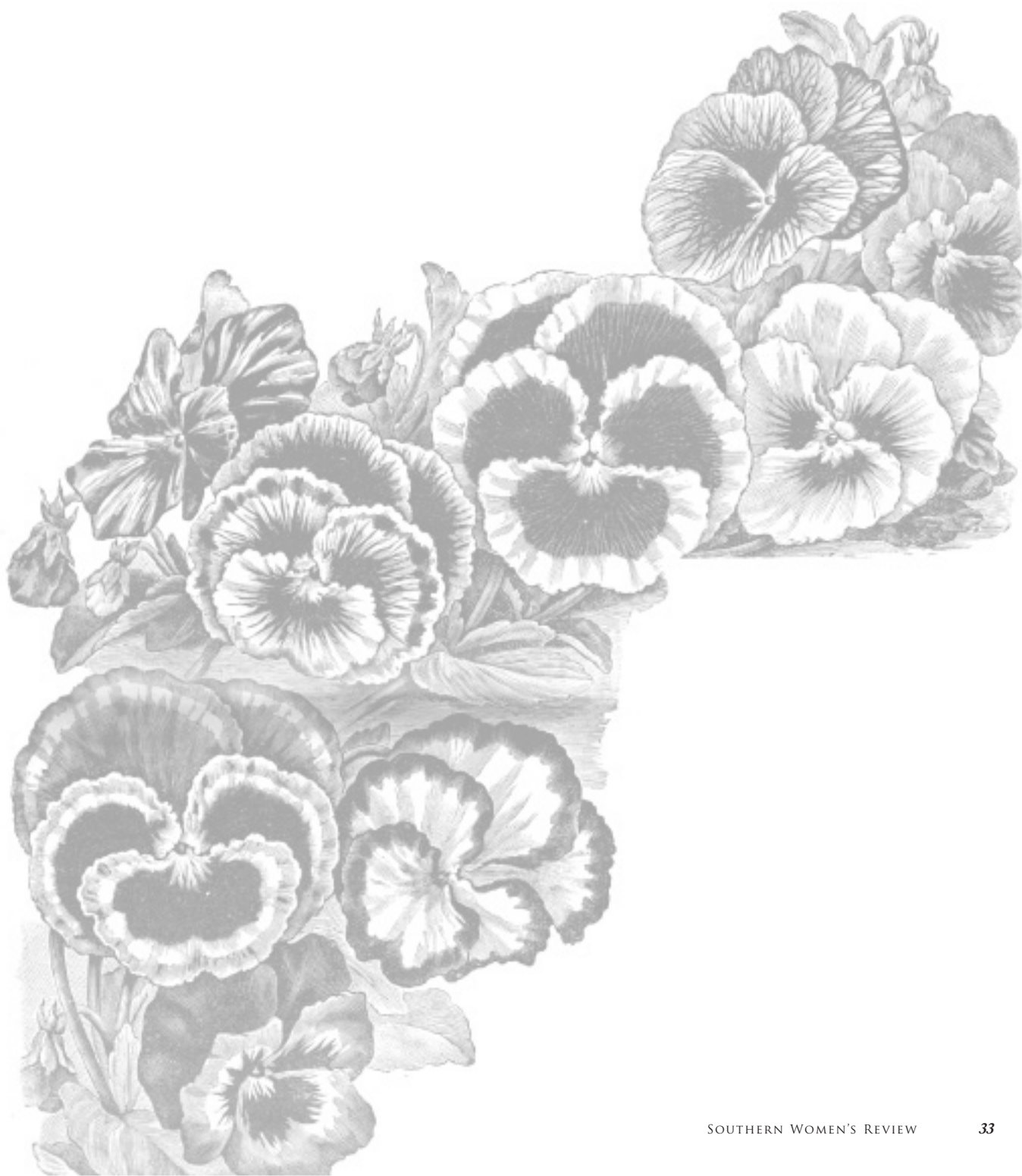
I've been going to church long enough to know this isn't part of the routine. There's usually some arm flapping and a sense that the priest doesn't really want to forgive. But this is something better than what the priest does, and I am clean.

As Gus and I leave, the nun tells me to come back with my baby any time my childcare doesn't work out. "We like to help out young mothers," she says, shaking Gus's foot good-bye.

I feel too good to go back to the Biehls. I don't want to have to answer questions about whether I had learned my lesson. The nun conversation is my personal business, and I can't say I'll never borrow another boat. When the urge strikes to escape, there's not much I can do to control it.

I walk to the park and push Gus in a baby swing. He laughs, barking the higher he flies. I should take him home and sit him next to the vaporizer, but for now, it's the two of us, and the afternoon sun is warm.

Daddy will not come to get me. Maybe when I'm old and he's older, we'll be on one of those talk shows where people think they're going in for a make-over and end up getting reunited with some missing person of theirs. Maybe he'll confess he's sorry he went, sorrier still he didn't come and get me. "If I'd only known," he'll say, crying in front of 60 million viewers. And I will nod my head and bless him with the sign of the cross.





Liar Liar Pants on Fire...

by Mary Pauer

*"Deceiver, Dissembler/Your trousers are alight/From what pole or gallows/
Shall they dangle in the night? -- William Blake, "Liar, Liar," 1810*

I lied as I supposed we all did as kids: that our toys were put away, that we had flushed the toilet, and that we were not drinking right from the bottle, with the refrigerator door ajar. My mother often looked me in the eye and demanded, "Tell Mummy the truth."

Her commanding tone arose from her belief that lying came to me naturally.

I was surprised that she knew my secret. I was more surprised though, at dinner, the night I heard Daddy tell a lie.

I don't remember Mom's question. I only remember the pressure of his fingers tight on the tines of his fork. I was watching his hands which I thought attractive. Mine were short, wide like my mother's, and my index finger was crooked a tad to the right. I saw my father put his utensils on his plate and heard him say, "No."

I watched his breath flow crystalline as on a cold morning. His falsehood took form and came alive.

He repeated, "No, I did not."

Mom saw the apparition too. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened to a small ooh-shaped cherry lifesaver. I expected her to cup his chin, to insist on the truth, but she didn't. My mother accepted his utterance; her mouth closed into pursed lips, and she turned her head briefly away. From that moment until I finished my broccoli, the meal was quiet.

I excused myself from the table where adult glances melted my ice cream.

That night, before sleep, worrisome thoughts filled my head. How often had my father lied? How often had he lied to me? That night, during sleep, in dreams, the sheets wound around my feet, shackling me to the mattress, sweating my cheek to the pillow. Lies. Lies.

I had missed the signals so obvious, now that I had seen my father's knuckled hands. In gambling those signs are called tells.

My father, a commercial airliner navigator, was away from home for weeks and months at a time. When he flew he could have been anywhere.

I waited for Daddy's postcards -- violet-inked stamps from Moroc, butterflies in Tokyo, stern women in pen and ink from the Republik Offereich, long eared Buddhas with modern propeller airplanes in the foreground. Majestic, and natural, in the distance, loomed Mt. Fujiyama (3776 m). Those vistas shone; shed a mysterious feeling on scenic views.

African postcards stamped with blue-feathered, red-beaked birds proclaimed their foreign lineage -- the royaume de l'arabie soudite. They waved hello and good-bye.

He inked his message with an X on a window of grand hotel, and the note on the back, "My room." He always marked the identical the mid-left corner. He could have walked in and taken the fancy postcard from the concierge.

Maybe that was the first lie.



My father was a precise man, a logical and numerical man, a man accurate in both Metric and Standard Measurement, a man who calculated with a micrometer. This is not the type of man that should lie.

A father shouldn't lie to his daughter.

More mysterious were the postcards which after his trip, he was he was home. We looked at the cards together and he said, every time, "It's hard work over there - not always a pretty picture."

Unidentified uniforms hung in my father's closet: somber gray, adorned with gold braids on the shoulders and around the wrists. They were not from the airlines. Sometimes, the outfits went on trips with him. I was sure Daddy was a sneaky Pete. I felt closest to him when he was away. I imagined him a Cock Robins on his way to London Town, or the naked Emperor, choosing his clothing with care. When Daddy was away, he was mine.

When he was home, his radio shack, in the basement, where he tapped codes to Russia in the middle of the night, was off limits. His workshop, where he drilled and planed and built engines and bookcases, was off limits. His secret self was off limits.

When he was home, I inhaled the smell of airline fuel on his hankies. He used three, one for his nose, one for the gracious offer, and one, in his breast pocket, for show. He hung his uniform shirts over the newel post upstairs, the collars still stiff in his shape, the creased arms limp with wear, the layered pile pungent with adult aromas.

When I was old enough to cross busy Park Avenue alone, my chore was to trudge to the Chinese Laundry to leave his worn shirts and fetch the clean ones. The laundry folded each starched shirt around a slice of cardboard, and then wrapped it separately, in brown paper, ready for travel. Mrs. Lin stacked the shirts, and wove the twine around the bundle into a handle. It was my suitcase to carry.

When Daddy was home, we went on car trips, just he and I. We were always on a mission. He'd ask, "Do you want to go with me?" This summer voyage began with Dad's instruction, "wear your bathing suit." It was the year I learned the breast stroke. I imagined gliding like Esther Williams, wearing a sheath and chic bathing suit.

I put shorts over my tank speedo, took a towel, put on my socks and sneakers. I took nothing else, not a sweater, not a comb, no tissues. Usually he'd have sent me back for a tote. Not this time. He did hand me a paper bag with a sandwich, and a napkin. I looked at a soft pear, with brown spots and his indented thumbprint. No juice, no snack. He wanted to get on the road: his anticipation infected me too. I was ready in a flash.

These were our true times together. We were scaring up a rare find, some paraphernalia for his ham radio station, call letters W2NYW. He always specified. "W-Two, N-Nan, Y-Yolk, W-Williams."

After several long distance telephone calls, my father had negotiated a purchase. We would drive the long trip to Connecticut, to inspect the transistor gizmos before the final exchange of cash. We were the Argonauts. The Golden Fleece was his. He said, "We'll take the Turnpike."



The bench seats of our Chevy were cloth and vinyl and I folded my towel underneath me, and sat quietly in the passenger seat.

Daddy promised I could swim in their in ground pool while he did the deal. We did not live in the kind of neighborhood that had in ground swimming pools, and I didn't have private swim-club friends. I wasn't allowed to use the community pool. My mother thought the water unsanitary. A person could get polio, or ringworm, become unclean; how a soul gets when a person tells a lie.

We arrived in the development around noon. The street with look-alike houses was quiet. The lawns were green. No bikes parked against trees, no dogs scrummed in the shade. There were no neighborhood noises, except cicadas humming in a whining pitch. No one was outside.

The man, shorter than my father, answered the bell. In response to me and my towel he said, "Follow the path around back." My father walked me to the pool.

I ate the bologna sandwich on white bread with yellow mustard in two minutes. I brushed the crumbs from my lips. I folded the napkin as many times as I could before I put it into the paper bag. I used about forty-five seconds.

No one is supposed to swim for fifteen minutes after eating. I can be trusted to follow a rule. Shorts still over my bathing suit, I sat on a green and cream plastic webbed chaise lounge by the side of the pool and sweated. I calculated the time from my plain-faced Swiss watch.

When freedom lay within three sweeps of my second hand, a mere 180 seconds, I untied my shoes, and dangled my feet in the water. A shiver ran my shin. Then I stood and laid my towel smooth. I stepped out of my shorts, folded them and curled my toes over the edge of the pool. I posed, deciding how best to shatter the pool's utterly clear water. I chose a cannonball dive.

In the moment my watch showed my last land bound seconds, with the August heat shimmering against the humid air, I heard my father's voice boom from the front of the house, where we had parked in the circular driveway.

I did not mistake his tone.

He said, "Let's go."

I hitched my shorts over the suit, thrust my feet into the socks and jammed them into the sneakers. I forgot the lunch bag, and drug my towel behind, folding it as I trotted to the car.

He had opened the front and back of the Chevy's doors, to circulate the over-heated air inside, still, the seats scorched my thighs.

"Yikes, hot." I said and jammed my towel underneath my legs.

Daddy's green Ray Ban aviator sunglasses hid his eyes. He was not holding a package or a bag or a box. He shut my door and walked to his side, climbed in, shut his door, turned the key in the ignition and exhaled through his nose.

Dad said the man wouldn't sell at the agreed upon price. Worse, in my father's opinion, was the lack of quality. The piece was not, as the man had promised, in cherry condition.

Our adventure was, in my father's exact words, "A waste of three-hour trip."

I didn't say I never got to swim; that perhaps for me too, it was a waste of a three-hour trip. I didn't ask him, if he was glad I had come along, if he had liked the ride with me. I didn't speak because his jaw was as tight in his face as his hands were on the wheel.

I didn't speak because I didn't have the language for such conversation.

We drove.



**

On the Jersey-side of the Tappan Zee Bridge, my father spoke. He offered a piece of information about the bridge. Crafts up to 300 feet in length and 43.5 feet wide can lock through. His jaw had fallen into place and his hands were smooth on the wheel, each finger in the proper position. Then he asked if I had a good time at the pool. He did not look at me, instead kept his eyes straight ahead, on the traffic.

I knew to watch his hands on the steering wheel. Sunlight tipping between clouds gave the illusion his fingers clenched and loosed, like the action in an old time wind up picture show. My chest felt heavy. The heat pressed at me as it had while I waited at the pool. The air in the automobile changed, as it had that night at dinner.

I opened the side vent, fiddled with the turn handle.

I did not tell a kiddy fib about my bed being made when truly; I had pulled the chenille bedspread over a smoothed lump.

I did not tell a polite postcard lie: *Wish you were here.*

I did not tell what they call a little white lie: *That dress looks great on you.* I say, "So what if it is on sale, it makes your tummy pooch."

That afternoon I said, "Yes, Daddy, I did."

I held my breath.

Daddy's hands relaxed on the steering wheel.

I lied because he wanted me to. I became light headed, giddy almost. It felt so right that a lie made him smile.



Saturation

by Aneesa Davenport

I didn't like your art until I lived with it.
Your hilltop prayer flags and handfuls of turmeric
and henna were too orange, too *National Geographic*,
your cityscapes too grayscale and
predictably geometric.
I told you so. Now I don't tell you anything.

Still your matted prints stud my walls like deep-set windows
skid by shutters and cement dividers.
Tinted, sunglassed, moody
—more flooded with color than I remember—
a flaming smokestack on the salt flats,
a white house in a blue corn plain we passed.
How small and well lit it is, how handholdable.
Now I love you in my indoor, muted way.



WITNESS

by Elizabeth Landrum

You want to know:
how I hold the load
of those drowning in grief,
charred by despair, locked
in a cell with worry.
You ask if witnessing hardship
and harm turns my flight
away from the storm.
You wonder if their fears live
in my veins,
and if the years of listening
have weighted my wings.

So I tell you:
the sludge on these feathers
will cleanse, for the holding
is bundled with hope,
like a hyacinth thrusting
through leaves of decay.
I have witnessed the lift
of a chin newly freed
from strangles of shame, and
I've seen self-consciousness
loose its grip just enough
to allow a first meeting
with another's soft eyes.

I've listened to histories of
unbearable loss now borne
in a waltz with the missing.
I have shared in a smile
when the mirror reveals
a face at last satined
by compassion.
I've heard from those whose
shoes had been nailed to the floor,
watched them tread barefoot
into the unknown.

And now I have felt
the downy surround of
a witness witnessing me.
And so I believe.
I give thanks
for the dance
at the dawning.



BLUEBIRDS

by Barbara Brooks

The male, azure with cinnamon vest, points the way
to an abandoned woodpecker hole. The female weaves
a nest of pine needles, grass. The young,
naked, blind, demand food.

*In the next room, the baby cries:
its diaper is wet.*

A green worm in his bill, he waits in a nearby tree,
searches for danger, enters the hole. He leaves, carries
a fecal sac far from the nest.

The father turns up the volume.

The black snake shimmies up the tree,
parents peck and fuss; chickadees, nuthatches mob it.
Defeated, the snake retreats.

*Shut that baby up.
She rouses from the couch.
I'll give him something to cry about.*

Feathered and sighted, the fledglings
peer from the hole. The father calls
to the young: fly.

the water, hot.

The female starts another nest.

the child screams.



Porch Talk

by Crystal Simone Smith

I turn cartwheels to the screeches
of porch swings the grown folks rock,
while orange cigarette tips fan
in the evening dark as they swat

endless flies away from cold beers
and talk about absent relatives.
One by one, the ridiculed arrive visiting
and the dark is suddenly changed - *Here she comes!*

I need to perfect my somersault
free of interruptions but, every spell or so
they burst into high laughter, the kind that stifles
and ends in the wiping of tears.



Sirens

by Delia Lewis

We execute a Siamese twin dive, holding hands –
then relax, eyes closed underwater.
Trusting our invisible honing devices, like the
gelatin-filled shark heads we saw on TV;
you tug me downwards, hair trailing your head like a comet.

Hey! A tea party
on the drain in the deep end.
Your elbow raised with mock manners and
weightlessness,
pinky curled in deference to an invisible china cup.
We giggle, talk gurgles, snort chlorine as our eyes are pulled to the
wavering membrane overhead.

A hovering shadow – mother-monster,
squat and foreshortened with the water's illusion –
calls down blunted cries, something about lunch and cramps.
We ignore, leave her to squall on the edge as we
probe the depths in high society,
fetch pennies on the drain.

Can you floor yourself against
the rust-stained concrete,
willowing your hands and pressing belly-hipbones-kneecaps down?
Can you lie still, pretending to nap?
Can you float on top, denying your butt
the earth's pull,
jutting your chin skyward?

Submerged, we are arrows –
cool streaks seen
only after passing, the image vibrating on.
Sheaths of clothing, skin, self – all
peel away behind us, curling in on
themselves as they slink to the bottom.
These bubbles, celebration.



In The Song of Lisbon

by Laura Eklund

It is this whole flower
That I talk to you
The morning is raining
And we are just two
Seasons away from Lisbon
And the rushing hour of birds...
It seems essential that we talk.
The women are hanging
Their linens to dry
The trees bound with whispers.
The bruised event of their eyes
Seem frightening, though they smile.
I have gone into the woods to breathe
We are all sameness in a story
The desperation will never dry.
Hold me while I sleep
Awake me in the morning plum
I am whatever happened to you.
Your face is still in Lisbon
And I am a part of this stream.



Side of Bacon

by Linda Heuring

Marva knew that the holidays were not a good time to ask her husband for a favor. That's why she was wedged here at the bottom of the basement stairs, imprisoned between a wall of concrete blocks and the sturdy legs of a solid oak pie safe. Who'd have thought the banister would give way like that?

It's not that she was blaming Dale for her predicament. After all, she was the one who wanted the pie safe moved. It was fine with Dale to leave it in the corner of the kitchen where it had stood for the seven years since her grandmother gave up housekeeping and Marva had "just the place" for the family heirloom. Until after New Year's, Dale wasn't going to want to deal with one more thing, especially anything that involved heavy lifting. He moved things around all day: ornate wrought iron bird cages, aquariums the size of couches, and truckloads of premium dog food.

"All I want is to take off these shoes," Dale said last night when Marva offered to fry some eggs.

"How about a sandwich? Or a piece of pie?"

"No," he said, with a little force. Marva backed off. He slumped on the couch, his stocking feet on a throw pillow on the coffee table. In a few minutes he would climb the stairs and crawl into bed. He had been like this since Thanksgiving when the mall extended its hours. "Twelve Days of Christmas -- Bah Humbug" screamed the ads in the fancy curlz MT typeface Marva recognized from her own computer-generated Christmas cards. The mall promised shoppers not 12 but 30 days of Christmas with all stores open 15 hours a day, 12 on Sunday. That was no big deal for the card shop next to Dale's store. A couple of passes with the feather duster and the store manager could turn the key that rolled up the grille door and greet the first customer of the day. Dale needed two hours to feed everyone, clean cages, straighten merchandise and mop the floors. And that was if all his staff showed up. At closing there was feeding, more cleaning, and paperwork. How could she ask him to do extra chores at home?

Marva took inventory. The cabinet wasn't going anywhere. It was lodged between the fourth step from the bottom and the wall, the hand-chiseled oak leaves and acorns on the space between the legs making a perfect arc around her lower ribs like a child's high chair tray. She wiggled her toes. She imagined her bare feet as blue as Smurf skin, brushing up against the back of the 100-year-old oak. She hated wearing shoes in the house, even in December. She'd spent the afternoon in the kitchen where the oven kept her toasty. The cold was seeping through the concrete floor, past the fleecy lining of her sweatpants into her rear end. She swore her bones were cold, but at least they weren't broken. Her head hurt where it slammed against the wall when she dodged the falling pie safe. She didn't get impaled on the legs, but she didn't escape either. She ran her palm across the back of her head. The hairs tingled, like she'd slept crooked on big hair rollers. No blood, though. That was a good sign.

She pushed against the pie safe, but even with the wall at her back, it wouldn't budge. She wiggled her legs underneath the wood to no avail. She was stuck like an accused witch in stocks.

Upstairs in the kitchen the oven timer beeped. Three beeps, a pause, then three more. The cookies were done. She'd baked Dale's favorite molasses cookies. The last tray was in the oven when she decided to slip a rope around the banister to guide the safe down the steps into the basement. Multi-tasking was her specialty. Now one of her tasks was progressing without her. The series of beeps repeated.

The cozy smell of baking cookies turned into the acrid smell of burning molasses. Marva struggled against the furniture, throwing her body at the legs. "Solid oak," her grandmother had told her. "Your great grandpa Jefferson built this." He made as few cuts as possible with his sharpest hand saw. They didn't call oak "hardwood" for nothing. He chiseled in the pattern. The front was all one piece, except for the doors. Those legs went all the way up.



The beeping was drowned out now by the smoke alarm. Marva tried pushing with her knees. Where's that adrenalin rush I'm supposed to get? she said to herself. If people could overturn cars to rescue people, why couldn't she toss this furniture to rescue her own self? She pushed until the muscles in her arms rebelled, and then she beat on the wood with her fists, the soft flesh reddening with every punch, the wood unyielding, until her bones felt bruised and her shirt was damp with tears. She took in the short shallow breaths of a whimpering child, then dried her face on her sleeves. Get a grip, she told herself. There's got to be a way out of this.

She imagined the cookies blackening in the oven, their bottoms scorching like burning cowpies from grass-fed bovines. Grass-fed cow poop was smokier than poop from desert-fed cows, according to Dale. She calculated it was only a matter of minutes until the cookies burst into flame, spreading from the oven to the wallpaper to the curtains. How long would it be before the deadly smoke slid down the now-disconnected banister to the basement? The smoke alarm's scream reverberated in her head. Just underneath she could hear the beep of the timer. Three, pause, three.

Marva knew that animals caught in traps would gnaw off their own legs to escape. One limb wouldn't do it in her case; she'd have to gnaw herself in half. What would a smart dog do in her place? Dale was always telling her stories about how animals knew more about survival and healing than most humans do. He said some dogs can smell cancer on humans. He called it "detecting chemical markers." He said they could smell breast cancer and lung cancer. Dale was going to be a vet, back when. The pet store, it was one of those unplanned things. A part-time job during college turned into a full-time one, and when old man McCracken decided to get out of the business, he made Dale an offer he would have been a fool to refuse. Marva coughed and covered her mouth. Her fingernails were blue. She spread her fingers and her hands shook. What was it in the smoke that killed you? Carbon monoxide?

She'd scream if there was anyone to answer. She was the one the other neighbors asked to sign for their packages or let in the furnace guy. What part of home-based business didn't they understand? But she did it anyway, making herself too busy to do anything but the pressing design work and her own household chores. She'd hoped to get back to her own work, her real work, not this commercial stuff. It was a little late now.

Not for Dale, though. Maybe he could take her life insurance payout and go to vet school. Get out of that mall. Unless the whole house burned down. Her life insurance policy was in her bottom left hand desk drawer, but she was pretty sure Dale didn't know that. She really should have gotten a safe deposit box. No telling what else they would lose in the fire. Besides her, of course. She should have taken training as a hospice volunteer. Then maybe she'd know how to prepare for whatever came next. It seemed a little late to start praying. Wasn't her life supposed to pass before her eyes? Her luck it wasn't her life that she was reviewing, but a list of undone tasks. Why should her brain work any differently facing death than it did every night facing sleep?

Her hips ached. From the cold? From sitting so still? Her hips used to ache from painting, on her feet for hours in a rented studio near campus. It was one large room, more like a glassed-in porch built to make the most of the available light, but she almost always worked at night, after class, after her job stocking shelves at the Piggly Wiggly, her feet as cold as they are now. She liked oversized canvas for the big sky of home. Bluer than glass cleaner or topaz or even her own eyes. Blue first, then the rusty brown rocky dirt as background for the tiniest flower or cactus needle or unturned stone. She painted sometimes on her tiptoes, sometimes in a squat. While the Midwestern sleet tapped at the windows like an unkindness of ravens, she warmed herself in the light of her paintings, drawing strength from the desert as it took shape under her brushes.

Leaving the studio at 2:00 one Sunday morning, her jeans a paint-spattered collage of blues and browns, she stopped at a campus waffle place for breakfast. She sat in a corner booth, warming her hands on a cup of coffee, watching the short order cook toss eggs and spin his spatula when the waitress brought her a plate of bacon.

"I didn't order any bacon," Marva said. The waitress pointed to three boys in a booth across the room. They looked her way and held their coffee cups in the air, like a toast.

"It's from them," the waitress said. She shrugged and stepped back to the end of the counter.



Marva picked up a piece of bacon. It was crisp and lean, just the way she liked it. She waved the piece at the boys, as if doffing a hat. They punched each other on the arms, the way boys do.

On the way out, she stopped at their table.

"So, what's the deal with the bacon?" she asked.

The one with the brown hair, who turned out to be Dale, found his tongue.

"Like in a bar. A girl as pretty as you, well, we'd send her a drink. But this," he looked around, "is a waffle house. So, we sent you a side of bacon."

She looked him in the eye. Eyes. They were as brown as hers were blue.

"Give me your hand," she said. She pulled a marker out of her jean pocket and wrote her number on the inside of his wrist.

Marva woke up when her head jerked sideways, a shooting pain down her neck. She thought she was in her studio on campus, Dale's weight pushing her small bones into the cement floor, skin against skin, the sparks of a new love reflected in the windows beside them, but a persistent beeping told her otherwise. The oven timer. Three beeps. Pause. Three beeps. The smoke alarm was silent.

She breathed in the aroma of burnt food. If there was a fire, it was out. The cookies must have turned into chunks of carbon permanently welded to the baking tray. She couldn't feel her legs at all beyond her hip bones. Her tongue kept sticking to her teeth, and her contacts were scratchy. Her little fingers were bruised purple from pounding.

The front of the pie safe stretched out before her like a blank canvas. She stroked it with her index finger, and she imagined the color transferring to the flat surface. Blue for the sky, she painted in broad strokes, then brown for the earth. With just the tip of her finger she painted three golden brown strips that held the sky to the earth like adhesive bandages.

It would be late when Dale got home, but not too late. Not too late to ask him a favor. Not too late to stretch a new canvas, together.





Fire Pit

by Nina Rubinstein Alonso

On the 4th of July Jacob and Carlos dug a fire pit in Jacob's Roxbury back yard, filling it with branches, logs and a layer of charcoal. The sky was cloudless blue, and the goat Bibi chewed weeds while they set up the grill and put on the first batch of sausages. "Picky eater," said Carlos noticing the goat working on a scavenged cigarette butt, carefully spitting out the filter.

"I'll tie her to the fence by the driveway," said Jacob, a strong, broad-boned man with an auburn beard, and long reddish hair, tied back with elastic. He carried logs and stacked them near the fire pit, as it would be an all day gathering, with people coming and going, and much food to grill. Carlos pulled a cooler full of beer and soda out of his van. "Where are the paper cups?"

"Peggy has them in the house," Jacob said.

The kitchen smelled like muffins. Peggy was stirring a big pot of corn chowder and pointed Carlos to the stacked red paper cups next to a jelly jar full of forks. "Hey, buddy," he said to Caleb, Peggy and Jacob's three-year old son, sitting on the floor rolling metal cars in circles, then piling them into a red truck. He had wavy blond hair, like his mother, but she had a ruddy complexion, and Caleb was pale as paper with huge blue eyes. Peggy's black and white checked apron wrapped around her white t-shirt and navy shorts, and her legs were the muscular and solid legs of a runner.

"I want to swing," Caleb said, as Peggy worked to keep the chowder from sticking to the bottom of the pot. She turned off the flame, wiped her hands on her apron and turned to him. He slowly stood up, took a few shaky steps then reached for her. She picked him up, straightened his green Batman shirt, and carried him to the tire swing that hung from the great oak at the far side of the back yard. Jacob, wearing a matching Batman shirt, saw them coming, took his son and set him on the swing, pushing him gently back and forth. Caleb smiled and clutched the support ropes, looking up into the leaves and branches.

Carlos' wife Rina arrived with pies and brownies, followed by Felipe and Bree and a stream of friends bringing cartons of coleslaw, tofu, burgers, salad, hot dogs, and every manner of food for a July picnic. Rina, a narrow-boned dark haired woman, pulled six folding chairs out of the backseat of her car, and then opened one and sat down. She was exhausted and queasy, her period overdue, but she didn't want to think about being pregnant, as she miscarried six months earlier. She squinted at the yard, which had no natural place for chairs, no lawn, no pathway, only weeds and bushes scattered wherever they happened to grow. The shed, patched together from recycled wood scraps, held machine pieces that Jacob kept for various projects. To Rina the place looked like a junkyard, with one awkward clump of thorny pink roses by the back door.

Evan Baker, Jacob and Carlos' patent lawyer, parked his gray BMW at the far edge of the driveway. Rina called, "Hey, Evan. Are Jenny and Owen on their way? I could use help with these chairs." Evan scowled, shook his head, and turned away.

Rina called, "Evan," but was interrupted by Eddie and Sara, who helped with the chairs, then Marisa and George and their three kids, and a stream of people arriving and gradually filling the big back yard. Carlos set up speakers, and soon rock music was thumping in the background, accompanied by Jim on his acoustic guitar. When Jacob noticed they were running out of milk, Carlos jumped in his van and made a run to the one local market that was open on a holiday. Jacob and Carlos, roommates in college, were partners in a fledgling design business.

Evan stood next to the goat, smoking and staring down, as Peggy walked over. "Want a drink? Some food?"

"Maybe later," he said. Peggy noticed his white shirt was wrinkled and open at the neck, his khaki pants needed pressing and his beige jacket was stained at the elbow. He was usually immaculate to the point of formality, often sporting a snappy red bow tie.



"Are you okay?" Peggy asked quietly, taking in his scuffed shoes.

"Jenny and Owen are gone, disappeared. She left a 'goodbye I'm filing for divorce' note but no phone number, no address. She used to keep my clothes nice, put a clean shirt out for me every morning, and make my breakfast before work so I had time to play with Owen. Now she's taken my son, and I can't live like this. I want to borrow a gun if you have one, and I'll pay for the rounds." As he spoke Evan didn't meet her eyes but focused on the way the goat's mouth chewed dandelions.

"A gun? What are you saying?" said Peggy. "It's a kick in the teeth, but people can get through these shocks, work things out, and you're a lawyer, so..."

"You don't understand," Evan interrupted. "My life is over."

Peggy found Carlos eating a sausage wrapped in a toasted bun.

"Carlos, Evan's wife took their son and left, and he's asked me for a gun. He's way over the edge." Carlos, a dark-haired Argentine with light hazel eyes, stopped chewing, swallowed and stared at her.

"What are you saying? His marriage has been going downhill for years. I remember when we started work on patents and setting up the partnership, he and his wife were battling, but he loves that kid. A gun? He must be knee deep in shit."

Carlos raised his angled eyebrows and looked in Evan's direction. "He looks seedy. Where's the bow tie? I'll check it out."

Peggy walked to Jacob, who was still swinging Caleb back and forth, until the child suddenly said, "Off, off, tired," and Jacob caught him quickly before he let go of the ropes. "How's does Caleb seem?" Peggy asked Jacob.

"Like Dr. Mackey said, the last treatment was rough, and he's slow bouncing back, so he's weak. It'll take time," said Jacob, and he held Caleb, who put his chin on his father's shoulder, and watched Marisa and George's three plump children chase each other and shriek, kicking a red beach ball.

"His bones hurt," said Jacob.

Peggy nodded, her blue eyes reddening. "He told me that, too. I wish there was something else to do, anything else." Peggy wiped her eyes where tears were spilling over. "Carlos is with Evan. His wife and child left, and he's a complete mess, talking suicide. Maybe you can spend some time with him when you get a chance?"

"He's bound to be down," said Jacob, "I mean that's the way it is with something rotten like that. But it's been coming on for a long time, no surprise, and being a lawyer he'll probably come up with some legal tactic, or Pam Murphy could help. She's a partner in his firm doing divorce work. Evan told me about her."

"He's asking to borrow a gun and ammunition," said Peggy.

"Well, just because he's saying crazy things, doesn't mean he's going to go do anything."

"But what if?" Peggy said, trying to get by the lump in her throat, looking at her only child, ghostly pale from leukemia.

Carlos brought Evan a beer, bread and sausage still sizzling from the grill. "Hey, what's going on, man?"

Evan took the plate and held it, staring at the sausage as if it was something he didn't quite recognize. His brown hair was shaggy, and he hadn't shaved. "I don't want to impose, but I'd like to borrow a gun and a few rounds, if you can possibly help me out," he said. Carlos could think of nothing to say. He walked back to Jacob and Peggy, patting Caleb on the shoulder.

"Hey, little one," he said, smiling, and pulled Jacob aside. "Evan's in hell," said Carlos. "I don't want to flip out over it, but he's asking for a gun and ammunition."

From where she was sitting near the fire pit, Rina saw Evan put the plate down where the goat could get at it. Evan stared into nowhere, holding a glass of beer. Eddie and Sara were dancing to the loud music, singing 'Come on baby, light my fire,' and George and Marisa were waving sparklers and spinning in circles. Marisa was a substantial blond wearing a pink print sundress that puffed out as she swirled, displaying her naked legs, and showing off her small, pretty feet in white sandals, her toenails painted bright baby blue.



When Bree got up to get a drink, Peggy sat down on the empty chair next to Rina. It was sunset, and the sky was edged with fiery bands of pink and orange. Blackness widened slowly as the colors shifted and faded. Peggy wiped her eyes.

"The lab reports for Caleb say the chemo isn't doing anything, and they haven't found a match for a bone marrow transplant. They transfused him again but he's so weak, my boy, and Peggy stretched her fingers wide and let them drop onto the black and white checked apron that covered her lap.

"You know I was tested, Carlos, too, but neither of us is a match," Rina said.

"We've all been tested, both our families, most of our friends, and we've searched everywhere, but Caleb's a rare type. I can't stand it, and now Evan's falling apart."

"What's going on? He scowled at me when I tried to say hello," said Rina.

"His wife left and took their son, and Evan asked me, so politely, for a gun. He says his life is over, period, no discussion. I want Jacob to bring him to the emergency ward, but Jacob says I'm over reacting. Carlos agrees Evan's in bad shape, but thinks he'll get through it. I suspect that if he can't get a gun here, which he can't as we don't have one and wouldn't give it to him if we did, he'll go elsewhere. I've never known anyone to ask for a gun straight out."

"I'll see what I can do," said Rina, who spent years as a social worker, before she switched to teaching high school history. She approached Evan, who stood staring down at the goat. They spoke in whispers, and she soon returned to Peggy.

"He's not willingly to see a psychiatrist and repeats that his life is over, and it's too late to help him. He's being horribly good mannered, which is scary. We need to talk to Jacob and Carlos and explain that it's serious."

It was getting dark and cooling off when Peggy brought out the chowder and muffins. The house was high on a hill over Boston, with a perfect view of the fireworks.

"For Christ's sake, no," said Carlos to Rina. "I'm not dragging Evan to a loony bin."

Jacob shook his head. "He's going through a bad time and is letting out his worst thoughts, that's all. I don't believe he'll hurt himself. He's just frustrated and miserable."

"I know you believe that, but what if he does?" asked Rina.

"No way am I dragging my lawyer to a psycho ward," said Jacob.

"No fucking way," said Carlos.

"Mama, chocolate milk," said Caleb, and Peggy left the group sitting in the dark to find some chocolate milk.

When she came back, the fireworks were shocking the sky with burst after burst of pinwheels and stars. Caleb stared, then turned and buried his face in his mother's shoulder. Peggy watched as if hypnotized, finding relief in explosions that melted into the dark, leaving trails of sparks and smoke, pockets of energy flaring up and turning into nothing, forces of creation and destruction somehow echoing each other. When it was over, she found Rina sitting by the fire pit.

"Evan's gone," said Rina. "I asked him to wait, but he drove off, I don't know where."

"Well it's out of our hands," said Peggy, "but maybe we blew it?"

Caleb gazed at the fire, watching the ripples of flame, until his eyes slowly closed, and he slept on his mother's shoulder.

Rina, queasy and unsettled, said, "I'm going home to call him," but Evan didn't pick up when she tried that night or the next day or the next.

In early November, Peggy was the one who spotted the obituary and called Rina.

"Dead?" said Rina.



"It says 'by his own hand,' the newspaper way of referring to suicide. They write that Evan Baker was Harvard Law Review, a patent attorney, and left a sister, wife and son." Peggy took a breath and let it out slowly the way the nurse said was calming.

"I'll tell Carlos. Does Jacob know?" Rina put her hand on her mouth, feeling a wave of nausea pushing at her.

"He's with Caleb in the hospital as the doctor sent me home to rest. I can't sleep because I sit up with Caleb, afraid he'll stop breathing if I don't keep watch. Jesus, I don't know—it's torture. I showed Jacob the obit, and he said it's sad that Evan was beyond help," Peggy let out another dark sigh.

Rina heard a clunk.

"Peggy?"

"It's okay. The phone slipped out of my hand and hit the table. Right now it's hard to be here alone. I know you don't feel well, but Jacob has the car."

Rina said, "I'll come over in a while. The nausea isn't too bad today," which wasn't true. She was worse, and the news was heavy on her.

She stood up carefully, leaning on the chair and got to the bathroom. After she threw up, she wiped her face with cool water, rinsed her mouth and brushed her teeth. She went to the refrigerator, so cold and white, humming its electric song, and took a sip of ginger ale, one of the few things she could tolerate. She put a packet of saltines in her jacket pocket.

She felt numb. It was too much to absorb that Evan was dead, and that Carlos and Jacob refused to do anything that might dent Evan's dignity, or was it their own dignity? Could she have done more? Caleb was fading, despite months of doctors and treatments, and there was nothing to do except wait it out. She had no power, nor did anyone else, to fix the horrors.

She found her car keys, but stopped on her way to the door, and lay back on the couch to rest for a few minutes. She felt a flutter inside, not for the first time, but strong and definite, and the idea came that the tiny growing child was a messenger, telling her something she should try to understand. She listened, but there were no words, only the pulse of blood, only the living fire of energy pushing forward through whatever pain.



Buzz and Hum

by Masie Cochran

Ria June had never really been alone. Two weeks after her eighteenth birthday, Arnie drove her, three hours, to Little Rock to get married and to see a matinee.

But that was nineteen years ago, and Ria June was stuck on the mountain married without a husband. She often thought about that day in Little Rock, and she couldn't remember the show they saw or what they had for dinner. She didn't remember the yellow dress she wore with blue flowers on the hem and collar or the white-strapped sandals with her toenails painted blue. But, she remembered one moment, every part—the color, the smell, and the sound of it. She played it over and over, like a favorite song.

The sun had been down for hours and Arnie and Ria June sat in the front seat of his truck. Arnie leaned in for a kiss but, instead, pulled the seat belt across Ria June's chest, his hands touching her breasts. The metal clicked and he whispered hot into her ear, "I'm taking you home, June."

Arnie had been gone five years, and not long after he left, Ria June started talking to herself. The two hemispheres of her brain began a dialogue. At first, she spoke from one side, and Arnie from the other. Ria June might think about going to the store, "They'll laugh at you for being left." Or sleeping with the windows open to break the heat, "Bugs'll bite you up," she'd hear him say.

One night, months after Arnie took off, Ria June went outside to sit on the front porch. Under her arm she carried ice cubes in a plastic bag, and smashed them up with a hammer against the wood of the porch. She'd been chewing ice for almost eight weeks and had lost fifteen pounds. The day was too hot to get much done, but the night was cool, so Ria June sat down in a rocking chair, took her sewing out from under the cushion and began to stitch.

She'd barely put needle to cloth when she heard buzzing. She sat still, listening to the mud daubers. They buzzed behind the front porch screen door. They'd come back just like they always did. Arnie cleared them out every summer, sprayed poison till their bodies hit the porch, sprayed the poison thick till he was sick, dizzy, and needed a chair to sit and get his head.

But Arnie was gone and the mud daubers were back from the dead, buzzing and building houses like flutes in the corner of the screen door. She closed her eyes, listening to their buzz and hum.

The sound moved through Ria June's body like a swollen river full of sand and grit. She felt the vibrations in her blood and in her brain, calming her. Both sides of her brain, right and left, hummed in harmony and after that night, Ria June began to speak from both sides of her brain. "I think I might stick my feet in the river tomorrow," she'd say. "That'll feel good."

In the years Arnie was gone, Ria June spent daylight in her garden where she grew colors. She grew red, green, orange, purple, and yellow, colors of the imagination—hot pink, lime green, neon blue. And the colors were working overtime. Carrots more orange than the dirty sun, red radishes, and purple potatoes that stayed purple boiled and mashed.

She was pickling beets the night Arnie came back home. She knew he was home when he pulled in because he always killed the engine from the road and coasted to the front of the drive. Arnie walked in the door without a knock, passed Ria June who held a mason jar to her chest. He took the stairs three at a time, dropped his bags in the hall, and fell on the bed with his clothes on.

Ria June set down the jar and picked up the telephone and called Everett.

"He's home," she whispered.

That night in bed Ria June lay on the right side of the bed, closest to the door. Arnie slept on top of the blankets, his boots dangling over the edge of the bed.

Ria June smelled Arnie's body next to her. His smell was unmistakable, not unpleasant, like clay and grass, even if he stayed inside. His breath smelled like hot metal, his hands of cigarette smoke. Ria June leaned in to his wild dirty hair to smell his yeasty scalp. When did you get so many gray hairs? she wondered.

Arnie snored as he slept. His dirty jeans were tight and she liked the way they fit. His arms were tanned and freckled. Ria June wondered if he had gotten any tattoos. His lips were rough and chapped, almost bleeding. She thought about bringing him a glass of water.

Ria June put her head on the pillow and remembered Arnie and his meanness. All the hateful things he'd done to her. She tried to remember what she first saw in him. Her mind went to the days as a teenager she spent walking on Dead Horse Mountain, down



past where the barbed wire cut off the south end of her family's land. She explored empty riverbeds. Moss cracked beneath her feet and she imagined it was sand at the beach, near the waves. The rocks closest to the riverbanks sprouted weeds and strong flowers, a dozen daffodils every spring and high, the cracks in the bluffs bled black and rust. Birds flew overhead, casting shadows on her skin like leaves on creek water.

Then she remembered the day Arnie found her walking near the water. She'd never spoken a word to him, only seen him in town. He was older, and she'd always thought of him as a man, and herself as a girl. That day, Arnie carried her across the creek bed and then walked away—like he wasn't expecting anything, just didn't want her feet wet.

Later, after they were married, it was the moments of kindness that were hardest on Ria June. At times his kindness fooled her, like it did the day by the creek. Other times, most times, she thought his kindness was what she hated the most. When he asked her about her day, stirred something in the kitchen, or picked up a neighbor child and tickled him for a while. These things were hateful because his kindness looked so hard and unnatural, like an inmate on visiting day—his calloused palm pressed to the prison glass, waiting for warmth on the other side. She'd make herself crazy with her imagination, wondering what Arnie had done, what awful thing he had done to make him be nice to her.

Lying in bed, she wondered why Arnie had come home. Why, after all this time? Did he drive the long road home, from wherever he was, from whatever arms held him, thinking about her to pass the time? Maybe he thought of her often during those five years, even when he was with Jean. Maybe he heard about Everett, and had come to take her back. Maybe he'd leave tomorrow, as easy as he'd left before and as easy as he'd come back home, without a word.

Without knowing it, Ria June fell asleep. She did not dream, but slept silently and still. In the middle of the night she woke to the sound of a woman singing. It was a song about a bar in Memphis.

The music got louder and louder until it filled her room. She rolled over—Arnie was gone. The sheets were wrinkled, but empty. Maybe it'd all been a dream, she thought. The band was really going now. Then, suddenly there was a crash and the music stopped. Ria June jumped. She heard Arnie's footsteps on the stairs. He crawled into bed, and the room was quiet.

Arnie was back after five years gone, and now her radio was broken, broken on his first night home. Ria June waited until morning to sweep the pieces from the kitchen floor.

Ria June woke early but Arnie had already gone into town to let people know he was back and ready for the blow log. The women on Dead Horse Mountain had no place at a blow log—except on their front porch listening, hearing every explosion, hoping it wasn't their son or their husband or maybe hoping that it was. Ria June had never seen a blow log. The hollowed-out tree tethered to the ground, standing like a chimney, fire spitting from its top. But she knew the smells. The smell of Arnie's shirt the morning after the blow log—the poison of butane, spray paint and hairspray, a mix that Ria June knew made the log blow and the men feel sick and good. But only the birds heard the quieter sounds, the whine and hiss of fire behind thick, wet bark, the wind rapping the metal cables, the men whistling soft like distant trains.

Ria June tried to keep herself busy around the house and not think of the blow log, not think of Arnie or Everett, but she couldn't get any work done. As she emptied the broken shards of plastic into the trash, the jumbled red and yellow wires that had made her radio sing, she thought Arnie might have broken the radio for no other reason than it was hers. Before Arnie left, he owned everything in their home. But even then, Ria June had still considered most things *theirs*.

That changed, for the most part, when Arnie left town with Jeanie sitting shotgun, the back of his pickup full. He took the television (both the color set in the den and the small black and white on the vanity in their room), the kettle, the radio, pillows and sheets, everything he could lift on his own. Ria June didn't mind that she couldn't toast her bread in the mornings, or that the powder that smelled like lilacs was gone. But she missed the radio and the music. She sold jarred vegetables to Shirley and bought herself a new radio, at a good price. And now it was in the trash.

Ria June put down the broom and gathered some jars of pickled beats to sell to Shirley and started walking down the road to the store. She loved walking down Black Oak Road, never any trucks. The red dirt road rose and fell with the hills, disappearing for a few feet, and then emerging again, woven like the hem of a homemade skirt. The road passed dense forests that turned to large cow pastures—a creek ran along the edge of the fields, where the cows cooled in the summers.

When Ria June got to the store, Shirley was halfway through her latest romance novel. After she read them two or three times, she



sold them for a dollar at the back of the store near the VHS tapes. Shirley looked up and grinned, motioned to Ria June to join her and sit behind the counter.

"Brought you beets," Ria June set the jars on the counter near the register.

"Just take it out of the register—I already sold out of Tuesday's," Shirley said.

Shirley shifted in her chair to get comfortable. She was going to talk awhile. She always did. "Did you see those boys cleaning out the tree? The boys were chasing the girls around with worms. It was a scene."

They pitted the log in front of the store every year. The men and the boys, on hands and knees, gutted the rotted insides with their bare hands, pulling out the worms and spiders, spilling them on the ground to bake in the heat. Ria June didn't say anything, just nodded. She knew the tree was hollow, didn't need to see boys covered in dirt, with maggots and termites popping on the blacktop, to prove it.

The men hunted all year for the perfect tree to use for the blow log. This year Jesse found the tree, an old maple that fell during the last ice of winter just north of his land. It was over twenty-five feet tall but the men had used Lince's chainsaw and cut it in half, shaved off the branches and dug out the insides, leaving it smooth and hollow. The boys tested their voices, heard them come out clear at the other end. The wood was dead but strong, and would burn slow.

Shirley laughed, waved her hands over her head, "This morning was crazy. After they got that big old log on the truck, they nearly bought us out of hair spray, spray paint, lighter fluid, all that. I felt so silly ringing up hair spray for those old boys. I'm going to have to stay late, counting their grimy change."

Ria June put ten dollars from the register in her hip pocket and walked over to the freezer and got a small bag of ice. She carried it behind the counter and sat down.

"You got to eat more than ice, crazy," Shirley said, motioning to the bear claws in a plastic container on the counter.

Ria June waved her off, poured some ice into a paper cup, "lost nearly twenty pounds."

"You can tell, too. Making the rest of us look bad."

"Hush it," Ria June slipped another cube into her mouth and turned to Shirley, leaned close.

"He came home last night," June said.

"Who? Arnie? No, girl, no."

"He spent the night, left this morning, but I guess he's staying. Bunch of stuff in the truck."

"Just came home?"

"His house, guess he can."

"Come on, June, wasn't vacation."

"Well, all I know is he's back, don't know why."

"You must be a wreck. How's Everett holding up?"

"Haven't seen him, called him when Arnie came home but couldn't talk."

"You can't be happy he's home?"

"No. You know I hate it, but he is home. Mystery to me."

"You didn't—"

"Hush girl. Didn't even talk."

"Course not, didn't mean...you know I'm stupider than a cow."

Shirley waits for Ria June to tell her more but gives in, "He didn't say nothing?"

"Not a word."

"Not your weight?"

Ria June, shook a cube into her mouth, crunched. "No, not even."

Both women sat in silence. But silence made Shirley uncomfortable, so she shifted in her seat, turned to Ria June, "I wonder what happened to Jean."

Ria June cracked a smile, "I bet she's somewhere watching my television."

Ria June walked the quiet road home and looked at the houses on Dead Horse Mountain. She'd been in most of the homes for



babies, or funerals, or marriages, or card games. Her first years married on the mountain she and Arnie would socialize with the other couples, drink and listen to music. Those days, most people on the mountain didn't know that Ria June got hit. Shirley knew all along but when people started finding out, when it was clear to everybody, they starting looking at her different, like they wanted to hide her away. She stopped coming around for dinners and music and kept to herself. Even though many of the men on the mountain hit, or had hit, their wives, they didn't do it the way Arnie hit Ria June, not the way he scared her. Arnie hit Ria June just for the feel of it.

Once Ria June tried to run, took off walking for miles along the river, walked nearly seven miles. Shirley's husband Lince was driving back to the mountain after picking up goods for the store and saw her from the road. She was covered in bruises—her neck and hands with scratches. He picked her up and brought her to home to Shirley. Shirley and Lince tried to have her stay the night but she said she had to get back.

Before Lince took Ria June home, when Arnie thought he'd finally gone too far, he looked for Ria June everywhere. He drove the roads slow, crossed the cow pastures, and walked by the river. He looked for her in the bedroom, the kitchen. It was getting late into the night—he even looked in the stove. He told her later, when she was home. He held a washcloth to her face and told her all the places he'd hunted. He told her not to scare him like that, make a man look for his wife in the stove. Ria June thought he was probably looking for his dinner and she thought he should've known better. She'd never pick the stove but, instead, the bathtub, her face under clear water—make Arnie clean her out when he wanted his shower.

Ria June pushed the memory of that night out of her mind. Instead, she thought about how she loved walking home from town. She could see her garden from the road, the way others saw it. As she walked closer, she could make out the rows, the tomato planters, and the wooden markers Everett had cut for her. As she walked up her drive, she saw Everett bent down in the garden, by the peas, nearly hidden.

He raised his head and waved, "June."

She walked around and settled down on her haunches next to him. "Good to see you, I wasn't sure you'd come by."

"Yes you were."

"You're right," Ria June rubbed her hands over his chapped knuckles. She looked at him, tried to smile, "Sorry about calling you like that."

Everett stood up and helped Ria June to her feet. "Almost came over."

"Good thing you didn't," Ria June said. "Not that I didn't want you—I did, but it'd be trouble."

Everett wasn't lying. After Ria June's call he yanked on his boots and went to his truck. He sat with the door open and the engine off. Sat for a moment, then went back inside, returned and slammed the door to the truck and turned over the engine—the flood lights splashed against his small house. He kept the truck in park but revved the engine, felt the heat coming through the dash. He took his foot off the pedal and looked to his right. In the passenger seat, the one he thought of as June's, her sewing resting in the handle of the door, sat a gun. He lifted it, checked the chamber, stashed it under his seat, and drove to Ria June's.

Ria June looked at Everett, who'd been quiet for a long time, his eyes on the ground. She said, "I was shocked. You know, I thought he might come home anytime, but when he did, I guess I really thought he never would."

"Where'd he stay, June?"

June motioned weakly to the house, "Here, you know that."

"Where'd he sleep?"

"The bed...you think he's going to take the couch."

Everett grasped Ria June's hand, "He touch you?"

"Nothing happened, I'd never—"

Everett stopped her, his mouth hard on her lips. Her hands dropped lightly to his belt.

Everett knew the answer. He'd sat in his truck, through most of the night, in the field across from Ria June's house. Seen the light in the bedroom dim and made out the shadow of their bodies, separate, on the bed.

Everett pulled back. "He's got to go. Can't see a life for us with him here."

June tried another smile, said "Maybe he'll go on his own."

"A dog doesn't go when he's getting fed."

"He's my husband. You knew that."



"June, he's no husband to you. He'd kill you if he wanted."

June's eyes went wide and searched Everett's face. She'd never heard him talk like that.

Everett turned to the road. "I'd never let that happen."

"We'll figure it out." She grabbed his hand and said, almost in a whisper, "You know, do something."

Everett kept looking at the road but squeezed Ria June's hand to let her know he'd heard. "I'd better get going. I told the boys I'd be early, bet they already got the log strung up by now."

Everett walked to his truck but stopped before climbing in. He could still feel the heat of her hand in his and her words do something, do something rang hot in his ears. He called out, "June?"

She turned and looked at him, "Yes?"

Everett started to say something but stopped himself, "Nothing. Just wanted to tell you, before I left, that you're looking good."

Ria June smiled, wrapped her arm around her waist, and went inside.

The hollow tree stood upright, tethered to the ground by four large metal cables. It looked like a grand chimney without a house around it. Underneath the tree was a large grill with six hours of firewood underneath it. The fire was blue hot, shooting flames through its trunk, piping smoke from its top. The men had been blowing things up since dusk and it was nearing midnight. All the trucks were parked in a large circle around the log. Arnie blew the speakers in his truck early in the night, so the only music came from Lince's guitar. Lince never threw cans on blow log nights, just liked to lie back in the bed of his pick-up and play. He was playing happy tunes, and men were smiling and tapping their feet. Only the men who kept drinking could keep throwing. Jesse, the boy who won the blow last year, threw a spray paint can into the log. He darted away from the log yelling "Redbug! Redbug!" and all the men jumped behind their trucks and waited for the explosion. Those were the rules. Drink, throw, yell redbug, and try and blow the tree to bits.

The log whined and pulsed louder and louder till it blew, and shot fire and metal high up into the sky. Jesse flung his fists into the air. The men patted him on the back and cheered.

Tom tossed Jesse another beer, "Shit, that was a loud one. I thought that'd be the bitch to do her in."

Jesse cocked his head "Night ain't over yet."

The man who drank the most, threw the most, and the one who blew the log to pieces got mountain bragging rights for the rest of the year. Jesse was planning on making it two in a row. Arnie came over and grabbed a can of hairspray and threw it in the air, missing the log. The can hit Tom's truck denting the hood. Tom looked at Arnie but lowered his head when he saw Arnie's eyes, red with blood and angry as hell. Arnie glared at Tom and then the dent in the truck, "Redbug, motherfucker."

The men watched Arnie stagger around. Most of the men had known Arnie all their lives—lived on the mountain with him, drank with him, shared some of the same women, hunted with him. They were not all smart men, but they knew to keep their distance or to keep him close and on their side.

Arnie stumbled around the log. "It's good to be home, boys. Gone too long, I started missing you fags."

Most of the men looked away, a few mumbled, "Yeah," "Good to have you."

Everett lifted himself onto the hatch of his truck, "What brings you back?"

"Bet you'd like to know," Arnie gulped the last of his beer, threw the can at the log.

"Just curious, forget it. Been a long time."

"Curious man. You guys ever notice how curious this guy is?"

No one spoke. A few got up, joined the men over by the beer coolers. Others, not wanting to get involved, climbed in their trucks and turned on their radios.

"You must be the most curious motherfucker I ever met." Arnie moved over and sat next to Everett. Arnie kicked his feet out in front of him, his boots scuffing the red dirt.

"You curious about my shoes? You want to try on my shoes?"



Everett looked down, his eyes on the rusty scars left by Arnie's boots, "I'll pass."

"Pretty big shoes." Arnie stood up and faced Everett. He slid his hands down the front of his pants. "You want to try on my pants."

Arnie leaned down close to Everett's face. Everett was breathing deep and ragged.

"Pass."

"You want to sleep in my bed, asshole?"

Everett whispered but his quiet words shook with anger, "Leave."

Arnie smiled and flicked Everett's nose, hard. "I'm not going anywhere."

Everett rose, looked Arnie in the eyes, "Straight to hell, if I have any say."

Arnie laughed. "You know, you're probably right about that one."

Arnie began to walk away but then stopped as he passed the dusty headlights of Everett's truck. "But I'm taking June with me." He grinned as he saw Jesse, who was splayed-out drunk on the grass. Arnie bent down and slapped Jesse on the side of his head, "Come on, let's get some more beer and finish this bitch off."

Everett sat alone on the back hatch of the truck. His eyes stayed steady on Arnie as he staggered off, his arm slung over Jesse. The log glowed, spitting hot fireflies into the dark sky.

Ria June sat on her front porch at night, sewing. The explosions going off in the distance made her insides jump, but you wouldn't know it. The stitch she sewed through yellow fabric was perfect and straight. She watched the road. No cars passed. All the women were inside, all the men at the blow log.

She drowned out the explosions by crunching ice and listening to the mud daubers buzz. They moved the screen door forward, just an inch, with the wind of their wings and then set it back down soft. Ria June put her sewing under her chair and grabbed a cup of ice, emptied some into her mouth and crunched on it. She was working on her sixth tray.

Ria June was tired and her eyes were getting heavy with sleep. She began to think about her men. She thought of Arnie's whistling and Everett's talking. She loved it when Arnie whistled. It meant he was feeling good and that heavy things were off his mind. When he whistled she knew where he was in the house, and she could sit back with her feet up and just listen to the nice sound. Many nights after Arnie left, Ria June dreamed she heard whistling, that he'd come back home and was feeling good.

She loved it when Everett spoke. His voice moved slow like a truck on flat dirt—a baby could sleep in the front seat. He loved to talk about places he'd only seen on television. Ria June laughed when he said they'd rent a house in Florida, right on the beach and cover each other in sunscreen. Watch the sun set, and drink beer with their feet in the tide.

Out of ice, Ria June noticed the explosions were slower, each boom farther from the one before. The night moved past midnight to the darkest hours before morning when the sounds of animals take over—the frog burps in the water, the scratching of crickets in the grassy fields, the chittering of birds in the branches, the buzz of mud daubers behind her screen door. Their buzzing filled the night.

At home, wives shuttered bedroom windows, checked on sleeping children, looked for headlights coming into the driveway. The men at the blow log were growing tired, moving slowly, their eyes closing. Laughs grew short, quiet and dreamy. The empty sky moved gray over the tethered log as the fire burned from the top like yellow and orange leaves. Some of the men were passed out, drunk on the ground, their hands stuffed into the waistbands of their pants. More natural sleep settled over a few and they snored with their backs propped against trees, their hands, fingers laced, resting on their chests.

Then, the log exploded. Fire and wood flew high in the air. The heat singed the grass and leaves. Sparks cracked against dew covered cans and trucks. The metal cables tore from their steady homes in bark and snapped, whipping the air, clipping the arms and legs of men who slept too close to the tree. The men screamed and fell to the ground, grabbing each other. Some moved their hands over their faces and cried out, and a few tried to catch a last glimpse of the great smoldering log.



Arnie stood over the men, whistling and clapping his hands. "Should have seen you sorry sons of bitches." He walked over to the men on the ground, "And all it took was the butane can off the grill." He kicked the old grill and it clattered to the ground. "Bill, man, you cried like a little girl. What a pussy. You need a tall one."

Arnie sucked the spit between his teeth, walked over to the cooler, covered in ash and grit, and tossed Bill, who was still on the ground, a beer. The can hit the dirt, rolled, and stopped a few inches from Bill's face. Arnie laughed, "Should have seen you scared sons of bitches."

And Arnie was right. He sent those men, who were feeling like men, falling to the ground with fear. Everett watched Arnie stagger around, punching his fists into the air, feeling good and strong. Everett thought of how Arnie would whistle all the way home and drive Ria June, broken and bloody, to the floor. He looked, for a moment, at the pile of bark, ashes, bent metal, and fire. He looked at the men, some bloody, still on the ground.

Everett stood, heavy with dirt and ashes, and tackled Arnie to the ground. He hit him and hit him with his fists, with rocks, and cans. Arnie spat blood onto the clay. His large shoulders slumped and hit the ground and his eyes fluttered and rolled back into his head. Bits of ash and cinder clung to his eyelashes. Still, Everett hit him and hit him. All the men, even Jesse who shook with fear like he was riding in the back of a pick up, took Arnie to the creek bed. They left him in the river, the water moving over his dry, cracked lips. And the smell that would rise hot from the creek was ignored like road kill.

But that night, before the smell, before Everett moved in, and before their trip to Florida, Ria June sat on her front porch and sewed a line, perfect and straight, and set a lacy hem to the bottom of an old yellow dress with blue flowers. She sat peaceful and quiet, listening to the mud daubers behind the screen door, just for the buzz and hum, the buzz and hum.





light *by Kate LaDew*





woods *by Kate LaDew*

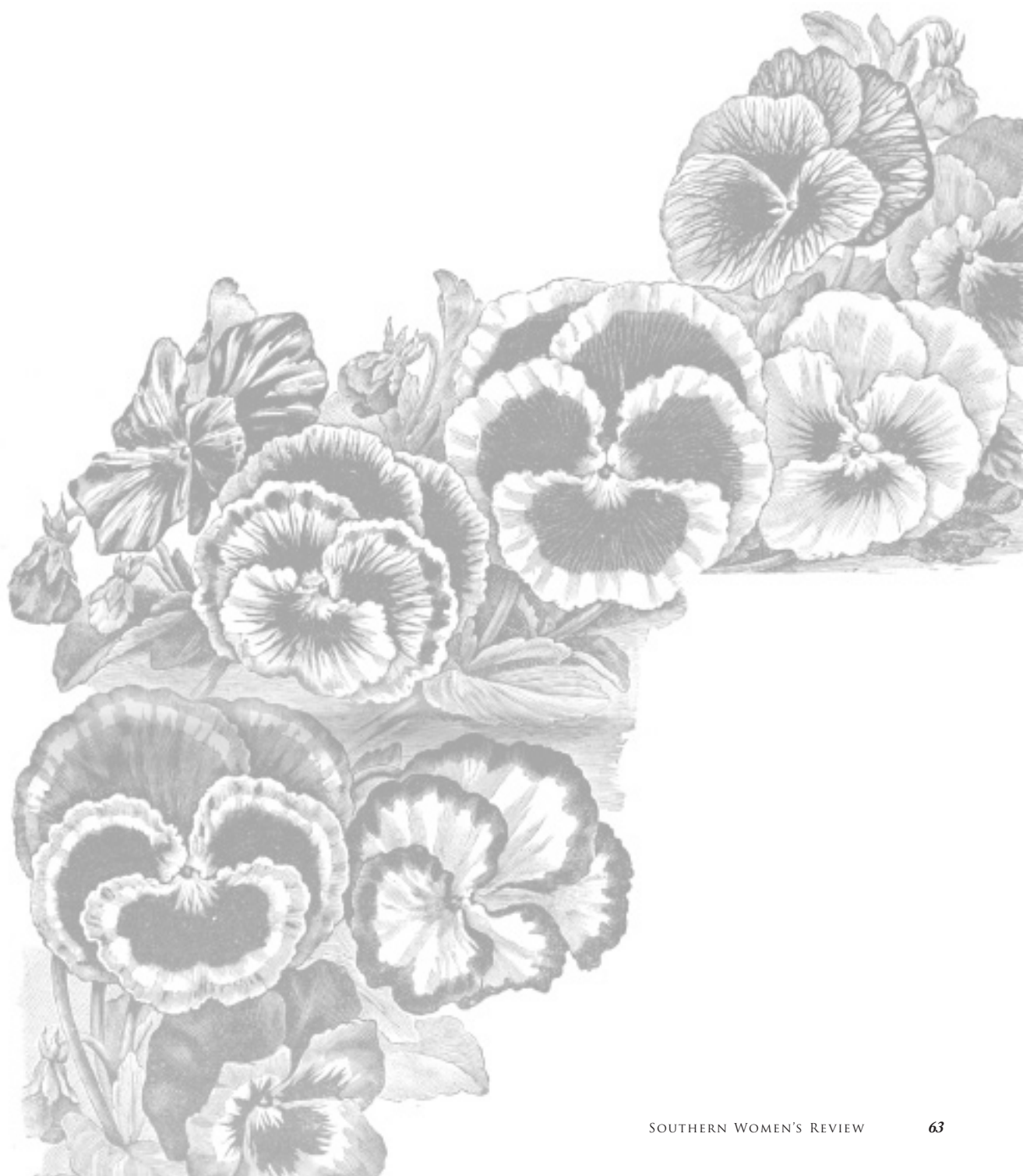




Angels Above

by Christina "Desi" Gunter







Eclipse

Rosemary Royston

Sun's on my back, its deep kiss
a blessing that promises
the dark will disperse
before it has time to settle.

*(I know better
than to trust
such a powerful lover
who, like a vine, crawls.)
What is it you want from me?
The same you wish, sweet one. Don't
you see?*

I write in a glass house.
Lizards are my most faithful companions.
If I stay too long in the desert, it's possible
I won't return.
So I've hung a folk-angel
above sun-bleached green doors.
I know the doors aren't locked,
but I'm hesitant
to go through.
Inevitably I do,
for stasis will kill
and the sun can burn too hard.



Clogs

by Pia Taavila

I'm wrinkled and sag
 like my Birkenstock clogs. Their
cordovan leather

wears through at the toes,
 shiny along the instep.
We are rubbed away,

our prongs and buckles
 bent akimbo. The cork soles
crumble at the heels;

rivets pull away
 just about to yield. Yet we
can't give the other

up just yet. We rest
 at the doormat, side by side,
nestle in, and wait.



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