SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

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"No True Southern Lady Would Be Without It."

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Letter From The Editor

Dear Reader,

Welcome to our inaugural issue of the Southern Women's Review. So many of you have asked how the idea for the journal began. Here's her story:

As an undergraduate at Berry College in Rome, Georgia, this editor was inspired by the Southern Women's Writers Conference, a bi-annual gathering of Southern Women bound by their love of writing (by the way—it's not too late to attend this year's conference if you haven't already registered!). After graduation, I had the pleasure of working at *Southern Living* magazine and her sister publications for almost a decade. It was an honor to join the talented staff of mostly Southern Women Writers, who shared their lilting stories with mostly Southern Women Readers. The magazine couldn't have been a better training ground for the pairing of words and aesthetics. Later, while working on my M.A. at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, I met the exceptional Linda Frost, then editor of PMS, who allowed me to join the staff. —I wish I could say there was an ah-ha moment, but it was a (perhaps appropriately) slow process that led me here, to this, the premiere issue of the Southern Women's Review.

I would like to thank all the members of our editorial board for believing in the project and lending their gracious critiques and support. I wish to thank managing editor, Helen Silverstein, and my at home support staff, Martha Hudson. But most of all, I wish to thank those who submitted to the issue. Whether you made it into this premiere volume or no, we are so appreciative of your submissions.

Speaking of submissions…You won't want to miss the brilliant works of poets like Gray Jacobik who hails from Deep River Connecticut but has her poem "Oysters," set in Hampton Virginia where her grandparents lived and worked. Gray says she "recalled the delights of harvesting them in the evenings and the communal experience of learning to swallow an oyster whole and alive: quite a challenge for a timid child." Or, Joanne Emily Turnbull whose fiction story "Last Respects" was inspired by a great-aunt's comment at her grandmother's funeral. "Elderly women in my family have a quirky obsession with funerals…" she notes.

While you'll love the works featured in this issue, some of my favorite pieces are the bios. I love reading the accomplishments and quirks of the women featured herein. I love knowing that poet Linda Maxwell "occasionally catches herself droppin' her gs at the end of her sentences" or that Melissa Blackburn is a wife and mother and poet and artist whose submission started as an explanation to a friend about why she makes ceramic birds (I want one desperately by the way!). Also, many of the folks featured have forthcoming poetry collections, novels in progress, and pending publications. I for one can't wait to read them all and I encourage you to do the same!

We hope you enjoy this first issue, and please e-mail with your thoughts on how to improve the review. And, of course, e-mail your submissions again beginning August 1, 2009.

Wishing you well in all your creative endeavors,

Alicia

Alicia K. Clavell
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ABOUT THE COVER *Our cover design by was inspired by a 1957, Field Enterprises, Inc. brochure our editor discovered at GreenCup Books in Birmingham, Alabama. The brochure titled "A Lovelier Complexion" by Mary Sue Miller, instructs women on the joys of skin care. The illustrations by "Lali" were indicitive of at least one interpretation of the quinisential Southern Woman in the 50s. Our art director, Rebecca Reeves, made the illustration her own by modernizing our Cover Girl, and we now fondly refer to her as "Lali" after her original illustrator.*

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Chicago native **ELIZABETH BLOOM ALBERT** started writing for fun and profit about five years ago. In 2008, Narrative Magazine featured one of her short stories as a "Story of the Week." Winner of the 2008 Kate Braverman Short Story Prize, and a finalist in both the 2007 StoryQuarterly Fiction Contest and the 2005 Chicago Literary Awards, her prose has appeared or is forthcoming in The Baltimore Review, Another Chicago Magazine, Karamu, and Quarter After Eight. Although she is not a born and bred Southerner, she is married to one, and is a very frequent visitor down south as she has family spread throughout the region—D.C., Tennessee, Georgia, Texas, and Alabama, to say nothing of owning a (ramshackle) vacation property near Huntsville Alabama.

BEEBE BARKSDALE-BRUNER has an MFA in poetry from Queens University, a BFA in painting from the University of NC-Greensboro, work and awards in ceramics and a book of poetry from Press 53, published April 2007, It Comes To Me Loosely Woven. She contributed the design and typeface of the cover and is now combining digital art with short form poems called fibonacci in a second book. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina with her husband and 4 irresponsible cats.

DANITA BERG has published creative works in journals such as Redivider, Invisible Insurrection, and Florida English, among others. She recently earned her MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College, and is now completing her Ph.D. coursework in English at the University of South Florida. She teaches creative writing at USF and Eckerd College in Florida.

KRISTIN BERKEY-ABBOTT is descended from a long line of Southerners (Tennessee and South Carolina, primarily), and spent most of her first 36 (of 43) years living in the South (Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, and South Carolina), so the South permeates her creative work. Kristin has published widely in a broad variety of journals, but her happiest publication moment came in 2004, when Pudding House Press published her chapbook Whistling Past the Graveyard. She teaches English and Creative Writing at the Art Institute of Ft. Lauderdale, where she also serves as Assistant Chair of General Education. Additional details about her various publications and professional life can be found on her Web site at www.kristinberkey-abbott.com.

MELISSA BLACKBURN is a wife and mother of three living in Auburn, Alabama. She earned a BFA from Auburn University and an MFA from The School of Visual Arts, NYC. After 10 years in Manhattan, Melissa returned to Auburn in the wake of September 11 to raise a family and a garden. Melissa has worked in radio, for Nonesuch Records in Rockefeller Center, and currently for The Opelika-Auburn News. Melissa's creative interests include painting, hand built clay work, poetry and short memoir-style fiction. Melissa considers herself deeply southern though culturally diverse having moved 20 times by the age of 18. Her ancestors settled in the Southern colonies from Ireland in the 1760's and served in both the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. To reach Melissa about her birds or anything else, visit www.blackburnhollow.com.

F.M. BRADLEY was born and raised in Shelby County, Alabama. She has completed numerous creative writing workshops at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where she received a Master of Arts degree in English with concentration in Creative Writing. During her tenure at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, she produced a book length collection of short stories entitled Picking Up Rocks and a book length collection of poetry entitled Sensing Alabama. She now teaches English Composition full time at the University of West Alabama. Her writing has appeared previously in Alabama Echoes, Aura Literary Arts Review, Big Muddy Literary Journal, Enigma, Healthcare SafeScan, Healthcare Risk and Safety News, Kaleidoscope, and Wingspan Literary Journal. In the past, her short stories have received the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Literary Award and the Barksdale-Maynard Award for Fiction.

Contributors

FABU CARTER BRISCO, was born in Mississippi and raised in Tennessee. She travelled to The University of Wisconsin-Madison to study African Languages and Literature and remained in Madison, Wisconsin to live, write and work. She is the current Madison Poet Laureate. Her poetry has been published extensively in Madison literary publications. African American Life in Haiku will be published by Parallel Press in 2011. Her poem "Effie in the Cotton Field" is from an unpulished manuscript, In Our Own Tongues. Her web site is www.artistfabu.com.

ANTOINETTE BRIM teaches Creative Writing, World Literature, Composition and African American Studies at Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock, Arkansas. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing/Poetry from Antioch University/ Los Angeles and a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and Language with an emphasis in Creative Writing from Webster University. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and a Harvard University W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow (National Endowment of the Humanities Summer Institute. July 2006). She is also a recipient of the Archie D. and Bertha H. Walker Foundation Scholarship to the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown (July 2007). Her work has appeared in various journals, magazines and anthologies. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize nomination. Her debut poetry collection, Psalm of the Sunflower, is forthcoming from Willow Books in September 2009.

MEGHAN BRINSON hails from Charleston, South Carolina. She graduated from the College of Charleston before attending the Prague Summer Program and earning an MFA in poetry from Arizona State Universtiy. She has served as poetry editor of Hayden's Ferry Review and was an international teaching fellow at the National University of Singapore. She has work appearing in or forthcoming from Cider Press Review, Gulf Coast, Pebble Lake Review and Puerto del Sol.

JESSIE CARTY'S work has appeared in journals such as Margie, Iodine Poetry Journal and The Dead Mule. Her first chapbook will be published by Puddinghouse Publications in 2009. Jessie is also the Editor of Shape of a Box (www.youtube.com/shapeofabox).

NICOLE CARTWRIGHT DENISON lives on a trout farm in western North Carolina, is the author of The 4th Stage of Grief (blossombones, 2008), Purview to Undoing (Gold Wake Press, 2008) and Recovering the Body (dancing girl press, 2007) and a Best New Poets, Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Work is forthcoming in A Trunk of Delirium and The Ghazal Page and has appeared in Up the Staircase, Diagram, Spider Vein Impasto, No Tell Motel, Six Little Things, 13 Myna Birds, Press 1, Arsenic Lobster, WOMB, Spooky Boyfriend, elimae and others. Photography has appeared in Stirring, Digital Paper and Lily. With founder Rachel Mallino, she co-edits Tilt Press.

BARBARA CONRAD Born and reared in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; residences include Chapel Hill, North Carolina and Charleston, South Carolina; presently lives in Charlotte, North Carolina • Chapbook, The Gravity of Color, published 2007 • Editor, Waiting for Soup: Writings and Art from Urban Ministry Center, 2004 • Published in Tar River Poetry, Kakalak Anthologies, Aurorian, Icarus, Main Street Rag and others • Honorable Mention: Icarus, 2004 for Because It Crumbled in an Unnamed Storm of '62; Kakalak 2007 for Snorkeling the Big Island • lst Place, Marjorie Blankenship Melton Award for Poetry, 1999-2000, for Winter Solstice; 2nd Place National Level in League for Innovation, 1998-99, for They Painted Me Pink

LIBBY CUDMORE is the self-proclaimed star of the Stonecoast MFA's Pop Fiction department. She has essays and stories in upcoming issues of Pulp Pusher, Inertia, Battered Suitcase and the anthology Quantum Genre on the Planet of the Arts (with Matthew Quinn Martin). She is a regular contributor to Pop Matters and Hardboiled, and has also published in Shaking Like a Mountain, Sage of Consciousness, The Subway Chronicles (Essay of the Year 2004) and Long Story Short (Author of the Year 2004).

Contributors

A.M. GARNER is an associate professor at the University of North Alabama. Further verification of her 'southern-ness' is at www.amgarner.blogspot.com

MICHELE GENTHON was raised in Jackson, Mississippi by Yankee parents, so she learned the rituals of Southern life by observation rather than experience. After graduating from Millsaps College, Michele lived throughout the United States, earning advanced degrees from the University of California, Riverside and the University of Michigan. She has served as Executive Vice President of Keystone College in Pennsylvania and Vice Chancellor of Antioch University. "Sharing Rituals" is from her unpublished book My Unfinished Symphony, stories of ordinary women and the everyday lessons they share with one another. She is currently working on Child of the Red Priest, an historical novel about the relationship between Antonio Vivaldi and his star female student.

MARNI GRAFF is a founding member of the /Screw Iowa Writers Group, /and has written screenplays, essays and poetry, along with two mystery series. Her current novel takes place in Manhattan in the land of soap operas. Graff leads the "Writers Read" workshop in Washington, North Carolina and lives on a river in rural Hyde County, where every day she sees deer, shore birds, and the occasional black bear.

NICOLE CARTWRIGHT DENISON lives on a trout farm in western North Carolina, is the author of The 4th Stage of Grief (blossombones, 2008), Purview to Undoing (Gold Wake Press, 2008) and Recovering the Body (dancing girl press, 2007) and a Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominee. Work is forthcoming in Taiga and has appeared in Up the Staircase, Diagram, Spider Vein Impasto, No Tell Motel, Six Little Things, 13 Myna Birds, Press 1, Arsenic Lobster, WOMB, Spooky Boyfriend, elimae and others. Photography has appeared in Stirring, Digital Paper and Lily. With founder Rachel Mallino, she co-edits Tilt Press.

KELLY HARRIS Kelly's poems have appeared in PLUCK and PMS: Poems Memoir Stories Journal. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University in Cambridge MA. The Cave Canem fellow is a Cleveland native who lives in New Orleans with her husband.

EVE HOFFMAN has worked with nationally and internationally known poets at the Paris Poetry Workshops, Idylwild Summer Poetry Workshops, Hambidge Writer's Workshop and in Cecilia Woloch's Atlanta workshops. Her poetry has been published by the Georgia Humanities Council, Emory University Center for Ethics, New Southerner and online. Eve Hoffman has written the stories of twenty-three people impacted by breast cancer to accompany paintings of these individuals in A Celebration of Healing: Lives Impacted by Breast Cancer. She founded and published three competitive anthologies of Georgia public school K-12 writing. Eve Hoffman's work is performed by the Senior Ensemble of the Academy Theatre. She has been honored by her alma mater Smith College as a "Remarkable Woman."

GRAY JACOBIK lives in Deep River, Connecticut. Her collections include Brave Disguises (AWP Poetry Prize, Pittsburgh UP 2002), The Surface of Last Scattering (X. J. Kennedy Prize, Texas Review Press 1999) and The Double Task (Juniper Prize, UMASS Press, 1998). In the last few years she's completed a memoir-in-verse, a collection of new poems, and a series of dramatic monologues in Eleanor Roosevelt's voice.

AISHA JOHNSON is a graduate of University of Alabama at Birmingham. She lives and writes in Alexandria, Virginia. She is currently attending Wilkes University working on her MFA. Her fiction poem is the story of a wife forcing her husband to switch shoes with her.

Contributors

NICOLE "NICK" LEHNER She is a graduate of the MFA in Poetry program at Vermont College of Norwich University, and has worked with David Wojahn, Leslie Ullman, and Jack Myers, among others. My work has been published in SPSM&H, Bad Subjects, Bad Attitude, Blue Fiction, and other small litmags and anthologies.

PAIGE LEVIN lives and works in Philadelphia. A graduate of Smith College, she is working on her MFA in fiction at the Stonecoast creative writing program at the University of Southern Maine.

LINDA MAXWELL Although a native of New Mexico, Linda Maxwell has lived, worked and enjoyed raising her daughter in Kentucky for the past twelve years. She is currently a teacher at Lincoln County High School in Stanford, Kentucky (where she was 2008 Teacher of the Year) and an adjunct professor for Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond. Her poems have been published in The Chaffin Journal, Appalachian Women Speak: Poetry as Prayer, and Wordriver Literary Review. She occasionally catches herself droppin' her gs at the end of her sentences.

KAT MEADS Her lyric essay "What Lulled My Brother to Sleep on the Backseat of George Grandy's Fine Sedan—A Speculation, A Jealousy " is from a collection in progress, The Insomnia Essays. Her previous collection, Born Southern and Restless, was published by Duquesne University Press. Recent essays have appeared in Crazyhorse, The Southern Review, Agni Online, Superstition Review and elsewhere and have garnered two Pushcart Prize nominations in 2009 and a nomination for inclusion in Best Creative Nonfiction. Her most recent book publication is a novel, The Invented Life of Kitty Duncan (Chiasmus, 2006). She was born and raised in North Carolina and much of her work continues to be set there.

SUSAN MEYERS, of Givhans, SC, is the author of Keep and Give Away, winner of the SC Poetry Book Prize, the SIBA Book Award for Poetry, and the Brockman-Campbell Book Award. Her chapbook Lessons in Leaving won the Persephone Press Book Award. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in Cave Wall, Saw Palm, and jubilat.

ANSLEY MOON was born in New Delhi, India, raised in Georgia and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. She received an M.A. in Creative Writing from Trinity College, Carmarthen. Her poems have been featured in various anthologies, and she was recently chosen as a Fiction Semi-Finalist in the SLS Unified Contest. She is a Poetry Editor for The Furnace Review.

ERIN MURPHY was raised in Richmond, Virginia, and is the author of three books of poetry: Science of Desire, Dislocation and Other Theories (both from Word Press), and Too Much of This World (Mammoth Books; winner of the Anthony Piccione Poetry Award). With Todd Davis, she is co-editor of Making Poems: 40 Poems with Commentary by the Poets (forthcoming from The State University of New York Press). Her poems have been featured on Garrison Keillor's The Writer's Almanac and in dozens of journals and in several anthologies, including 180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day, edited by Billy Collins (Random House). She teaches English and Creative Writing at The Pennsylvania State University, Altoona College.

ALISON PELEGRIN is the author of Big Muddy River of Stars (U. Akron, 2007) and The Zydeco Tablets (Word Press, 2007). She is the recipient of a Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts, and her poems have appeared in Poetry, Ploughshares, and The Southern Review.

DIANA PINCKNEY has published poetry and prose in Iodine, Green Mountains Review, Atlanta Review, Calyx, Main Street Rag, Cave Wall & other journals and anthologies. She has three collections of poetry: Fishing with Tall Women, Winner of S. C. Kinloch Rivers Contest & N.C. Persephone Press Book Award, White Linen, Nightshade Press & Alchemy,

Main Street Rag Publishing Co. She taught writing in the Queens University Center for Lifelong Learning and in many workshops. She is presently teaching at the Cornwell Center in Charlotte.

DANNYE ROMINE POWELL lives in Charlotte, N.C., and her mother, grandmother and greatgrandmother were from Social Circle, Ga. Dannye's third collection, "A Necklace of Bees," was published by the University of Arkansas Press in 2008. She has won fellowships in poetry from the NEA and from the NC Arts Council, and her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including The Southern Review, The Georgia Review, The Atlanta Review, Ploughshares, Poetry, etc.

JC REILLY wishes everything could be written as a poem, including editorials, cereal ads, and weather reports. She is a displaced Louisiana poet living in Atlanta, with two strange cats and a quirky Socialist fiancé. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Kalliope: a Journal of Women's Literature and Art, The Reach of Song, Rive Gauche, the Xavier Review, the Arkansas Review, and three online journals, Ouroboros Review, Sweet: a Literary Confection, and Stone's Throw Magazine.

KIM ROBERTS is the author of two books of poetry, The Kimnama (Vrzhu Press, 2007), and The Wishbone Galaxy (WWPH, 1994). Individual poems of hers have been published in such journals as Southwest Review, Ohio Review, Malahat Review, No Tell Motel, and New Letters, and she has received writers' residency grants from eleven artist colonies. She edits the online journal, Beltway Poetry Quarterly (http://www.beltwaypoetry.com). She was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and has lived in Washington, DC for over twenty years.

NINA ROMANO earned an M.A. from Adelphi University and an MFA. in Creative Writing from Florida International University. Her short fiction, memoir, reviews and poetry appear in The Rome Daily American; The Chrysalis Reader; Whiskey Island; Gulf Stream Magazine; Grain; Voices in Italian Americana; Vox; Chiron Review; The Salt Lake City Weekly; Rough Writer's Ink; Mangrove Review; Irrepressible Appetites; Roads Literary Magazine; Night Train; A Little Poetry; ExPatLit and GULFSTREAM!NG; and will soon appear in The Northville Review. Excerpts from her novel-in-progress, The Secret Language of Women, appear in Dimsum: Asia's Literary Journal and also in Driftwood. Romano's debut poetry collection, Cooking Lessons, was published in June, 2007 by Rock Press, and submitted for a Pulitzer Prize. Her new collection, Coffeehouse Meditations, is forthcoming by Kitsune Books.

JANE SATTERFIELD is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Literature and the author of two poetry books: Assignation at Vanishing Point (Elixir, 2003) and Shepherdess with an Automatic (WWPH, 2000). She has received three Individual Artist awards in poetry from the Maryland State Arts Council, a gold medal for the essay from the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, as well as fellowships from the Sewanee Writer's Conference and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Her new book, Daughters of Empire: A Memoir of a Year in Britain and Beyond, is forthcoming from Demeter Press in June, 2009. She lives in Baltimore with her husband, poet Ned Balbo, and her daughter, Catherine, and teaches at Loyola University. For more of her work, see her author's site (www.redroom.com/author/jane-satterfield).

ANDREA SELCH has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a PhD in English from Duke University, where she wrote a history of poetry on commercial radio in the United States from the 1920s to the 1940s. She taught English and Creative Writing at Duke from 1999 until 2003. She has published individual poems in Calyx, The Greensboro Review, The Asheville Poetry Review, Luna, The MacGuffin, Oyster Boy Review, and Prairie Schooner, among others, as well as having a poem featured on the Best American Poetry Website. In 2007, Choreo Collective danced her "Holy Shell Waiting for the Return of the Soul," and "Early Weaning" at the biennial symposium of Duke

University's Sallie Bingham Center for the Study of Women's History and Culture. She received a 2008 "Hippo" Award from The Monti for her spoken story, "Replacement Child." Her three collections of poetry are Succory (2000), Startling (2004, reissued 2009) and Boy Returning Water to the Sea: Koans for Kelly Fearing (2009). She has directed Carolina Wren Press since 2002. She lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina, with her partner and their two children.

DOROTHY ANNE SPRUZEN: Dorothy lives in McLean, Virginia. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte and teaches creative writing for the Fairfax County Adult and Community Education Department. In another life she was Manager of Publications for a Northern Virginia defense contractor. Her short stories have appeared in several publications, and she has written two novels, one set in World War II England, and the other in New York City and Northern Virginia.

CHERYL STILES'S Her work "No Annointing" received the 2009 Agnes Scott Literary Festival prize for poetry. Her poetry and essays have appeared in journals such as Atlanta Review, Poet Lore, PMS: poemmemoirstory, POEM, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, SLANT, GARGOYLE, and Storysouth. As a Marietta, Georgia native still living in her hometown, she works as a university librarian and often writes about the South.

MONICA STORSS is a left-coast writer with an affinity for the Deep South. Her work focuses on domesticity, dereglement, and the appearance of alchemy in the everyday world. She holds a master's degree from the University of California at Davis. She is married to the poet Arthur Rimbaud.

JOANNE EMILY TURNBULL lives in Portland, Maine. Her publications include the book First Do No Harm (Jossey Bass, 2005) and the article Cupids in Cyberspace (Santa Clara Weekly, 2008). In addition, she's authored numerous academic and professional publications on women's issues, patient safety, and mental health. Her story "Last Respects" was inspired by a great-aunt's comment at her grandmother's funeral. "Elderly women in my family have a quirky obsession with funerals. While her remark seemed comical, my great-aunt was clinging to life while simultaneously preparing for its inevitable end."

KORY WELLS' has published and forthcoming work including poetry and prose in Pindeldyboz, Ruminate, Literary Mama, shaking like a mountain, New Southerner, Now & Then, and others. Her essay "Really Good for a Girl," labeled "standout" by Ladies Home Journal, leads her book She's Such a Geek. Her novel-in-progress, White Line to Graceville, was a finalist in the William Faulkner Competition. A native Tennessean and mother of two, she oversees corporate communications for a software company in the Nashville area.

MARJORY WENTWORTH'S poems have appeared in numerous books and magazines, and she has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize three times. Her books of poetry include Noticing Eden and Despite Gravity. Her children's story, Shackles, was published in February 2009. She writes a column on poetry for The Post and Courier newspaper, and she works as a book publicist. Marjory teaches poetry to cancer patients and their families in a program at Roper Hospital called "Expressions of Healing." She is the Poet Laureate of South Carolina.

CAROLINE YOUNG was born in Atlanta, GA to a mother who grew up all over North Georgia; she worked as a sharecropper from a young age. Her father was a city boy, who grew up in Atlanta and Decatur. She comes from a line of strong southern women who have persevered and transcended life's harshest circumstances. They often suffered in silence; she trys to give them a voice in her writing. She is a 2008 graduate of the Queens University MFA Creative Writing Program and is currently a PhD candidate in the University of Georgia Creative Writing Program. She has been published in Lalitamba and in Sub-Lit and was a finalist in the 2007 Southern Hum Press Women of Words chapbook competition.

No Anointing

by Cheryl Stiles

I

A gospel of new tongues—
ahhh-eeee, ta-so-so, ahhh-eeee.
In the Church of Jesus Christ

With All These Signs to Follow, I have felt
the Holy Ghost come through me,
speak through me—

ma-ree, maa-tha, so-ta-lee—and it was good.
His Spirit working me
from the top of my head down to my bare feet.

The Bible says not one sign
but all these signs shall follow.
They will speak in new tongues.

They will pick up serpents—
timber rattler, diamondback, canebrake.
If they drink any deadly thing—

strychnine, lye water, white lightning,
kerosene, gasoline—
it will not hurt them. They will lay

their hands on the sick—the cankor-ridden, the disease-
stricken, all those who are downtrodden
with ills, and they will recover.

II

That night I saw sheet lightning on the horizon
then a streak of lightning split the big oak,
sent sparks flying and smoke rising.

Thunder shook the tin roof, rattled the doorframe
of our house,
swung that string light bulb

in the kitchen back and forth like a pendulum.
I knew then
my crazy old man was planning something.

Dirt drunk on beer and Jack, he stormed through
the front screen door,
gun in one hand. With the other hand

he grabbed my neck, said,
"Got something
for you to see in the yard. It's out back."

He drug me through the mud to the henhouse,
that old chicken-coop
turned into a snake shack.

I saw the locked boxes of serpents,
stacked two and three tall,
all labeled after the names of the devil—

Satan, Beelzebub, Belial—and all the places
of hell—Gehenna
and the valley of Hinnom.

He cocked the hammer, put the gun to my head.
He unlocked the grate, opened
a box and yelled, "You come here, come."

"Put your hand in, whore, put your goddamn hand in."
I have been here before
many times—at least in certain dreams.

I am bruised, skin bluing, blood stained
on my clothes, my neck and arms.
I have often prayed for a *special* dream,

a dream like a divining rod, that wooded Y,
witch hazel, pointing
me toward an odd path I must travel.

Early on I learned the old arts, medicine-making
from black walnut hulls and bitter roots,
soapmaking from lye. My fingers

cracked and callused from stitching quilts
with womenfolk. I studied
the art of how to prophesy.

III

And in that special dream that had finally come,
the spirit flowed upon me, showed me
a cord—not rope, not twine, but electric,

plugged into a live outlet on one end but loose on the other,
its edges frayed, raw and exposed,
lying on the henhouse floor like discarded yarn

or string, looking just like any ordinary thing.
Now, drunk and staggering, he said again,
"Put your hand in."

With the strength of many women, like revenants and kin,
otherworldly, I turned, knocked him
flat on the ground, onto that cord.

And the fourth angel poured out a vial upon the sun.
The power almost split his skull.
Sparks flew from the barrel of the gun,

and *his feet were as if they were burned in a furnace.*
On his body a noisome and grievous sore appeared
and his mouth melted shut, forever sealed.

A gospel of new tongues—*ahhh-eeee, ta-so-so, ahhh-eee*—
the serpent always meaner
when no anointing comes.

Bodegónes

17th century Spanish genre scenes
immortalized by Velázquez, often set in taverns
or kitchens where cast iron pots on rough walls
were depicted as more significant than people

by Barbara Conrad

This woman frying eggs under a wide brush
of the artist's spell is not my mother, is she? Her raw
cracked hands, hard gaze at the child.

It might be any child — though isn't there more
than luminescent yokes between them?

What about the light the artist brings — to an unglazed
clay pot, tender skin of red onion on a crude table,
an unbroken eggshell. Such a plain life suspended
as if in meditation. As if lard from the pot

will never spatter onto a wide plank floor,
or the woman slip on a spill and shatter her bones.

In this scene, the husband-figure,
the father, will not bring home his bowery breath
or slump at the sink to swig a final jigger of bane
before she falls. He'll not stagger to her side

suddenly sober and sympathetic, or lift her
in a way I never saw him lift her.

This is where Velázquez fails me, all his glimmer
spent on brass, and that one odd shadow
of knife in an empty bowl.

Oysters

by Gray Jacobik

Most-prized delicacy of my forbearers, who,
raising me, raised that first shell to my open
mouth and poured the critter in, my head
tilted back, eyes squinched tight, trembling

with the dread and thrill of this right of passage.
They should be eaten raw—the slosh of the sea
sliding the oyster down your throat. *You can't*
be from Tidewater and not love oysters they'd

repeat, whether lemoned, vinegared, tabascoed,
or a la Rockefeller (those rich so-and-sos who
add spinach and onions and chopped bacon,
who nest theirs on coarse salt). *Ersters*

my relatives said, mocking my oy pronunciation,
proof a young Rebel was Yankee-hearted and
would one day move north. At low tide, off
Old Point Comfort, the rocky bars exposed,

my cousins and I would stoop till we harvested
a few bushels, throw back dead shells and clusters,
scheme how to avoid the squish against the roofs
of our mouths, the slushy gulp required to get

the glob down. I could shuck by ten. Uncle Willy
taught me to turn the knife while prying and lifting
the upper, shallower shell enough to cut the hinge
muscle, then run the blade round, sharp ridges

scraping my hands. Once in my twenties,
at an embassy reception, standing near
a punch bowl full of unshelled Louisiana
oysters, a Boschian vat of creamy eyes,

I watched others spoon oysters onto crackers
and eat warily, shyly, as if to ingest them were
somehow indecorous. There is, as Somerset Maugham
observed, "a dreadful solemnity" in eating oysters

which "a sluggish fancy cannot grasp." My child's
fancy brought snot to mind, slugs too, and my
grandfather's throat expulsions, unpleasant to hear
or see. A taste for oysters isn't easy to acquire,

especially if you believe, as I do, these bivalves
cry a woeful mollusk lament descending
your gullet, in this most intimate of cross-
species relations—one kind eating another alive.

Harvest

by F. M. Bradley

The oak frame's rough-cut timbers mingle and meld with vine and grape. They seem to have emerged from the same seed, from the same single stem that broke through endless layers of topsoil, rich with the thick rot of a thousand of this season's turning leaves and ageless moss.

Pop a scuppernong between your lips. Roll a thick-skinned bulb along your tongue. Squeeze it to the crown of your mouth, releasing an autumn burst of juice and sponge-like fruit as nature's protective dressing surrenders to your savor.

Lie back among the honeysuckle tendrils and tall grass and remember the Algonquin Ascopo, and Ascupernung, that grew along the riverbanks of Carolina long before you were created.

Imagine how the grape seeds made their way south in the moccasin mud of a native named Achak, Spirit, or Hassun, Stone. He hunted along the Black Warrior, spreading the vestiges of history's plenteous harvests.

This same September sky, its afternoon haze like a canvas for fuchsia strokes and violet flecks, and the familiar sound of a mockingbird as it struggles to croon a turtle dove's song, graft planter with picker, fruit with reaper, all into one.

Sugar Bust

by Meghan Brinson

My sugar has always come
from that factory that blew its top,
running the river hot
with deadly sweetness. My body
is a river and a factory.

And you, little gerkin,
pickling in my sweet sludge blood,
they tell me you will be
a monster. You will
burn your way out.

So I prick my fingers
on every rose I find,
hundreds of wishes for petiteness.
Like the best of them, I keep
a strict diet of eggshells and manure.

So hold me back, love.
Snuggle in hard, little wild fire,
into the matchbook, you hot blue blazer.
I have opened
every vein for you.

Schley Road

by Andrea Selch

Outside their trailers
where their yards collide
Mr A. and Mrs. B.
buzz past each other
on their ride-on mowers—
his a green John Deere,
hers, from Sears.

He circles left, she right,
and now and then
almost knee to knee
they nod their bills,
a welcome flick of blindness
in the too-bright day.

But once, after a hurricane,
a stump upended on the great divide;
Mr A. and Mrs B., dismounted,
stepped allemande gauche
around the latticed radical.

Caps in hand, they scanned
the damage. His business
would be roots, hers a ditch
which the ground-up stump
would hardly fill.

In five years' time,

grass may have grown there
but the gash persists,
appreciable in their tires' dip
as they do-si-do
on the property line.

"WE CLIMB ONTO THE MOTORCYCLE OF SLEEP"

- On a line by Jane Gentry

by Kory Wells

Jane. I love that image.
You holding tight to him,
your white scarf shimmering
in the night wind. It's how I sleep
with my man, too. But Jane,
can I ask about that roar
you mention? Has it grown
more noticeable though the years?
As your irresistible bad boy
freewheels through starry space,
does he sound like a Honda Goldwing?
A Kawasaki? A Harley?

My man's like a Harley,
a vintage model that rumbles
louder with every revolution
of engine and Earth. A problem
with the carburetor, I suspect.
Why, he sputters and gasps
and even backfires once in a while,
so deafening sometimes
I'm tempted to adjust the choke

right there in the darkness. I confess
I've thought how much quieter
a new model would be. But then
we circle back into the morning
glint of day bright as chrome:
those old plugs still spark,
that engine still cranks,
and despite the dents, pings, and misses,
the ride's still smooth
as sheets on the fresh-made bed
before we take the night
on one more thunderous spin.

Last Respects

by Joanne Emily Turnbull

Gladys kisses Myrtle. This is no small feat because her balance, always unreliable, is downright shaky today. This is because her right hand clutches a pouch instead of her cane. Because she refuses to wear glasses, Gladys cannot read the card that Myrtle's holding. No matter. Pinkerton's has been the family funeral home for three generations now and she knows what that card says like she knows her own name. The front never changes. Jesus --- blonde, blue-eyed, and backlit --- crowns the beginning of the 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

The reverse is customized for every death. Today it reads:

Myrtle Margaretta Perkins Harbison
Born July 27, 1898, Bakerstown, Pennsylvania
Died January 14, 1998, Venice, Florida

Gladys greets her sister. Welcome home, Myrtie-mine. Sure wish it was my name on that card. She closes her eyes to envision it: Gladys Gertrude Perkins Lambert. Thank goodness they didn't bury you in Florida. She remembers Myrtle weeping as she boarded a plane to serve a sentence of remaining days in her son's Florida home. Let's see, we were only seventy-nine when they made you go. Has it really been twenty years that you've been gone?

Birthday visits softened the first decade of exile. Gladys shudders as she remembers that last visit. They were sitting knee-to-knee, talking about friends who had died in the past year, and how thankful they were for their own good health and sound minds. It was when Myrtle began to explain her gift to Gladys -- the drawstring pouch -- that Dot, Myrtle's daughter-in-law, interrupted. Travel so expensive. Too old. Too frail. No more visits.

And so, these last ten years the sisters have clung to each other by a slender thread of Sunday telephone calls.

Well, we're together now, Myrtie-mine and that's what matters. And see? The pouch? It's always with me.

Gladys tightens her grasp around the silk bag and turns to the work at hand. She had made up her mind as she inched her way on her nephew's arm through the mortuary's black-canopied entrance tunnel. She will take care of both tasks in a single visit to the casket. The first, their grandmother's ritual passed down by their mother, is to inspect the corpse and judge its resemblance to the living Myrtle. The second is to bury the pouch beside the body.

Gladys hovers two inches above the head to examine Myrtle's hair. She gasps as she takes in the tightly-wound, wispy rolls that look like planted rows on the bluish field of Myrtle's scalp. They didn't comb your hair when they took out the curlers! Gladys knows her sister is unhappy with this hairstyle because Myrtle complained about this very thing whenever they visited funeral parlors. She said it was a shame, a common affliction on dead women over eighty.

Gladys, suspecting the undertaker has cut corners to prepare Myrtle for eternity, asks her sister, Where is your blue rinse bouffant? Then she remembers that Sunday night telephone call. Myrtle told her that a beautician convinced her to give up the hair rinse. Cobalt rivulets were staining her neck in the south Florida heat. You shouldn't have listened to her, Myrtie-mine!

Gladys drifts back to last week's phone call. It was Myrtle's turn. Gladys waited in her studio apartment where she moved when Myrtle left. The call did not come. Myrtle was never late. No matter. Gladys passed this Sunday evening like all others, staring out at tracks that no longer carried trains, television static keeping her company. When the phone finally rang, a catch-breath "Aunt Gladys" was all her nephew had to say. She knew Myrtle was gone.

Gladys was surprised that Myrtle's death hurt less than her banishment to Florida. Gladys could still see when Myrtle left. She remembers how her nephew's brimming glass-green eyes, so like Myrtle's, met her stone-grey eyes and said more than his words. "You're my favorite aunt. I wish you could come too but Dot won't, I mean can't, care for you both."

With Myrtle dead, Dot doesn't have to care for either of them now, Gladys thought as she hung up the phone. Then she began

to anticipate how the funeral parlor's muted light would flatter Myrtle's porcelain complexion. Her lifelong wish flickered: Why weren't they born identical twins? How unfair that Myrtle remained wrinkle-free well into old age thanks to genes that skipped Gladys and aided by twice-daily slathers of Pond's Cold Cream.

But today, as Gladys tries to steady herself against the casket to examine Myrtle, she decides the corpse bears no resemblance to her twin. She pokes at translucent paper-thin tissue that strains against the protruding skull. "Good God, Girl! What happened to your face?" It does not occur to her that Myrtle's face could wizen in a decade. Gladys permits a single tear to drop into interlocking webs of crevices packed with orange powder. She resolves not to cry.

Then she notices Myrtle's lips. They were never without rose-colored lipstick during life. Now they are bloodless gray. An oversight? Gladys thinks not. She reasons the mortician has omitted the lipstick on purpose, another trick to save money.

Gladys steps right to examine her sister's fingernails and wobbles. She almost drops her drawstring pouch as she fights for balance. She clutches the container's steel edge as one about to plummet into the sea clings to a ship's rail. A semi-circle of arms reaches to catch her. Not this time. The casket proves worthy ballast and she holds on. Voices behind the arms sigh. She has fallen so often this past year, broken so many bones, that the family has taken to calling her "pieces of Aunt Gladys."

Gladys sighs too. She has resisted the family and dodged the nursing home, but the doctor warned: One more fall.

She discards the thought and slips the pouch in her purse so she can concentrate on the fingernails. Now she knows for sure. The undertaker's misapplied artistry is no mistake. Myrtle's nails are fire engine red. Gladys shakes her head, disgusted. She thinks how her twin buffed those nails daily, never defiling them with nail polish. Now they dangle like garish Christmas lights hanging from ice-laden branches.

Something else is wrong; something more important. Myrtle is in the wrong casket! Immediately Gladys knows her nephew has surrendered his mother's requested mahogany coffin to Dot's practicality. They've substituted a metal one. Anything more would waste their heritance. Well, Gladys will deal with this later.

She knows grandmother and mother would give their opinions of the corpse at this point. They would speak loudly to the gathered family. They would make sure the mortician heard their judgment. But Gladys has had enough. Her inspection is over. She needs to sit down.

Myrtle rests in the main parlor. Separated from smaller, adjoining rooms by an accordion curtain, it mimics a modest living room. Floral arrangements intermingle with brocade sofas and chairs. All line the perimeter to provide an expanse of leaf-patterned carpet for mourners to chat as if at a cocktail party. Gladys inhales the sickly-sweet floral aroma and looks behind her. She pictures the rows of folding chairs that will face the casket for tomorrow's service. Soft, unfamiliar recorded music plays. She doesn't like it.

Gladys needs help to get to her chair. She scans the room for her nephew. Instead she finds his wife Dot. Her platinum hair and sequined pants suit emit beams like a brassy lighthouse over the wave of relatives.

Dot's Appalachian twang betrays West Virginia roots as she holds several cousins captive. "Myrtle could have died in July, don't you think? Lordy, who wants to come north in the winter?" Her peppery laugh draws tight smiles. "I said let's bury the old girl in Florida and be done with it. Why waste money flying her up here? Not to mention our air fare and the rental fee to store her until the ground thaws! But no, that husband of mine said you don't do your mama like that. And family is family, I guess, so I got to respect that."

Gladys shares Myrtle's disregard for her nephew's second wife. The woman takes crude to an art form. "Damn Dot," Myrtle called her daughter-in-law. "Talks alot. Doesn't say much." Gladys wonders how Myrtle endured two decades under the same roof with this woman. Damn Dot makes Gladys glad she never had children.

Her nephew startles her as he comes from behind and grabs her upper arms. He leans down and around to kiss her cheek. The camera around his neck digs into the half-moon hump that rises from the valley between her shoulders. He takes her arm and she totters a few feet to a chair placed against the folding curtain.

"Why the camera?"

"I'm going to take some pictures since the only time the family gets together anymore is at funerals. How about I get your

picture now?" He lowers her shriveled shell onto the chair.

Gladys congratulates herself. How wise she was to pick this perch for Myrtle's wake. Position is crucial. She creaks her head left and glimpses hazy flowers beyond the casket. Damn Dot's arrangement of pink-orange gladiolas blazes with shiny gold letters---"It's Time."

"Take my picture?" Gladys asks, "I guess so. Just make sure Myrtle's not in it."

"Why not?" Her nephew cradles her hand tenderly, like a child cups a dead bird, fearful it will crumble if grasped too tightly.

"Well, they say a corpse gets in the photo, there's going to be another death. Soon."

"Who says?" Her nephew smiles as if she were a charming, silly child, her words amusing, irrelevant.

"I don't remember." Gladys hates to be asked questions she can't answer. Was it Myrtle that told her about corpses and cameras? Something she learned in Florida? "Get now. Let me rest. Take your picture later."

She wants to be left alone to spend her last day with Myrtle. The chair, placed near the head of the casket, faces away into the next room. She is comforted that Myrtle lies close behind. Her back to the body, relatives bending to give condolences will get a birds-eye view of the corpse, guaranteeing brief greetings.

Gladys settles in, crossing her ankles. She smoothes out the skirt of her knife-pleated black dress to make sure it covers her knees. Then she opens her purse for a handkerchief. Her fingers graze the pouch. She curses. How could she forget her second task? Gladys rubs the bag, an act repeated so often over the past ten years that the silk has thinned. She can feel the sharp creases of the folded aluminum treasure hiding within the material. Well, a promise is a promise, especially one made to Myrtle, so she'll just have to make another trip to the coffin.

But someone must help her to the casket. Who? How will she slip the pouch in beside the body without anyone seeing her? With a start, Gladys realizes she must accomplish her mission before the casket is closed at the end of today's visiting hours. She lets the tiny pouch fall onto her lap and groans. All this planning takes away from her time with Myrtle.

Turning her head left again, Gladys catches a blur shaped like a black pencil with a fresh eraser. Standing ramrod at the foot of the coffin is Thornton Pinkerton, the bald, black-suited undertaker. She motions with her fish hook forefinger. He can help her to the casket.

An image flashes as he approaches --- how awful their mother looked in her coffin, almost as bad as Myrtle. Thornton had covered her mother's hairless, formerly brunette head with a copper-colored wig. He had neglected to reshape her lower lip, grimaced by a stroke. Rage startles her, obliterating her intention for the pouch. It erupts from her bony chest and flows like lava up her chicken-throat. This is the man who is responsible. Gladys spews her judgment.

"Chiseler! That does not look like my Myrtle!" As Thornton pulls back, surprised by the old lady's force, Gladys recalls Thornton's assurances about the coffin. "What's more, you promised Myrtle she could have that mahogany casket! It's no wonder the dead people don't come here anymore! They're all going to McClelland's Mortuary." She amplifies her raspy screech to ensure Thornton grasps the depth of her condemnation.

Gladys' eyelids sag like worn elastic. She must tilt her head back in order to peer at Thornton. It's no use. Misty vision prevents her from seeing how her words scorch his face. No matter. She can almost feel the heat from his burning cheeks. She remembers how her mother and grandmother made Thornton's forebears endure this verdict. No Pinkerton had ever succeeded in making a dead Perkins look as she had looked in life. Gladys smiles. She visualizes the averted eyes and contained, amused expressions of onlooking family members. They've witnessed this scene before.

Gladys knows that Thornton despises her, just as he despises her revered family tradition. What does she care? It's finally her turn to administer justice on behalf of the deceased. It's an honor granted the oldest family member. Thornton is an idiot.

Gladys sees him in her mind's eye. She knows he's smirking, thinking he'll get her. He'll make her look worse than her sister when he's in charge of her embalming. He's sizing her up, guessing her time will come soon by the looks of her. Ha! Let him plot revenge. Let him ponder possibilities for her eternal hairstyle and cosmetics. As if she would come here!

Thornton tries to placate her. He bends down and gently places his hand on her arm. "I'm sorry Gladys. I did my best with what I had to work with. Myrtle was so frail."

Excuses! She has heard this lame explanation before, how ravages of illness, accident, and age, hinder his work. Truth be told, Gladys knows he's worried that close-by mourners will overhear them. That could cost him business. Thornton's stale breath irritates her. She swats his hand as if it were a pesky fly.

"Take your hand off me, you swindler, you! How dare you call me Gladys! It's Mrs. Lambert to you! Don't make nice with me. Myrtle paid you good money and you made her look awful. You did it on purpose!" Gladys averts her head to let Thornton know the conversation is over. He slumps back to his post like a junior high boy slinking away from a rejected dance proposal.

Heck! She forgot. Thornton was supposed to help her to the casket. How could she forget her precious drawstring pouch? Well, Myrtle knows it's not her fault. That stupid Thornton has riled her so. She can get her nephew to help her to the casket later. Right now she needs to talk to Myrtle.

I'm sorry, Myrtie-mine. I can't do anything about how you look. Listen, about the pouch... A voice begins to throb in her head, right behind her ears, regular and persistent, like the beat of a kettle drum.

Myrtie? Is that you? Gladys knows that it's Myrtle, all right, and she doesn't want to talk about the black silk pouch.

Forget it. Nothing can be done about how I look, Gladdy-girl. Too late.

Well, Myrtie-mine, there is one saving grace. You look nice in your blue nightgown. The nightgown was Gladys' birthday gift to Myrtle ten years ago, the last time they were together, the day Damn Dot announced no more visits. She remembers how Myrtle fondled the nightgown's lace trim and decided that it was too pretty to wear. "I'm going to save this, be laid out in it."

I'm pleased you remembered to wear the nightgown, Myrtie. But it's so big! I know I bought the right size. Remember? You checked the tags. Despite inflatable pads placed under the nightgown, the frail form behind her is withered and wasted, like her own.

I gave you the nightgown and you gave me this pouch. Remember how I thought you'd given me such a strange birthday present?

Gladdy, don't waste time! Get me in that mahogany coffin.

But the pouch, Myrtie, it's such a burden. Oh, why did you give it to me?

Gladdy! Have you no respect for the dead? Get that son of mine over here. Make him put me in the right casket. Keep Damn Dot out of it.

A familiar hymn plays. She likes this one: A Closer Walk with Thee. It was playing the day Damn Dot took the twins to Pinkerton's to select the casket. Myrtle wanted to make sure her funeral arrangements were in place before she left for Florida.

Thornton Pinkerton and Damn Dot watched in amusement. The twins picked over the features of different caskets like they were discussing how fresh the vegetables were at the market. "This one! I want this casket." Myrtle hissed, mesmerized, as she ran both hands over the polished mahogany, caressing the shining wood as she might a lover.

Damn Dot stepped in. "Now you don't need something that fancy, do you, Myrtle? Look at these nice gray ones."

Myrtle ignored Dot, tsking to Gladys, "Remember Fern Broadfield? She got stuck in one of those cheap steel boxes."

"I know, Myrtie, but it's rare, thank goodness."

"Their families don't love them. That's all there is to it, Gladdy. Promise me you won't let my boy put me in a metal box. Make sure I get the mahogany."

Gladys remembers Damn Dot rolling her eyes and winking at Thornton as she nudged the twins out the door. "Don't you worry, Myrtle. Leave it to Dot. I'll make sure you get just what you need."

Shameful! If her nephew and that Damn Dot think Gladys is going to stand for Myrtle being buried in that gray box, they've got another thing coming.

Don't you worry, Myrtie-mine, I'll take care of this! I'll get you moved.

Gladys prides herself on still being able to take care of several things at once. First she will give her nephew a piece of her mind. Next she'll get Myrtle moved. Then she'll get her nephew to help her to the casket. Finally, she will bury the drawstring bag.

As if he'd read her mind, her nephew arches over her. He covers her like a tent. Placing his hands on each arm of her chair, his camera swings in her face like the pendulum on a grandfather clock. Rapid-fire words shoot from her frail façade, surprising

them both.

"Shame on you! Shame, shame, shame! How could you bring your mother to this place? Thornton has made her look terrible."

Gladys knows her nephew. He will try to quiet her. He does not want a scene. He does not want to be embarrassed in front of the relatives. So what? Gladys wants the family to hear. Maybe if they know how badly Myrtle has been treated, they'll make her nephew to do the right thing. She pictures them shaking their heads in sympathy. She listens to her nephew plead tradition.

"Now, now, Aunt Gladys. The family has come to Pinkerton's for three generations. I played Little League with Thornton."

"No excuses! Where is the mahogany casket? Your mother deserves better than that cheap box. She can afford it and I aim to see she gets it."

Gladys remembers how guilty her nephew felt that she could not live in Florida with Myrtle. Well, Gladys guesses he feels guilty now, sacrificing his mother's wish to his wife's command. Too bad.

"Your mother doesn't like this one bit, I tell you. It's an outrage!" Gladys gives him no chance to explain, dismissing him with a wave that warns him not to bother with an answer. She returns to Myrtle.

"Lordy, Gladdy, you didn't get me moved!"

"Sorry, Myrtie." Her chin trembles. "Please. Let's talk about the pouch."

Gladys recognizes the song playing on the loudspeaker. It's her favorite: Abide With Me. She fingers the silk bag that rests on her lap. The drawstring has broken.

Her mind wanders again back to that last birthday visit ten years ago, their discussion of the pouch.

"How odd." She had thought. "Why would Myrtle give her a bumpy bag for a birthday gift?

"Am-uh-what?" Gladys looked down to hide her disappointment. She'd been hoping for a blouse. Myrtle had good taste.

"Amitriptyline," Myrtle repeated. "And that's real silk, Gladdy. Embroidered those white crosses myself. They look nice against the black material, don't you think?"

"Amuh-trip-tuh-what?" Gladys was impressed that her twin could pronounce the word.

"Amitriptyline. It's a drug, Gladdy." Myrtle's impatient tone kicked off their life-long parry of spoken responses to unspoken questions. "It's a drug for people who get the depression."

"And just where did you get these pills, Myrtie?"

"Doctor. Been saving them up. Got me some too." Myrtle's next statement made Gladys wonder, not for the first time, if her gaping mouth was a periscope to her mind. "Two thousand milligrams in that bag. Woman at bingo said that should do it."

"Do what?" Gladys pushed. She suspected she would not like the answer.

Myrtle's jaw hardened. "If you go first, I'm taking those pills. If I go first … well, it's up to you. You don't want to take them, put them in my coffin."

Ten years later, Gladys understands why Myrtle gave her the silk drawstring pouch. A wonderful gift! How could she fail her sister? She rolls the tiny of bag between her fingers. Her nephew tries to sneak past and she calls his name. Wary, he squats by her chair.

"Please help me to the casket." Gladys tries and fails to raise herself. "I must see Myrtle one last time."

"Hold on, Aunt Gladys. Thornton is closing the casket. I'll ask him to wait."

Gladys sinks back down into her chair. Yes, of course, she knows that Thornton will keep the casket open. But she misses Myrtle. Those Sunday calls, that decade of scant balm that barely dulled her ache for her twin, are gone now. Myrtle has stopped speaking.

Gladys makes up her mind.

"Never mind." She pats her nephew's cheek. "Go ahead. Take your picture. Make sure your mother is in it. Me and Myrtle. And get me a glass of water. Please."

What Lulled My Brother to Sleep on the Backseat of George Grandy's Fine Sedan—A Speculation, A Jealousy

by Kat Meads

It would have been a Ford, possibly a Lincoln—black, maybe maroon. Plenty of leg and head and elbowroom, front seat and back. A car capable of transporting six adults and three buckaroos in comfort, seats designed for deep sink.

A kid who didn't need to pay attention to white lines or drifting headlights or sudden crossings by night-blind critters, a kid tuckered out from sand and surf and sun, could give in to rolling motion, enter without qualm the tunnel of dream.

Behind the wheel George Grandy Junior because George Junior always drove that party north to the city, south to sand dunes, west to baseball diamonds, a trucker by trade. In the front seat with him Elsie and the son whose dead daddy's pension explained why Elsie and George would court for life.

In the backseat, two Anns, Ferebee and Meads, their husbands and sons. Slim and trim those backseat men from farming's exertions, so six could fit, if close. Daddies against door handles, mamas next, the center reserved for young'uns already leaning heavy, night coming on.

And maybe George Junior saying, as the car picks up speed: Ya'll want this window up? Wind gettin' too much?

And maybe my father-to-be saying: Naw. Leave it.

And maybe my mother-to-be saying: 'Less it's too much on you and Elsie.

And maybe the other Ann saying: Feels good after that boiling beach, don't it?

The rolling of tires, the whinny of wheels, my brother dreaming, dreaming.

A bump, a jolt, and they're on the bridge, turning inland, the scent of salt replaced by pine and myrtle, gray dirt succeeding sand.

The caterwaul of cricket and frog, the widening shadow of swamp, and still my brother sleeps, his mother/my mother his pillow, his father/my father his shield, the night just night, its darkness just darkness, the color of heading home.

Letting Go

By Paige J. Levin

Mamma's what I call a keeper and maybe that's why she's been keeping Daddy around this past year. If you open up the top drawer of her dresser, you'll find a collection of buttons and threads, the kind that come free with clothes purchased at shops like Talbots and Ann Taylor. A rainbow of silken strings, tortoise buttons and silver clips clutter the right side of her antique dresser, the one she's refused to part with even though the drawers cough as they slide across the warped track. She's never used any of that stuff. Not a bit. But that doesn't stop her from growing the stash. And trust me when I say it's taking over like Carolina Kudzu.

"You best get home, Lizzy," Mamma said yesterday morning.

"But Mamma, I've got my thesis to write and kids to tutor."

"Dr. Morris said it's high time I let Daddy go."

I fell silent.

"Lizzy?"

"Yes, Mamma?"

"I'll book you a ticket."

And that's how I ended up here, thirty-five thousand feet up in the sky. I lean close to the wall, look out the window, study the world below. Philadelphia fades as the plane climbs higher. William Penn, standing atop City Hall, blurs into the blue sky until he disappears altogether beneath cottony clouds. I flip through the People I bought in the terminal, creasing the spine and filling in the crossword puzzle. Eight-Down is Kline, as in Patsy. When we start our descent into Atlanta, I close my eyes and name all those Peach streets in town: Peachtree, Peachtree Battle, Peachtree Dunwoody. My list only stops when we connect with the tarmac.

Mamma's idling at the curb when I get outside. She's driving Daddy's old diesel Benz and it's sputtering just like it always does. The heavy August air clings to my skin. My hair curls from the bottom up, clumping in thick locks that resemble Rotini. I'm outside not nearly a minute and a drop of moisture streams down the ridge of my spine before settling in the lace band of my panties.

The passenger window lowers and Mamma leans across the seat.

"I'll pop the trunk. Just watch out for my stuff," she instructs.

I walk around to the rear. Heat from the exhaust coats my bare legs in paced spits. It reminds me of hot breath, the kind those drunken Clemson boys used to exhale on my neck. I throw my bags in, close the trunk and walk back around to the passenger side.

"Give Mamma a kiss," she insists as I clip my seatbelt.

"Hello, Mamma," I say pressing my mouth to her cheek.

"Is that a peasant skirt? I read about that trend in Bazaar when I was getting my hair done." Mamma pinches the fabric of my skirt between two fingers and rubs back and forth like she's fixing to heat it up, start a fire.

"Yeah, I guess. I got it at some store that sells stuff from Guatemala."

Mamma releases the gauzy fabric like she's just been burned. Then she shifts the car into gear and pulls out into traffic. We weave through town and a half hour later, Mamma pulls into a shady space at the nursing home. She kills the engine and we get out, walking through the parking lot, down the corridors. I think to reach for Mamma's hand, anxious like a child on the first day of school. But instead, I curl them into tight fists and hide them in my skirt pockets.

"Well don't you look handsome today," Mamma says to Daddy as she enters his room, goes over to his bed. "Lizzy came to see you, Charlie." She brushes wisps of hair off his brow.

I just stand there, still.

"Here, Lizzy. Sit down and tell Daddy what you've been up to," she says as she drags a chair closer to the bed, the legs squealing against the linoleum.

I walk into the room and sit down.

Patches of quiet dot my sentences, like someone's turning my voice up and down, though it isn't really going very far up. But once I stop looking at the wires and hearing for the machines, I feel more comfortable. That's when I close my eyes. With the world black, we're no longer in the nursing home. My mouth keeps moving, catching Daddy up on my crazy advisor and the way my neighbor leaves his trash in the hall instead of walking it to the chute. There's no rhyme or reason to what I share. I just go on and on; at least that's what I remember.

"Lizzy, wake up," Mamma whispers.

"What happened?" I ask as I straighten my posture.

"You fell asleep. It's okay. Let's head home, Sugar. Dr. Morris stopped by, said we can take care of things tomorrow. Something about paperwork and insurance and whatever else it is one does when, well, you know."

The back of my hand drags against my mouth, brushing crusted saliva from the corners. I stand up and adjust the waist of my skirt. My arm shimmies from the elbow, just enough to drop my watch back down to my wrist. Then I look at Daddy. He hasn't moved one bit.

When we get home, I go up to my old bedroom. Mamma comes in as I'm putting on my pajamas.

"What is that?" I ask with a nod to the box in her hands.

"Stuff Daddy and I kept for you."

Mamma places the box on my bed, the patchwork quilt buckling under the weight, and then she sits down in the white whicker rocking chair.

"Go on," she instructs.

"Not tonight, Mamma. It's been a long day."

Mamma pulls herself to her feet, kisses me on the forehead and then retreats down the hall to her bedroom. After she's gone, I peer into the box. Right on top is a photograph of me straddling my first two-wheeler, a purple metallic Schwinn with a basket clipped to the handlebars. And all I can think about is Daddy's legs and arms mangled up with the metal frame of his bicycle, the same crumpled bicycle that Mamma has leaning against the back wall of the garage. Or the way his skull cracked open and his brains seeped out onto Tuxedo Drive, blackened tire marks the only proof a car had been anywhere near him. I reach into the box, lift the picture up and study the way my helmet is tilted to the right, resting on a pigtail, and how my eyes are squinting against the sun as I smile a toothy grin at the camera, at Daddy saying cheese. I set the photo against the alarm clock and move the box to the floor. Then I get into bed and with one twist of the lamp's knob, the room goes dark.

At six, I am staring at the crack in my ceiling. I get up and go downstairs where Mamma's at the sink tossing damp grinds down the drain. She's already dressed and her hair is clipped in a perfect chignon. As she flips the disposal off and on, off and on, the charm bracelet on her wrist clinks like a wind chime.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, Lizzy, you're supposed to make your presence known when you enter a room," Mamma gasps when she sees me.

"Is there coffee or did you drink it all?"

"I poured it out. When did you start drinking coffee?"

"When I realized my thesis was due."

"We'll get you coffee at the home. Go get dressed. The sooner we start this day, the sooner it'll be over."

Upstairs, I slip into a black jersey skirt, a blue t-shirt and my flip-flops. No matter how I tug at my hair, the curls won't budge. So I tack it all back in a barrette. I apply one quick layer of lip-gloss before grabbing my purse and heading for the

door. Except, just as I'm at the landing, I return to my bedroom and grab my baby blanket off the bed. I cluster the tatters in my palms and raise it my face, drawing in a deep breath of the past, and then I stow it in my purse and go downstairs.

Mamma won't go in. We've been sitting in the parking lot for two hours now. My bladder's about to burst. My blood craves caffeine. And Mamma has both hands wrapped tight around the steering wheel. The car's idling and no matter what I say, she won't respond. So I remain quiet, let her be and just wait.

"He was wearing a helmet," Mamma finally says.

He was, except the chinstrap wasn't clipped right, not that it would have mattered.

"I know," I respond.

"I told him to stop that biking habit of his. I was fixing to bend the wheel since he always ignored my request."

"Mamma, Daddy's a stubborn man. A bent wheel wouldn't have kept him off the road."

Mamma laughs, "Stubborn indeed, bless his heart. Sometimes I see that in you."

I reach over and rest my hand on Mamma's leg. She releases her grip from the steering wheel and lays her trembling fingers atop mine.

"It's for the best Mamma. In many ways, he's already gone. Heck, I bet he's cussing you from the inside out. Daddy would never want to be like that, still and quiet."

"But if I let him go, Lizzy, if he's gone I've got nothing."

"You've got me," I say.

"You're up in Philadelphia. The house will be empty."

I know what she means. Lying in bed last night, listening to the house moan in the wind, Daddy is still there. It's okay that his clothes still hang in the closet and his golf shoes still sit in mudroom. No one questions why Mamma washes his car on Sunday after church. But once we unplug the cables and let him go, everything changes. Suddenly Mamma's no longer that poor woman on Habersham with the husband in the hospital. Now she's that crazy widow who refuses to move on.

"Mamma, I'll move home," I offer.

"You will?"

"Sure thing," I say, stomach tightening as I think of how this will change my life.

"But what about school?"

"I'll make it work."

And with that, Mamma turns the car off.

It's half past three when we finally leave the home. I drive. Mamma is too shaken to be behind the wheel. I crack the windows, letting the summer heat temper the air conditioned blasts coming from the vents. No one speaks, not even when I pull into the driveway.

Mamma goes out back while I fix us drinks in the kitchen. When the kettle whistles, a stream of steam lifting from the spout, I pour out the water and brew us some sweet tea. Sprawled out on neighboring chaises, we sip our drinks.

"When do you want to go back?" Mamma asks.

"After the funeral, I suppose. I need to sublet my apartment and talk to my advisor."

"Don't be silly," Mamma says with a tone.

"Mamma, I can't not go back."

"Lizzy, I mean don't be silly about staying here. Daddy would've never wanted it that way."

"Since when did you care about Daddy getting his way?" I ask with a chuckle. "If you had let Daddy had his way, those God awful plaid shorts with embroidered anchors would still be hanging in his closet."

Mamma starts to tremble. From her chest to her neck, her body rocks. And I start to fear I've gone and set her off into a tizzy of tears.

"Mamma?"
"Lord, those shorts were ugly," she says between bursts of laughter.
"Ugly as sin."
"Lizzy?" She's catching her breath.
"Yes, Mamma?"
"Everything'll be okay, won't it?"
"Sure thing, Mamma. Sure thing."

Hunting

by Ansley Moon

He picks up the gun before heading out the door. He shivers as he steps out into the first frost of the year. *Nope,* he thinks and goes back inside to grab his big, camouflage coat.

As he walks, he pulls the zipper just below his neck. The ground succumbs beneath his boots, a giving between man and nature. No matter how warmly he dresses he can always feel the wind cut through him. He follows the path through the woods, while his flashlight shines a semicircle of light ahead of him.

After about twenty minutes, he reaches his tree, shoves the gun to his left side, and begins the climb. Once settled he finds the flask hidden in his deep pockets. He unscrews the lid and the liquid meets his lips. *Whiskey. Good ole' Jack never lets me down.* The alcohol courses through his body slowly, bringing that familiar warm sensation that only a good friend can provide.

A squirrel runs up the tree next to him, undeterred by his presence. The moon dimly lights the woods a bluish, grey color this time of the morning. Most people are never awake this early to see it. His hunting stand overlooks the mouth of a creek that you can follow down about eight miles before you reach the river.

He'd have to get back before she called, but it had been so long since he'd been here, in this tree, in his stand. He was determined he was going to kill something this year. His meat from last year was almost gone, and if didn't kill something soon he'd be forced to buy that store processed meat, which they injected with so many hormones its consistency felt like rubber.

He rustles through another pocket and rests his hand on a round can. He pulls out a can of Copenhagen. *Shit*, he thinks to himself. He looks around the stand, hoping he left an empty bottle or something up here. He glances down to the ground. *Maybe I could just spit it there. No the sound might disturb the animals, and then he surely wouldn't kill anything.* He unscrews the cap again and peers inside his flask. He finishes the rest of the whiskey and packs a wad of tobacco in his cheek. When he gets enough juice in his mouth, he spits the black-brown liquid into his flask.

He picks up his binoculars to make out a sound he heard. *Just another damn squirrel.* Too bad he didn't like squirrel meat, as they were legal to hunt year round.

He enjoyed the primitiveness of hunting. Once he found a target he'd count silently to ten, while watching the animal in his scope, and then he would shoot. The gunshot was the only thing that brought him back to being a man. After it he was an animal again.

Around daylight he woke to the sound of his own snoring. He looked at his watch. 6:47 am. He had not meant to fall asleep. He grabbed his gun and walked back to his cabin.

The temperature had risen slightly and the only hint of the morning frost was the wet earth beneath his boots. He bent his knees and unlaced each boot before slipping them off his feet and placing them outside the door. The only voice to greet him was the one of the answering machine offering "No new messages."

Susan was supposed to call. She was visiting this weekend and it was already Thursday. *It was six months since she was here last. What am I supposed to do? If she doesn't know I love her by now there isn't much more I can do.*

He takes the orange juice from the refrigerator and drinks it from the bottle. The acid burns his throat more than the whiskey did. He turns on the stove and cracks two eggs over a cast iron pan. The eggs wilt and turn white, then brown, under the heat. He uses one hand to cover them in salt and pepper and uses the other hand to run hot water over a dirty fork. Sweat beads along his scalp while he stands over the counter eating.

After he finishes his breakfast, he walks into the bedroom, throws his dirty clothes into the hamper, and searches for a clean shirt. His closet is small but packed neatly. His clothes are lined in order from white to black with one red sweater and several old blue work shirts, from a job he no longer has, in between. He grabs a white thermal shirt and layers a grey thermal over it.

He takes the dirt path to the first gravel road and turns right. Before he makes it to the stop sign he pulls over and vomits outside his pickup truck with one hand resting on the door. He wipes the yellow chunks from his face with his handkerchief,

and then continues the drive to work.

After eight hours of unpacking boxes of DVDs, video games, televisions, iPods and laptops he returns to his cabin. With one push of a button Susan's voice fills the house like she is still there.

"Dad. Hey it's me. I'm sorry. Something has come up and I won't be able to visit this weekend. I'll call you later.

"Dad…Dad…Dad," he listens to the message again before he finally stops and grabs a beer from the fridge. He twists the top off the longneck with the underside of his shirt and sits in his chair. He looks out his large windows to the woods below and sees a deer. He closes his eyes and counts silently to ten.

Two Rows of Teapots

by Dorothy Anne Spruzen

Tarnished silver from a long-dead aunt, I should love it more
Huge and pretty from Bermuda, too heavy to use
Wedgewood and basalt, my father's, once
Made in Occupied Japan, small brown perfection
Delicate, for green tea, perhaps
Ornate, for Oolong, I think

Three modern ones:
Leaning like a drunk, fake barnacles and a snail
White with a hole through the center, hardly space for tea
A spiral shell shape, there's a word for it

And then the Egyptian lotus, from Papa Omar, with love

Antique and not
From so many places
And so many people, a collage of memories
The shriveled leaf we call tea, prized by them all

Form and color, different and similar
Spouts and handles, same utility
Assorted beauty

Bilingual

by Kim Roberts

Over a line of dark trees
in Rock Creek Park,

cumulonimbus clouds
are heaped,

their full white foliage
a ghostly mirror

of the maples and beeches.
The clouds

are a translation
of the trees. They say

something similar.
They say *thermals* for *branches.*

They say *toposphere*
for *leaves.* Against

a soft blue sky,
they say *beauty* for *beauty,*

delight for *delight.*

Flight Pattern

for Sylvia Young

by Caroline Young

Red hair, speckled legs,
rock and manure in the cracks of her heels.
She flaps her arms along the graveled road, rising
beyond the cotton field with bleeding finger-tips.
Her mother seizes her, skirt pinned beneath
the leg of the sewing machine. There is no thing
beautiful as a hickory switch in flight. She is not
to be an airplane. A bluebird. A butterfly.
Her father will come home tonight
sour and backhanded.
His bourbon-breath threatens to swallow her.

In flight, she learns to lay eggs
with no effort; crying babies, angry wives
in her wake. She lights runways,
sparks storms from London to Paris.
She bathes in a shallow pool. A heat hungry
sorceress, she will mystify a taken man
of God. Straying with his net. Almost caught.
An airplane. A bluebird. A butterfly.
Her wings cannot lift the red balloon
bearing against her memory.
No thing strikes her as a life.

At rest, she dreams only of landings.

What is reflected in the Koi pond in early evening

by Antoinette Brim

I.

Koi: antiquity in gold leaf with crimson splashes of autumn white;
a slow stir of fin and finesse nestled amongst fans of green leaves.
A shield of water lily brushes my face from the distance. I am afloat
amidst jewels that swim and dart. My face is fluid. My eyes are adamant
black; a mirror of time unfolding, spawning forward thrust. Awash,
I am illusion: a duet of amniotic moon and stony pool bottom.
Without gills, I breathe brocaded scale and dragon wing.

II.

A wave of my hand across the water's surface erases my face
from the pond and stirs the newly fallen leaves into excitement.
They turn koi and swim deeply into the waiting school.
The water remembers and returns to its former home.

III.

Silken dusk light curves and sways in the koi pond.
It does not fear being lost; instead, it bathes in clear stillness,
caresses the koi and then withdraws into the darkening sky.

Someone Graffitied Swastikas on the Sheep

by Erin Murphy

Someone graffitied swastikas on the sheep.
The vandals scaled the split-rail fence
in Scottsville, steadied each ewe, shook
the can of blue spray paint, took aim.
The sheep were freshly shorn. It takes a year
for coats to come full fleece. No amount
of scrubbing will erase the stain.

I Took an Evening Astronomy Class

by Erin Murphy

I took an evening astronomy class
with my father when the only safe
topic was the sky. I have lobbed
the words I love you with no one
there to catch them on the other side.
I owe three people apologies.
Two of them know why.

They say to understand a man you must walk a mile in his shoes.

by Aisha Johnson

A fiction
I slip into the bedroom
tie you up,
tape your mouth shut,
turn off the TV.
Convince myself,
there is no grip to get.
Make you listen to old poems by me,
recorded in makeshift sound booths,
by way of other men's basements,
using garage band.
Poems are my favorite platforms
I say.
You try to mumble over the tape,
what? I can't understand you,
I laugh.
Slide my feet into your Sunday shoes,
this will put an end to that though,
I explain.
Slam the door behind me.
Your shoes are loyal,
don't make a sound on flat surfaces.
Won't even flop off my feet properly.
Pink-slipped,
foreclosed,
and repossessed,
We are all that is left.
I need to comprehend.
Didn't give you the glass,
I stuck my finger in,
to pull bits of the cork out.
We have to be.
These are the soles I watch you carry to the altar.
I can't stand the silent treatment.

heading home,
I have decided,
we will catch a fire,
shake loose our skin,
and since you are still tied up
you have no choice in the matter.

Gently pulling the tape from over your mouth,
we sit face to face.
You say,
You are still morning Bea Arthur.
I say,
Your shoes are your shoes.

Mr. Schadel

by Marnette K. Graff

At first glance, he wasn't the sort of man who provoked sexual feelings. Mr. Schadel was our next door neighbor, a thin wiry man with a shiny bald spot and a deep tan from Sundays spent on our beach completing the New York Times crossword puzzle in pen. Over the last seven years, our families shared the boardwalk down to the rocky sands of Long Island Sound, chatting as the blue-green waves broke over us, laughing at the way the stones on the bottom hurt our feet and minced our steps. We advanced to drinking glasses of wine on their veranda while watching evening sailboat regatta's, the white, blue and red sails glowing as the sun turned the horizon orange and pink. There were visits to our deck in the bright haze of summer as seagulls laughed overhead, and we ate lobsters on tables covered with thick layers of newspapers, butter dripping down assorted chins and arms as the pile of bright orange shells in the center of the table grew. We saw them almost every weekend at some point, were invited to their children's weddings, and became the Schadel's traditional shiksa invitees at their annual Sedar dinner.

I was thirty-five when my family moved into our old house with its tall windows and clear view to Connecticut, almost forty-two when my father, half an hour away and lying in bed next to my mother, suddenly stopped breathing, right in the middle of the Johnny Carson Tonight Show.

Mrs. Schadel had been sorrowful and sympathetic on the phone when I shared my news. The Schadel's were caring and friendly, but not obtrusive; kind, but not overwhelming. That morning, the calls to my father's large Italian family had been conducted to the backdrop of Frank Sinatra booming from their porch, a comforting sound of normality in the middle of my disrupted world. Mrs. Schadel played it as she did every Saturday morning while she hung out the wash, her sheets and towels snapping in the breeze and soaking up the green scent of fresh air at the seaside.

The next day my husband was shopping for food our family and friends would wolf down, reassurance of their status as having cheated death, following an emotional afternoon spent at the funeral home, that bastion of dim lighting and malignant quietude. My mother had decided getting her hair done would shore her up through the onslaught. My assignment was to take a long, hot shower in the only time I would have to myself that day, my reward for the last thirty-six hours. First, a night spent in the Emergency Room, when my nurse persona watched the proceedings in a clinical way that had told me from the outset it was a worthless effort. This had been followed by those painfully wrenching calls to nine siblings while my mother slept for a few hours under a sedative's heavy blanket. There was no delicate or easy way to announce their oldest brother's death, no words of explanation to make sense of the unthinkable, little comfort I could offer to blunt their shock. The day had passed in a blur--the bizarre visit to the funeral home to make arrangements, more calls and tears, talks with my mother, discussing how she would manage the future emotionally and financially--until we all fell into an uneasy sleep.

The shower was hot, stinging, glorious in its physicality. I lathered everywhere, washed my hair vigorously, and rinsed, letting the water stream on my stiff neck and down my rigid back. The crumpled look on my mother's face as she understood there was no saving to be done rose in my memory with a visceral pain, and I thought back to the brief visit to say our goodbyes in the cramped emergency room cubicle. The respirator tube had been taped to one side of my father's mouth, giving him a grotesque grinning countenance I knew the undertaker would have difficulty smoothing out, a suggestion of jauntiness that he was just off on a new adventure, making the scene all the more unreal.

Feeling exhausted and spent, I sat on the bench in the shower, shaving my legs, contemplating all I had to do that afternoon, trying to shrug off the need to feel something beyond pain. I was rinsing off when I heard the urgent knock on our back door.

Toweling off hastily, I threw on the closest garment, my husband's silk robe. Knotting it tightly around me, squeezing the water out of my wet hair, I opened the door, expecting to see a florist. Mr. Schadel stood on the step, a basket cradled on one arm, his uncertain smile already fading.

"Oh, but I've bothered you, and that was the last thing I wanted to do."

"No, of course not, I was already out of the shower," I lied. "Please come in."

He followed me into the kitchen and ceremoniously removed the stiff linen towel covering the basket contents. Chunks of thick, meat-filled baguettes sat nestled on a bed of greens, surrounded by piles of glassy green and black olives, while the aroma of long fingers of salty cheeses reached my nose. My stomach growled, and I became aware my toes were aching with cold from the hard tile floor.

"For you all to stay strong these next difficult days," he said. "We are so sorry about your dad."

His use of the word "Dad" startled me and broke my reserve; hot tears stung my cheeks before I felt them leave my eyes. I threw my arms around his neck and held on tightly as I wept, my stomach heaving and aching in waves with the effort. Mr. Schadel held me securely, rubbing my back, murmuring softly, "Go ahead, get it all out, that's better," over and over in a litany that finally allowed the tide of pain and tears to subside.

My head fit perfectly into the crook of his neck as his hands continued to knead my back, both arms rubbing in large comforting circles that reached my buttocks. Water from my wet hair dripped down the collar to the small of my back, plastering the silk against me. I breathed in his scent of leather and lime, remembering a thin piece of silk was all that stood between my body and Mr. Schadel's exploring hands.

Reluctantly I pulled back, looking into his eyes, and his lips came crashing down on mine. They were soft, tender and resilient, and I let myself fall into that kiss hungrily, greedily enjoying the taste and feel of unfamiliar lips. They were pliant but firm, seeking mine and enveloping them with a moist warmness enhanced by the feel of his hands holding me against him. The scroop of the silk rustling between us crackled in the air as I responded to that kiss, not wanting to be dragged back to the reality of my day. Here was Cary Grant, Pierce Brosnan and Tom Selleck—everyone I had ever fantasized about kissing, rolled into this one moment, taking me far away from where I was and what I would be doing for the next few days.

Mr. Schadel ended the kiss by pulling back from me and delicately brushing wet hair away from my eyes. Our arms fell by our sides.

"I think your husband is home," he said. We stood looking at each other cautiously. I saw the younger man then, the good man his wife had fallen in love with, the one she played Sinatra for.

"Thank you," I said. "That made me feel…alive."

"I know," he added, equally somber, as the door opened behind us. "It's hard when death gets so close."

He squeezed my hand, then dropped it to turn to shake my husband's, becoming just Mr. Schadel once again—the nicest neighbor a girl could have.

Letting Go by Beginning Again

by Danita Berg

Learn that your 63-year-old mother is getting remarried.

Immediately deny that a stranger wants to join your family. Deny that some random square-dancing widower wants to share your mom with you and that he might expect you to call him Dad.

Promptly try to talk your mother out of it. Remind her of her previous 40-year marriage, the one that ended in bankruptcy and giving up your childhood home. Remind her of the daily phone calls you fielded from her for months, when you learned how to comfort her as she cried over the loss of her furniture, her good credit, her pride. Remember what it was like to find out that your mother was fallible, what it was like to hear her weep (don't remind her of that).

Consider your mother during an ensuing holiday visit, smiling and always checking her messages. Uncomfortably conclude that even older women might get lonely, that your phone presence might not be enough to keep her company. Realize that even mommies might have sexual tendencies. Immediately banish that thought from your mind. During your mom's visit, field phone calls from an overpolite elder gentleman named Jim. Hand your mom the phone and roll your eyes. When your mom takes the phone into the next room, press your ear to the door and listen in.

Realize you are not going to stop this thing. Grudgingly offer a date when you can go home to watch your mom marry a stranger. Offer a date as far off in the future as possible. Tell your mother at the airport, as she leaves you to head back to that Jim guy, that it's not like she's planning to have more kids. Tell her she could always retire and live with you.

Receive more calls from your mom. Hear her become younger, even giggly over the receiver. Tell her she's become ridiculous, but begin to smile when you say it. Discover that hearing your mom sound happy makes you happy too. Understand that this is not about you. Begin to share her enthusiasm. Offer to buy her wedding invitations and flowers for the ceremony. Call when you spot her perfect dress in a catalog; pressure her to accept it as a gift.

Realize that your mom had to give you up once too, to your own husband. Realize now how difficult that must have been for her. Call her beau and ask if you can help plan their honeymoon. Begin planning for the trip where you will walk your mom down the aisle and give her away. (In a weak moment, call her again and threaten to keep walking right out of the church with her, when the time comes.)

Pray for your mom, that the rest of her life will be joyful, that you will allow her to make her own mistakes, just as she did for you. Tell her you'll be there for her again when she needs you, no matter what this new marriage brings.

Cross your fingers.

Sharing Rituals

by Michele Genthon

When I first met Mouse, she was standing in her backyard, hands in the pockets of her apron, supervising a stocky young man who had climbed into her catalpa tree to cut down dead limbs. "Ah'm not sure if he really knows what he's doin'" she protested to us, in her Mississippi Delta drawl. "My children insisted I hire someone this year. I could certainly have done it just as well myself, even if I am in my eighties."

Mouse looked just like her name--less than five feet tall, with a petite frame, and round eyes that perched atop a sharp nose protruding from a face that had long ago wrinkled and collapsed into itself. She was the matriarch of a household that included her unmarried son Wendell, her divorced daughter Mildred, and her two grandchildren, a teenage girl and my new husband's best friend, Robert Lee. Because both of her children worked, she managed the extended household, doing the cooking, cleaning and other household and yard chores. When I moved to Memphis as a bride in the late 1960's, Robert Lee invited us to his home almost as soon as we arrived "so you can meet my grandmother." Disregarding all southern manners, he introduced her to me only as Mouse, a sobriquet he said she insisted upon, since it was the name given to her by her long-departed husband.

After introductions, Mouse extended her wrinkled arm toward the house in a gesture of welcome and invited us in to have "sweet tea." Her two-story home, with its stone porch and square white pillars, set back from the street in one of Memphis' verdant neighborhoods, was not a wealthy one, but was comfortable, not so different from today's middle-class households in which two working adults are able to provide extra creature comforts. It was a combination of past and present, with heirloom silver and crystal in the dining room, modern appliances in the kitchen, and two televisions, one on each floor of the house.

During the two years we lived in Memphis we visited her warm and generous household often and both years we were invited to join Mouse's family for New Year's Day festivities. In the South, where football coaches are treated with the same reverence as ministers, New Year's was a major holiday. In those days, before even the more disadvantaged had televisions and differences between time zones had been minimized, football bowl games (fewer in number than now) were played over a shorter span of time and several were broadcast on New Year's Day, often with two broadcast simultaneously. If a game ran late in the central time zone three games might be airing at one time. In order to participate in as much football action as possible, Mouse wanted both television sets in the living room. "Now Kathleen, you clear the knickknacks off the top of that color t.v. Robert Lee, you and Wendell go upstairs and get that black-and-white t.v. and put it over there in the corner, right on top of the color t.v."

"You'd think we'd never done this before" Robert Lee whispered to us under his breath.

"We'll put the more exciting game on the color t.v. and turn up the sound," Mouse instructed. "Then we'll put the other game on the black-and-white t.v. without sound. If the score in the game on the black-and-white gets close or 'Bama or Ole Miss come on, we'll just change channels and put the more exciting game on the color set with sound."

Because football would consume the entire day, food was required. Mouse prepared a full buffet of cold sliced ham, potato salad, green salad, warm vegetables, tomato aspic, deviled eggs and cornbread, available for "dinner" and then for snacking right through the evening meal. There were also numerous "hors-d'oeuvres," ranging from potato chips to fried pecans, homemade cookies to "put-up" pickles.

Beverages included "Co-Colas," "Sem-Up," coffee, plenty of the "hard stuff" and, for this holiday, Mouse's special eggnog. The year Robert Lee became engaged, Mouse marked the occasion by revealing her secret eggnog recipe to his fiancée, Karen. I was included, probably because I had been so effusive the previous year in praising this beverage that felt like sweet

clouds on the tongue but tasted like thunder.

Karen and I stood in front of the gleaming white counter tops in Mouse's sunny kitchen and waited for her instructions. "First," Mouse said, "We'll separate the eggs and then 'cook' the egg yellows. We'll beat bourbon into each egg yoke and use its heat to do the cookin'." One at a time, we put an egg yoke into her cut-crystal punch bowl, added a tablespoon of bourbon, and briskly beat the mixture with a wooden spoon until it turned a soft caramel brown. We repeated this twelve times until a full dozen eggs had been added to the bowl.

"Now, we add sugar." Mouse measured out the shiny crystals and incorporated them into the egg yellow/bourbon mixture. "While I do this, Michele, you beat the egg whites. Karen darlin', you see those two cartons of cream? One has an 'X' own it and the other has two 'Xes.' Beat up the double-x cream.

"Y'all are doin' real nice, there. Okay, now we'll fold in those egg whites, very gently. And after that, we'll fold in the cream. This is pretty thick, but when we add the single-x cream, it will thin out. Now, stir it together as gently as you folded in the other ingredients."

We followed Mouse's instructions meticulously and waited, wide-eyed, as she sampled the eggnog and pronounced it "wondaful." In spite of her acclamation, she grabbed the bottle of bourbon and added several glugs of the "Kentucky poison," stirring again.

Robert Lee carried the punch bowl to the white linen-covered dining room table and placed it in the center. The women arranged punch cups around the bowl and then placed the day's hors-d'oeuvres artistically around the table, all in subservience to the punch bowl. Mouse stood back to admire our joint handiwork and we timidly awaited her approval. However, after the inspection, Mouse bolted back into the kitchen and returned with the bottle of bourbon. "This," she said, with more than the usual sparkle in her eyes, "should be placed right next to the punch bowl cuz, ya know, some of the 'gentlemen' might like theirs a bit stronger."

"Now, ya'll come on in here," Mouse said as she led us through the kitchen and into her bedroom, tucked away in the back of the house with a window facing her garden. Mouse opened a polished chest of drawers that might have held her original trousseau, and withdrew two paperback books with soft black bindings and covers darkened with age. She gave one to each of us. "This book is a collection of my mother, Mary Flournoy's recipes. You see, my mother wrote food columns for the Commercial Appeal newspaper. Around the turn of the century, the paper decided to publish her recipes. I thought ya'll might like to have a copy."

After a day full of football, food, and bourbon-laced eggnog, I carried The Mary L. Flournoy Cook Book home to add to my then meager collection of cookbooks for new brides. In anticipation of finding an exciting new recipe, I perused its pages but found nothing I could use. To this day, I have not been able to fit Mary Flournoy's recipes into my modern life. I have not taken the time to make "Dripped Coffee" and I certainly haven't prepared "Cymlings Fried in Bacon" as I don't even know what cymlings are. I have little time for making "Currant Wine" or even "A Good Pudding." The "Household Hints" do not apply to polyester or artificial wood and I doubt my son, when he was young, would have tolerated the "Beef Tea" or "Corn Meal Gruel" contained in "Some Tested Recipes for the Sick." For me, this is not a cookbook or a "how to" book as it was originally intended. It is a history book and holds a treasured place, because it symbolizes an intergenerational heritage that I had not received from my own family.

Mary Flournoy did not include a recipe for eggnog in her book, so I follow the notes I had scribbled during Mouse's lovingly-shared instructions. I have had to adjust the recipe somewhat as the cream in the grocery store is no longer marked with "x's," but, I always serve my eggnog with great pride, partly because I know that it will receive accolades from my guests, but also because I know that I am carrying forward the work of other women. I am maintaining the line of connection to women's pasts. And, when I serve Mouse's eggnog, no matter how elegant the table, I place the bottle of bourbon, undecanted, right next to the punch bowl.

Reunion

by Kristin Berkey-Abbott

We let Jesus plan our family reunion,
and we won't be doing that again.

He searched through the stunted
branches of the family tree and invited
them all: Weird PopPop Walter, who went to war
and was never the same, Cousin Buddy
who married that poor little black girl,
Aunt Leona, who we never forgave
for stealing all of Mamaw's silver.

And then Jesus went and invited strangers
to our feast. People we didn't know
from Adam's housecat. We're lucky
they didn't rob us blind.
Where Jesus thought all these people
would park, I don't know.

We usually cater these events, we told
him that. But no, Jesus had to go and change
things. Price of admission, he informed us,
was that we had to bring our favorite food, enough to share.
How could I do that?
My favorite food was Mamaw's sweet
potato pie, and no one's made it since she died.
But one rainy day, with restless
children to entertain, I set
one to work peeling potatoes and taught
one the secrets of pie crust.
The smell of those pies baking made me weep
with missing her, which alarmed
the children. To distract them, I dug
out the old quilts she made, and we lost
the rest of the day to looking at photo albums.

Fired by insider information, the children pestered
everyone at the reunion, and we told each other stories
we hadn't thought of in years. I hope my girl's stopped
thinking of herself as fat and sees herself as sturdy
like her Great Aunt Lillian who did the plowing
herself after flu felled all the menfolks.

But the greatest miracle of all was the singing.
Descended from northern Europeans, we keep
our mouths shut to keep from freezing, but Jesus
got us to open up. Jesus built a big bonfire,
and we spent the night singing while the leftovers multiplied
to feed us again.

Save the Ta-Ta's

Bumper sticker advertising a "playful and expressive" clothing line to celebrate women's "unique beauty." A portion of proceeds from each sale is given to breast cancer research.

by Jane Satterfield

Save us, lord, from the frat boy lingo "I'm sorry, you look-
so-familiar, was it 8 a.m.
first-year Latin class?"

--Yes, the fishnets, the black
rubber arm bangles, yes, the rag &
razorblade regalia. But I'll decline

the market brand, product placement,
the proferred dinner date.

--& because laughter heals, lord,
there's plenty of gear in sparkle, foil, and with bling,
slogans for fun, for kids, for men & for women:

My girl's are better than yours--
Cancer can take take my ta-tas but not my tee

Save us, Lord, from the lure
of a good-hearted mission gone astray.

From feel-good grrls in organic tees--
"I ♥ my little Ta-Tas,"
"Saw you looking so step away—.

We think backward, don't we, women?

Through our mothers, generations gone—

silk petticoated, stones cluchted in their kid-gloved hands
attent on the power to march, not the merch.

If You're a Woman, Take Notes…

by Kelly Harris

On Billie Holiday
Being a lady
makes men swarm.
If you are honey
don't let no man
make you bittersweet.

On Nina Simone
If you are Black
as God's fingernails
in the Earth:
Scoop yourself
into a ball of fire.

On Tina Turner
Keep your legs
sharp as scissors
Men can't harm you
without cutting themselves.

On Florence Ballard
Sometimes another woman
can charm her way into
your destiny. Be nice, but
keep extra eyes behind you.

Because We Were Young

by Dannye Romine Powell

and in love
and on our way
somewhere, maybe
Emerald Isle, because
the room was dark
and cool
and the ceiling fan
swooned,
because the bed was wide
or maybe because
it was deep,
we didn't eat first
as we do now
and when we had
couldn't remember what
because back in the room
the bed was wide
and deep
and we were young
and in love
and on our way
somewhere, maybe
Emerald Isle.

Playing House

by Jessie Carty

She insists I am gingham and pigtails. Very *Little House on the Prairie.* But, I hate dresses. Yet, I once wanted to be one of those girls *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. Instead, I am hyacinth and flannel.

In kindergarten, I went to work while my husband for the day baked on the wood stove. Even so I want someone to bring me flowers.

Laura married at what? 15? For Love. I could take the GED. I could take the red carnation He offers. We could move to the apartment over His parent's garage. I could learn to sew.

Effie in the Cotton Fields

by Fabu Carter Brisco

Mississippi sky is stretched out blue
in the glimpse before headin out
most times barefooted
trampin on chilled, dewy ground
finally arrivin
at rows of ghostly fields.

No one sees dark turn light
except your hands become clearer
as they work the earth
the cotton bolls stick and cut your fingers
pullin softness out from prickly hulls.

You can't get no red on the fluff
so you suck your hurt fingers
while the other hand continues pickin row after row
the boys pickin cotton
while baby sister chops weeds.

Effie Florida Cunningham is in the fields
blackish curls tied up in a flour sack square
sunburned limbs bent over pullin weeds
around growin cotton stalks
from seeds that elder brother planted in Spring.

He planted cottonseeds shallow in worked over soil
to chop durin months of growin then pick
and stuff tight in croaker sacks
before draggin *King Cotton* to be weighed
in exchange for writin on the family book.

As she sweats and her back hurts
Effie is the fields dreamin
one day sharecroppers own land
one day pickers get more money
from the real price of cotton.

One day colored folks sell at the Exchange
and one day Pa might just buy me a pretty
something fine on store credit
iffin this year we don't owe more than we made
iffin this year.

7:10 ON HIGHWAY 1295

by Linda Maxwell

Lone sedans with their commuter mugs
Point toward Madison County
While I in my chilly truck
Caress the bicep curves that coax me
Into a valley of tobacco fields, trailers,
Cardboard signs that say *Thomas for Jailer* and *Rabbits 4 Sale.*

On fresh-tarred highway shaded by century-old sycamores
Dangle motherless branches precariously poised to plummet
Onto unsuspecting hoods
Like daggers
Loosened by the next updraft
Or degree.

Country voices on WKDO from Liberty
Offer fenceposts, hand-carved birdhouses, canned peaches,
Scoby Watson who thanks the sellers for "callin' in"
And repeats their phone numbers
Like Baptist medleys
Awakened from their hymnals
Inside lace-painted churches.

Too soon
The journey empties into 52.
Dutifully, I turn right
Behind sleepy school bus kids
Leading me to Lancaster's perfect square
Of courthouse, clothing store,
Library and lunch counter
And I choose responsibly
Nicholasville, Danville, Stanford, Lexington.

Until another day on 1295.

Melon Stand, South of Many

by JC Reilly

Picked them yesterday,
says the smoky voiced man
wearing more wrinkles than face.
Dark as the bark of a live oak,
he leans against his pickup, rasping,
Been here four hours.

He pulls himself upright as an oak,
straightens his overalls, and squints.
Three dollars each. Best you've eaten.

He holds out thick twigs of fingers
bent from years of seeding.
Clasps the proffered bills,
shrugs them into a pocket.
Let me pick one. I got other customers to serve.

A glint in his eye: he's kidding;
he's glad he hasn't rooted
in drowsy heat for nothing.
Though three dollars seems
like nothing much.
He selects a squat melon,
skin nearly smooth, except for a ridge
on the bottom, slightly yellowed.

Best you've eaten, or bring it back tomorrow.
I'll be here.

Stillborn

by Marjory Wentworth

Blue jays zigzag through leafless
black branches at the edge of
the winter field where a cow
has lain for three straight days, since
birthing a stillborn calf.
When she moans, the cry comes from
the great gulf of grief that is
motherhood. One tree trembling,
alone; red berries on tips
of the tallest branches,
this is what the cow sees
through air, the color of tears.

Lunch

by Eve Hoffman

Fatigue eyes in the morning mirror,
kudzu of dirty bras, panties and jeans breeds
on door knobs and the bathroom floor,
unmade bed sheets gather dust and dog hairs,
three day old dishes not yet carried to the sink,

Nachos and coke,
discs of chocolate on rosemary bread,
lunch today.

Yiheyuan, The Summer Palace

by Nina Romano

Peking 1896

There are no coincidences.

I finished assisting father in an operation, and realized how much I loved the art of healing and desired nothing more. My father, Gianluca Brasolin, a Swiss doctor proficient in both Western and Eastern medicine, kept an inexpensive garret southwest of Tiananmen Square in the eighth alleyway in the Dashilan area of Xuanwu District in southern Peking, the capital's garish and tawdry red-light district. Father chose it because he could do the most good there.

In the brothel that adjoined our humble residence, my Ba ba saved a young prostitute from dying of a self-induced abortion. He stopped her hemorrhaging, administering a hypodermic injection of snake poison.

Because father was a renowned practitioner of European and Chinese remedies, and was fluent in both Mandarin and Italian, he became the doctor for the Italian Consulate. We'd been in Peking for six months, but soon would return home to Guilin. He was bored with the civilized dignitaries, the artifice of court life, and frightened by brewing political strife and animosity toward foreigners.

Later that evening, Ba ba smoked a pipe on our terrace overlooking a row of jagged houses. There was a banging on our door.

Court messengers. They'd come to summon him to assist the Italian ambassador who had taken ill while speaking with Ci Xi, our Empress Dowager. Ba ba was to attend the sick man at the Summer Palace, fifteen kilometers northwest of Peking.

He looked up from the parchment and told the messengers to wait in our courtyard.

Ba ba handed me the scroll. "Lian, ready yourself. Get my bag. It's in order."

We passed Zengh Yi Lu, site of the walled foreign legations. In the royal court palanquin, I said, "That's it? Nothing more, except he's sick? Plague perhaps? Cholera?"

"Precious Lian. He probably has a cold."

The city, poor as our Guilin, was worse due to the enormous population. Noise from brothels and the twanging music of the pipa and yangqin, was buoyed on billows of smoke from cook stoves, outdoor kitchens, and opium pipes. I loved the hutongs, narrow alleyways enclosing siheyuan, the courtyard houses of Peking.

As we approached the palace, Ba ba described Longevity Hill and Kunming Lake. "Three-hundred hectares—mostly water and three thousand structures."

I saw pavilions and towers, covered corridors and bridges. "Such riches." After the poverty and derelict housing, this opulence was nauseating. "The Empress Dowager should assist the poor."

We entered the East Palace Gate. A tall man in gray tunic dress walked us past the Hall of Virtue and Harmony, where our Empress entertained, to the Renshoudian, the Hall of Benevolence and Longevity.

Through an elegant gallery, a profusion of colors, fields of flowers—red and green columns, ceilings of purple and gold, arches cut of woodwork motifs. A light breeze flurried silk coverings at the apertures, and a cry announced the first trine, the hour of the rat. The beginning of this sirchen, or large hour, was from 11 pm to 1 am. A fortuitous hour of energy and unpredictability.

Ushered into myriad hallways and galleries, we entered a room curtained of sea-foam Shantung in which the patient languished. Father bowed, introduced himself and examined the man moaning in distress.

Ba ba questioned the man. Then spoke to me in Mandarin, saying perhaps he'd over-indulged. Dressed in evening frock

with tails like a penguin, the man was unkempt—hair tousled and sweating. His stomach bulged, wanting to birth a melon.

He complained of a headache.

Father touched the man's brow as he quaked from chills. "Champagne?"

He nodded.

Father asked what I'd do.

"Take his pulses and look at his tongue. Undress him."

"I'll inspect his body but won't give him an emetic."

"Thus you won't disgorge Signor from all he's eaten?"

The ambassador sat up, pointed and said, "Who's that woman?"

In Italian, I said, "His nurse."

"Wait outside," Ba Ba said. I was disappointed he wouldn't slice open the ambassador's stomach to empty the apparent suckling pig he'd swallowed whole.

Father knitted his brow. He told me this was typhus and the symptoms were grave and could be of epidemic proportion, or just this isolated case—typhus was likely caused by a flea on a cat.

A huge man dressed in black silk, who father called a eunuch, gave Ba ba a purse, which he accepted with a bow. Father told the eunuch he needed to discuss what the Empress wanted to do.

The eunuch escorted us to a chamber, where the Empress sat on a gilded chair.

Father's eyes roamed the room. "An entire Italian delegation is here, not just the ambassador." Another sweep of eyes. "Many countries."

Six men in Italian marine uniforms stood at attention. They fell into step as our formal escort. One tall man among them with a Roman nose and clean shaven caught my eye. The military escort stopped, a resounding click of heels, and two eunuchs, practiced and perfect, led us further into the hall.

A large platform and the dragon-in-clouds carved rosewood throne held a tiny lady, ornately coiffed and dressed.

There were many men and a few women ornately dressed by western standards. Few Chinese faces. Dignitaries in formal attire huddled in small groups, whispering behind gloved hands. Different worlds. The blonds stiff, the darker ones easy on my eyes.

I whispered, "What's the screen for?"

Father said, "She holds court behind it. We're lucky to see her face."

He looked small escorted to the Empress between the huge eunuchs, queues long as my arm. These once-men castrated and mutilated themselves in order to serve the court, saving their cut off members: penis, testicles and scrotum by preserving them in alcohol. These body parts were bao, or precious treasure, buried with them at their deaths, in order to become whole in the afterlife.

The Empress bade father forward. He bowed and then kowtowed, touching his forehead to the floor. The Empress's high-pitched voice squeaked around my ears. It was difficult to hear father. He didn't turn, but backed up like some awkward turtle.

I was about to leave when Father said, "She wants a word with you."

"Me?" My palms perspired.

Two colossi escorted us before the Empress.

I curtsied; then kowtowed. I smacked my forehead hard.

"Rise. So young for such lurid work. How old are you?" she said.

"Seventeen, your Imperial Highness." The words eked out as though I had a money toad stuck in my throat wanting to spit out the coin.

"Squalid work this touching of sick bodies. Would you rather come to court to assist me?"

Shocked, my thoughts galloped: what would I do, pick out her outfits? Her son was dead or I'd be forced to be a concubine.

I looked toward Ba ba. Fear on his face. He'd die if I left him, he'd said so every day.

"Have you no tongue, girl?" the Empress squawked.

"I could never leave my father, your Highness, unless you commanded me. When he is aged and infirm himself, I'll be his hands and eyes."

One of her eyebrows arched to her hairline. I'd committed an outrage, but instead of ordering my head chopped off to be put on a stake beyond the palace walls, she sniggered. She flicked her left hand, long nails curved, the tips fitted with gold pointy pieces, the ends of which were filigree tassels. I felt ill at the squandered riches to clad her, thinking of the sick and poor begging at the Forbidden City's gates and eunuchs unable to afford a proper operation to dismember their private parts which leaked because of it.

"Leave. I have no time for a girl who chooses poverty over the court."

Why would she want me? Because I spoke Italian, or studied medicine? Poverty, the path of Buddha and our Goddess Kuan Yin. I bowed with arms crossed inside wide sleeves and pinched soft underarms so I wouldn't laugh.

She said, "You wish to address me?"

"Your Supreme Royal Highness—" Father interrupted. "Only to thank you, Oh Celestial Great One, for leaving her with me when she'd rather be at court. My wife is dead."

"Ah. Then done," she said, and repeated, "jié shù."

My father knelt down. I tucked my qipao, "banner dress" beneath me for the kowtow.

We exited with an honor guard of the same merchant marines in white uniforms and hats.

The tall sailor winked at me—a salute to my spunkiness with the Empress? I tripped and turned to glimpse his handsome face again. Another wink. I heard a statesman say I was a girl of high morals who preferred a deprived life rather than riches.

Nicely put. I tugged up my skirt and raced to catch father.

At a huge red portal, father stopped. The eunuch stopped also.

"Is our ordeal over?" I asked.

"No. That eunuch will escort you to place to wait for me. I must make sure the ambassador will be cared for because the Empress will not suffer any repercussions or scandal. She detests us foreign devils enough, though curious why your mother married one. Behave and don't speak to anyone."

I nodded. We walked for what seemed like a li. I caught my breath in a hall of etched dragons. "If the Empress hates you, why did she summon you?"

"I make myself understood to all parties and know medicine of two worlds. The Empress cannot afford culpability if something happened under the auspices of the court."

Father left. The eunuch showed me to a garden.

"I will bring tea. Anything else you require?" I wanted to say, yes, a pallet to sleep, and may I dunk my feet into the pool?

I sat by a fountain emptying into a pond. I trailed my hand in-between lotus. The garden smelled of jasmine. Father was lucky to aid the sick—that was exciting. Nothing replaced the intricacies of the human heart, mind, body, and soul.

The carp frolicked in the light of flickering lanterns. "Hungry fishies?"

The servant appeared with a tray of tea, fried bean curd and sesame cakes. He backed away as if I were royalty.

One of the honor guard sailors appeared in the alcove and beckoned me. I was astonished to see a man here, especially this one who'd winked at me. Ah! For certain, this was the hour of the impulsive rat.

He called to me in Italian. I stood, shaky on my feet. He was tall as the willow branch that canopied the space between us, handsome in a European way like father. A smile illuminated his face—round eyes like chestnuts held mirth and youth. I stopped quaking, approaching with steady gait. He was a god. His gaze held me. I stood in front of him and looked up into his smooth-cheeked face. His smile faded, and a cloud covered the sickle of moon.

His serious expression conveyed something I couldn't fathom. Then he spoke. "Sei la più bella raggaza che ho visto mai."

The most beautiful girl he'd ever seen sounded like music from a piper. I wanted to follow him anywhere. How could I believe a sailor? He stood at parade-rest—an expression father said was more relaxed than attention. He held a bayoneted rifle in front of him. I moved closer. Nothing of his body shifted. Only his eyes moved and made me step into the space embracing him. He leaned down and placed his warm, soft mouth upon mine.

I thought I'd faint from terror and pleasure. My mind begged permanence, but this was irrational. He pulled away and straightened. I inhaled his sandalwood cologne and tobacco. He whispered, "Non dimenticarmi mai."

I repeated childlike, learning a lesson by rote, "Mai, e poi mai."

At the sound of footfalls on the parquet floor, he flipped his rifle to his shoulder, saluted, did an about face and marched away. Would I ever learn his name?

I touched my lips, again murmuring in Mandarin, "Never will I forget."

Girl's Night Out: A Tale of Terror

by Libby Cudmore

Every so often our group of friends decides we should split up into husbands and wives—the guys go over to Nicholas' to play ultra-violent video games on his Xbox, and the girls go to Bernadette's to watch something with more sap than all the Waffle Houses combined. This wouldn't be so bad if I got to go with the husbands, but alas, I kiss Ian goodbye when he drops me at the door of my syrupy doom.

This time, Ian leaves me alone and vulnerable for a week while he takes a road trip to Texas with our best friend Sterling. At first I thought I'd enjoy the time alone to write and eat scones and think dirty thoughts about the other women's husbands, but within hours of his departure, I am bored out of my skull. When Sarah comes up and asks if I want to go to Bernadette's to watch Miracle on 34th Street, I'm so desperate to get out of the house I've been trapped in for four days that I give no thought to the consequences of my agreement. I'd never seen Miracle on 34th Street, how bad could it be?

Turns out it was awesome. I love old movies. But the night didn't stop there, no, good things do not come solely on their own. The lights still low, the candles still flickering, Bernadette and Sarah began talking about Christmas. I have no problem with Christmas. Since I married Ian, I've more or less abandoned my converted Judaism roots to the point where it has become more out of tradition than faith. Until I met Ian, I hadn't celebrated a Christmas since I was ten and my own faith, while strong, is vaguely based in some notion of a higher power, minus the specifics of Jesus and without the bat mitzvah or a confirmation.

Such is not the case with Bernadette, a devout Catholic, and Sarah, a die-hard Methodist and though they know something is amiss with me, it has yet to sink in that my scattered, vague faith is not a setting that can be turned on and off at will, like the New York accent that's slowly beginning to soften after four years in Charleston.

"We really need to put Christ back in Christmas," Sarah is saying as I stretch my legs and get a drink of water in the kitchen. "And I don't see what's so wrong with wishing people a Merry Christmas at the store or celebrating Christmas in schools. Now it's all winter pageants and 'Seasons Greetings' and that offends me." Her tone implies that the school has replaced Christmas with Nazi Appreciation Day. "Christmas isn't about cash-in commercialism or presents and Santa, it's about the birth of our Lord. Why shouldn't everybody celebrate that?"

Don't be Jewish, I think, staring at the boxes of gluten-free cereal Bernadette decided she was going to force-feed her child because she read somewhere on the internet that a gluten-free diet was a way to assure that your baby would sleep through the night. Don't be Jewish, don't be Jewish, don't be Jewish . . . .

She continues, oblivious to my presence. "I saw this figurine that I really want, it's Santa kneeling over Jesus' manger. That's what it's really about, you can fuse the two. Santa is based on a saint, after all."

I almost choke into the sink. I want to ask if she's kidding, but Sarah isn't the joking type. If a porcelain figure of Santa kneeling at Jesus' manger isn't blatant holiday cash-in commercialism, I don't know what is. Briefly I toy with the idea of quoting John C. Reilly in Talladega Nights, "I like to picture Jesus as, like, singing lead vocals for Lynard Skynard, and he's got, like, this angel band, and I'm in the front row, and I'm hammered drunk," but I doubt my audience had seen Talladega Nights and if they had, they wouldn't remember it as anything more than that cute race-car movie with the guy from that other cute movie about the human who works in Santa's workshop while he's off playing peek-a-boo with Jesus. I keep my mouth shut and steal a molasses crinkle off the wire rack. It's gluten free. I spit it out into a paper towel and look at the clock. Normally Bernadette's baby Pheobe wakes up by ten to signal the end of the evening, but it's nearing ten-thirty without a peep. Damn gluten-free diet. I imagine Alan and Nicholas are laughing as they shoot each other's heads off, exchanging curse words and high-fives. I imagine Ian is showering with complimentary soaps while Sterling posts pictures from their day's adventure online. Meanwhile, I'm stuck here singing Morrissey in my head, How I dearly wish I was not here . . . .

Back in the living room, the topic turns, randomly, to breastfeeding. Neither Sarah nor I have children, but she's at least

planning to have some even though she can't keep a houseplant alive. Ian and I are looking at getting a cat and maybe a bunny, but no kids. Bernadette is a stay-at-home mom who is probably planning on breastfeeding Pheobe until she's in college. "I don't even know why they make formula," she says. "It should be illegal. If you're feeding your baby formula, they should come take your kids away for malnourishment."

All my sisters and I would have grown up in foster care and despite our addiction to formula, we managed to grow up strong and lead healthy lives as productive citizens. "But what about kids whose moms drink or smoke? Or women who can't breastfeed because of chemotherapy or AIDS?" I ask somewhere outside myself. Perhaps my instinctual logic is attempting to get me kicked out of girl's night and therefore allowed to hang out with the husbands. Fat chance. Back in college I slept with Nicholas and I don't think she's ever fully forgiven me. She's probably warned Bernadette never to leave Alan alone with me, vixen that I am, I might let him have a beer and seduce him while he's under the powerful influence of one Guinness.

Bernadette shakes her head. "Doesn't matter, because chances are, if you're smoking or drinking while you're breastfeeding, you smoked and drank while you were pregnant and so the baby's going through withdrawal, which could actually be a lot more dangerous. And even if you have AIDS, it's still more important that you nourish your baby properly because after you die, the baby is probably going into foster care, where it won't get fed right, so it at least needs a good basic beginning."

I am dumbfounded. Withdrawal? More important to give your baby nourishment than to spare them an incurable auto-immune disease that will probably kill them before they hit their teens? Maybe it's the lack of gluten or sleep causing her brain to melt like Nazis opening the Ark of the Covenant, that's the only explanation I can come up with for why she would say such a thing.

"I can't wait to breastfeed," Sarah chirps.

I want to hit her. The only thing she's capable of nursing is a bottle of Smirnoff Ice, and after one of those she goes on about how, like, totally buzzed she is, like we're back in freshman year, when I was sleeping with her husband.

"That's what breasts are for," Bernadette says. "Alan is always trying to touch them, and I have to remind him that they're not for him anymore, they're for the baby."

Oh, gross, Bernadette implied that she and Alan did it, and that's nasty. I prefer to imagine that the stork dropped Pheobe down the chimney, or because she's Catholic, it was that immaculate conception thing they're always going on about and maybe Santa will kneel over Pheobe's bassinette. I try to think of something beautiful, something coitus-free, and the first image that pops into my head is . . . Jeff Goldblum. I haven't thought him much about since I was thirteen, young and virginal and hoping maybe, just maybe, that he'd escort me to the prom. I concentrate on Earth Girls Are Easy-era Jeff Goldblum, with his almond eyes and pointy ears and tall pants, trying in vain to ignore the boob-tastic conversation on the other side of the room.

"My nipples are really small . . . ."

Jeff Goldblum, Jeff Goldblum, Jeff Goldblum.

". . . and men just need to realize that sex is for procreation only . . . ."

Tall pants, tall pants, tall pants . . . .

" . . .Alan's penis is too big . . ."

God, I take advantage of the dark to look heavenwards. Hi, it's me. Look, I know I'm not always good, and I'm sorry I took your name in vain this afternoon when I burned my hand taking a batch of brownies out of the oven, but I'm begging you, please let that baby wake up. Now. I'll do anything. I won't think dirty thoughts about anyone's husband for the rest of the night. I won't say Goddammit either. After that one, I mean, that was in context so it doesn't count, right? Seriously, if that baby doesn't start screaming, I will. Please, I don't ask for a whole lot, and I think you owe me one because I asked you not to let me get the flu last month and I did, and I was sick for days and that was not cool.

But alas, the entire reason for sex did not wake up. I began to wonder if she was dead from malnourishment. In this moment I hate Ian. I hate him for leaving me here, I hate that he is having fun while I am in hell. I regret riding over here with Sarah, I regret trying to do my part to save the earth. Screw the ozone layer, screw polar bears and melting ice caps and all the other socially conscious things that prevent me from driving myself home, or off a cliff, or anywhere but here.

Then, like an archangel, Alan appears in the doorway, illuminated by the hall light. I could kiss him, he is my savior, he is my white knight, he is the bartender finally yelling "last call" when you're the designated driver and your friends, who think they are amazingly funny, are, in reality, horribly boring. "Turn off the light!" Bernadette hisses. "It'll wake the baby!"

About damn time.

Alan flicks off the light and trudges into the room. He'd be handsome if he weren't so downtrodden, weary from 50-hour work weeks to support her breastfeeding habits. Bernadette gets up as he sits down and gestures for us all to be quiet. "I'm just going to check to make sure she didn't wake up," she whispers.

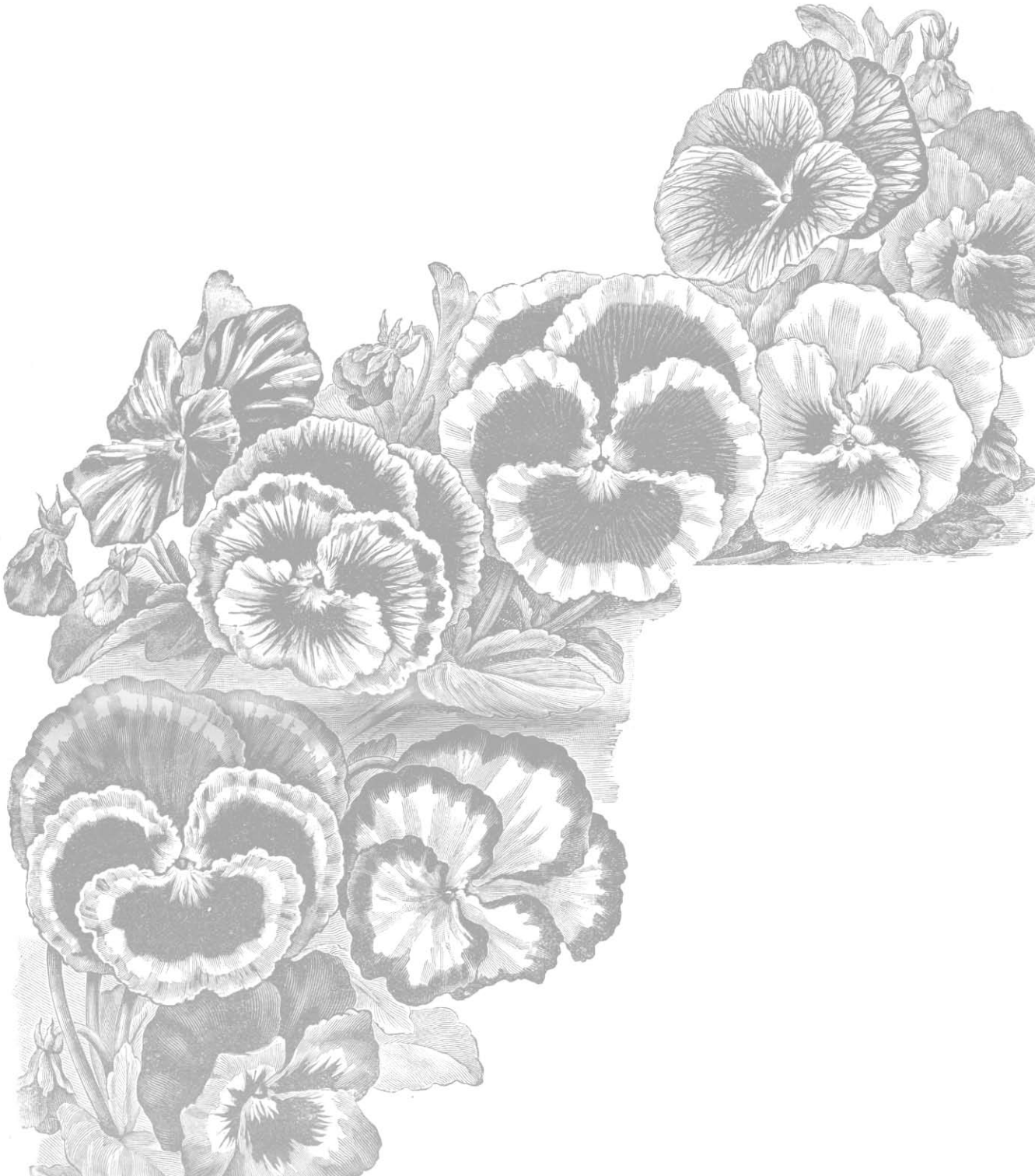
Obviously, she didn't wake up because she isn't crying, because I am still here. I hold my breath as she opens the door. There's a symphonic pause and, like gunfire at the Louvre, Pheobe starts to wail. Even in the dark I see Alan rolling his eyes.

"Tell Bernadette we said goodnight," Sarah says, gathering up her purse.

"Goodnight Alan," I add, following Sarah.

She starts the car and we drive in silence for what seems like hours. Two blocks from my apartment, she turns to me and smiles. "We should do this again," she says.

"Yeah," I reply as we pull into my driveway. "Give me a call."



Family Snapshot

by Elizabeth Bloom Albert

Teams are uneven—three on one and four on the other, but that's because one team's got two not much taller than their daddy's belt, plus the one female who's playing—the boys' mother. Their opponents have the big brother, more linebacker than point guard, but basketball is what they're playing in the driveway of this three-car garage home and the big brother knows how to sink one in from clear across the court, which in this case is demarcated by the front-end bumpers of two SUVs parked some twenty-five feet back from the garage door.

The big brother's got possession and would try for another three-pointer, but his mom is blocking him. "I'm here," Paw-paw shouts. He wants a chance to impress his wife, Evie, leaning against the hood of the Explorer; she jumps up and down like a high school cheerleader each time he scores. Evie is sixty years old, same age as Paw-paw, but with her slight build and strawberry blond ponytail, she can fool the eye, make a body believe she's not much older than Paw-paw's son, the high-scoring member of the low-scoring, four-man team.

The other cheerleader is Celia, Cousin Jack's wife, holding the baby. Marla Rae sinks one in and the two cheerleaders let out a hoot. They squeal so loud, the baby wakes up and begins howling, causing Lucie, the lab-mix, to yelp behind her invisible fence, which of course makes the baby cry even louder. Jeremiah steps out of the game to place a comforting hand on baby Jack's back. Jeremiah might be a mere five years old, but as Marla Rae and Wayne, Jr. often say about their youngest, Jeremiah's got the touch. Baby Jack's quiet now. He reaches down to touch Jeremiah's head with a smile that's all eyelashes and dimples. Marla Rae comes over to tousle Jeremiah's hair. "Good job," she says. Evie and Celia take the opportunity to slap Marla Rae a high-five. "Go sink another basket," one of them says. "Show those boys what you've got," the other one says. Paw-paw and Cousin Jack shoot their wives a hurt look—the way they see it, the two women are cheering for the wrong team.

The game starts back up. The big brother misses what should have been an easy shot, lets loose a "God damn it." His father grabs hold of the ball, hooking it under his arm, and turns the boy around by his shoulder. "That kind of talk will get you sent up to your room," Wayne, Jr. says, and you can tell from his tone he means it. "Yes sir," the boy responds. We are in the south and children yes-sir and no-ma'am their parents all the time and, in this house at least, are taught to never take the Lord's name in vain. The Ten Commandments, each one individually cross-stitched and framed, hang at eye level to a seven-year-old in the staircase of this Tupelo, Mississippi, home; every second step up to the boys' bedrooms is another rule to live by.

"Wayne's coming down hard," Evie says. She was saying worse at thirteen.

"He's just jealous of T.T.'s three-pointers," Celia leans closer to say. T.T. stands for "the third"—there are a lot of Wayne Dexters dribbling balls on this concrete basketball court.

Celia's parents pull up onto the driveway in their RV. They have come down from Louisville to look after the baby while Jack and Celia run their marathon on Sunday, much like Paw-paw and Evie are in town to look after the three boys while Wayne, Jr. and Marla Rae are running. It takes Celia's parents a minute to step down from the cab of their RV, enough time for one team or the other to score another basket or two, but everyone's on time-out while they wait for George and Gina to emerge. Even the baby is quiet.

"They're probably just soaking in a little AC before they step out into this heat," Evie says.

"No ma'am," Celia tells Evie before marching over to the RV, the baby on her hip, "my guess is they're finishing an argument."

Later in the evening, while most everyone else is outside setting up lawn chairs, firing up the charcoal grill, or pushing the baby in the baby swing that hangs from a tree branch out in the backyard, Luke, the middle boy, looks up from his Sudoku to ask Paw-paw what a trophy wife is. This is the expression Evie had used earlier to introduce herself to Celia's parents. "You might remember my Uncle Wayne from the wedding," Cousin Jack had said to his in-laws, when at last they stepped down from their RV. "And I'm Wayne's trophy wife," Evie then said, which never fails to get a laugh, because when you are close enough to be shaking Evie's

hand, you can plainly see the creases in her face and the gray streaks in her strawberry blond hair.

"I mean," Luke continues now, "I know what a trophy is and I know what a wife is, but how can something or someone be both?"

Paw-paw reaches an arm around Evie. They are standing elbow to elbow at the kitchen island, Paw-paw making a salad for supper with the cucumbers they'd brought down with them from their garden back home, and Evie assembling the fresh fruit trifle, which will be the dessert. "Well," Paw-paw says to Luke, "when I asked Evie to marry me and she said yes, it was like I won a prize."

Evie notices the southern drawl seeping back into his speech. It happens every time they're down here. "Oh, isn't he sweet?" Evie says as Paw-paw is nuzzling her neck. There's a hint of a drawl in Evie's words, too, though she's never lived south of the south side of Chicago.

Luke seems satisfied with Paw-paw's answer, but then he becomes curious about something else. "How do people get divorced?" he asks, though what he really is after is why. Taped to the staircase wall next to the cross-stitched Ten Commandments are Luke's Sunday school drawings, annotated in Marla Rae's distinctive block lettering, with each Commandment translated into a grade-schooler's diction. Thou shalt not commit adultery has become Don't break your marriage vows. Luke's crayon drawing, done last year when he was six, is harder to decipher, but it looks like it could be a man leaving a house in a huff, slamming the door behind him.

There's been no answer, so Luke asks again: "How does someone get a divorce?"

Paw-paw just grunts, goes on slicing the green onions for the salad, pretending not to hear him.

But Luke is persistent. "I mean, did Nana just want to stay here when you moved up to Illinois? Or did you decide you didn't like her anymore?"

Paw-paw is still not responding.

"Or did Nana tell you that she didn't like you anymore?"

"Out of the mouths of babes…" Evie whispers in Paw-paw's direction, though it is probably Luke, clear across the room, at the table in the breakfast nook, who can hear her best. Paw-paw's hearing is on the decline and Luke is a little pitcher that has big ears.

Later, Evie will say: "Why didn't you just tell Luke to go ask Naw-naw?"—Naw-naw is what Evie calls Paw-paw's first wife when no one else is around.—"Isn't that what all parents do—send their kids to the other parent with the difficult questions?" There will be a twinkle in her eye as she says this later in the privacy of the guest bedroom, but for now she is giving Paw-paw wide berth, letting him answer Luke as he sees fit, letting him say, "That's not a subject I care to discuss with you right now, young man."

"I just don't get it," Luke says.

"There's nothing to get," Paw-paw says. "Get back to your puzzle."

It is at this point that Wayne, Jr. opens the sliding glass door to poke his head in. "Ya'll want to come out to the back porch for a minute? Jack's got his camera set up on a tripod for a family snapshot."

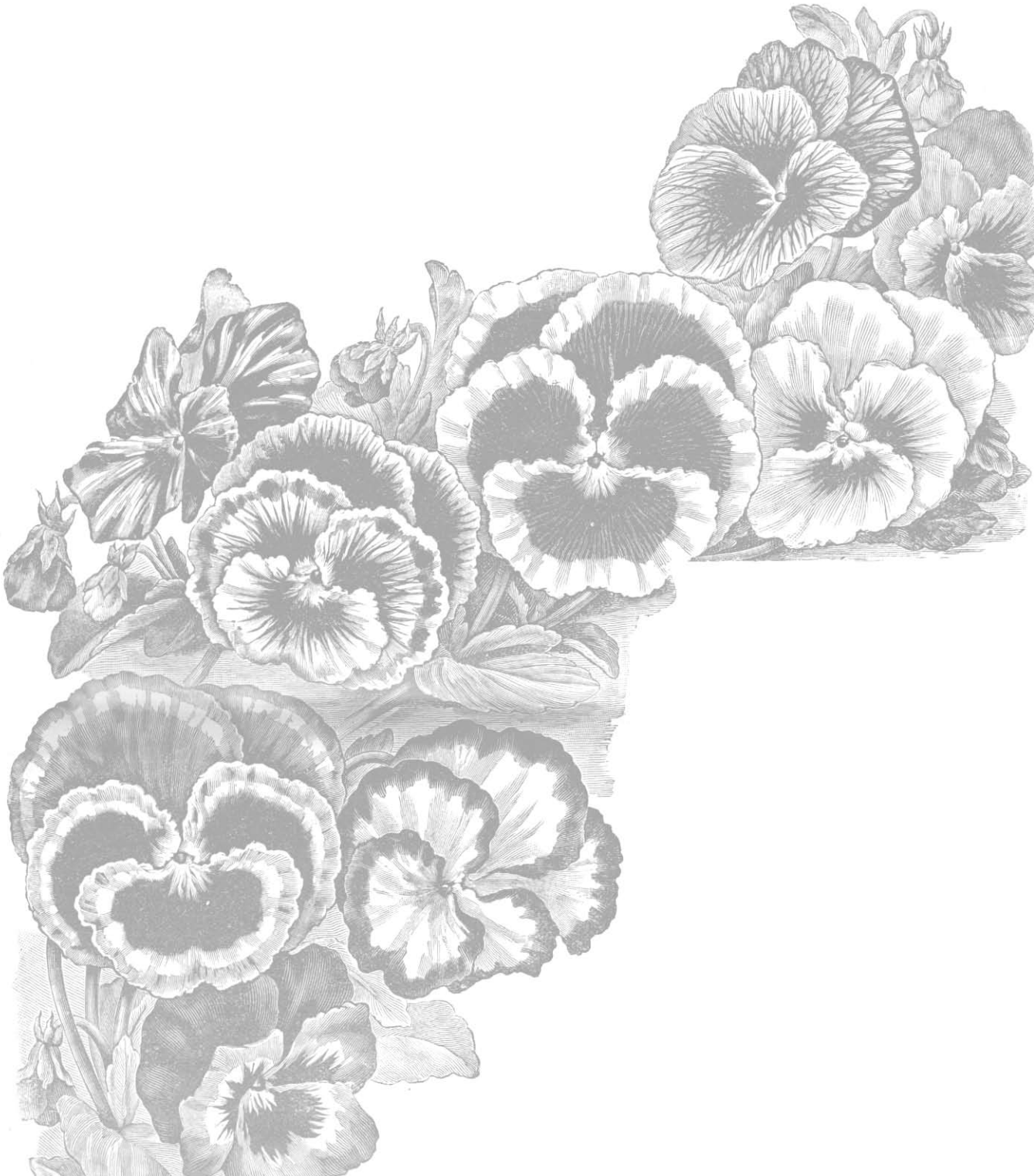
Jack's camera is a standard Nikromat with a roll of film in its body, so it won't be until after the negatives are developed that we will see T.T.'s bunny ears positioned over Jeremiah's head, the blur that should be Marla Rae's face as she turns to discipline one child or another, and the fact that, in every frame, Paw-paw's eyes are closed.

NO bIRdS ALLOWEd

by Monica Storss

Come here so I can slap you – My Grandmother

You are old now. You have taken the creole and the Cajun--deveined the shrimp {Crawl to a memory place - a slippery contagion - a wild prospect} --leave the dancing up to the lavender clad hussies what with their satin and all (purple confused with white…) one war two war three war four | you have greeted the GI's enough; enough. Drive to the sea wall and make masking-tape initials of the boy you like and stick it to your thigh to tan in the summer here it is** I have found it. Found, it. What's that Aunt Nat said on her way to do the grocery shopping?? !!I'ma go give the daygo's a treat!! \ like she weren't a daygo herself. O how you hated the pontoon. You have made two generations of little girls fear the rapture. They have anxiety attacks when the house is quiet because they fear the rapture same way you feared the red scare. [Slap some cardboard and fill the hole in the bottom of your shoe and only one sandwich to share and only one apple between the two of you? That's not very delicious.] I'm a daygo I'm a WOP I eat spaghetti and I eat slop. You rilly shudda kicked Arthur Bishop in his fool-head for that one. You won't eat nothing Italian and you won't eat leftovers, neither: don't worry. It's cool. It is your prerogative as a grown up to not eat spaghetti or leftovers. the war is over now. You miss the bluebonnets. You should, sure. That's a big blue swath across the freeway meridian your memory. At seventy-six you still cry you're an orphan every time that PahPaw or Granny's birthday or anniversary or some such roles around. You cry often. You miss the sea wall and Dan's Night Owl Café. But not enough to make peace and not enough to go back. | You call your sister. When you hang up you claim she's a conniving bitch. You will call her back to play her a gospel song over the receiver in a few hours. You will cry together. Sometimes you cry because of Jesus. Peach cobbler's your favorite. Sometimes old ladies in thrift shops and chat rooms and grocery stores try to make you're their friend or take you to lunch or to church. You refuse to give them you number. Ain't got no time for that sort of thing you sniff (You make your 56 year old vegan daughter take you to the Waffle House instead.) The gypsies came when you were three and they asked Granny and Grandma Gennuso if they could take you away and *-o shit!-* they found you standing in the middle of a circle on the front porch / them looking down at you, you just pleased as punch. That was before you drank the gasoline because you though it was Co-Cola, but after you up-chomped the beaded tiffany lamp because, shit, it *looked* like candy. We won't talk of funerals here in the twilight. The surgeon cutting something near your nose|the niece decomposing under branches that spread wide========= that take up all the longhorn sky, that take little kisses at fickle sparrows. No birds allowed.



Hurricane Floyd

by Nick Lehner

She comes to the beach in combat boots,

stomping through sand like Grandpa at Normandy.
I'm in the water, but Andy goes to meet her
when she's still only a swaggering silhouette
against the murky pre-storm sky.

We've come to the coast for a three-day visit,
yes, at the height of hurricane season. This morning
the waves are even grander than yesterday's.
In the small beachside bar, locals talk
like televised clichés: I'm not leaving. I 'us born
and bred here. We've seen hurricanes before.

The Marines haven't yet started sandbagging or securing
anything, so today she can play in the swelling waves
with us. Tomorrow she'll follow orders,

cover all air conditioners with plastic
to keep Floyd from slipping inside.
She'll help secure "receptacles,
trash, outdoor" from blowing off base. She will fight
a good fight in peacetime.

Those who live, work, and serve at Cherry Point
Marine Corps Air Station will be the last to leave
the beach, save the diehard barflies, hunkered over tequila,
eating stale pretzels in the dark, listening to someone's old transistor.

She has plans to evacuate, officially or not.
"I'll see you Thursday," she laughs when I leave,
outrunning the storm in Tuesday's gray pre-dawn.
Still, I take Route 17 in tears for the first ten miles.

Back home I shake sand from my clothes, alone,
and watch the news, half-hoping for catastrophe,
disaster in the footage of coastal towns. On CBS
I see Parris Island, the privates preparing
solemnly for Floyd as if he were not a hurricane
but some decorated hero of a Brigadier General.

Close enough, so I clean the house while I wait.
When she calls from Raleigh, where the traffic
headed inland is backed up for miles, I say
Semper Fi in irony, and watch the weather report
for more details about the approaching storm.

ISLAND SHERRIF

by Diana Pinckney

Only so much foolishness a lawman can take. No-counts stealing cigarettes from the Handy Pantry, kids joyriding in someone else's cars, their lazyass parents zoned out in front of the T.V., tourists trashing the beach, bikers like locusts swarming causeways, developers grinding up dunes. We got family fighting out the wazoo, but they'd soon punch me as each other. Now these crazies calling me about mermaids for God's sake. Seeing'em close to boats, hearing singing half the night. Take a cold shower, get a real man's job. What the hell am I to do if I did catch one? Listen, those rumors been floating round for years, so I done a little looking and listening myself … Damned if I'll let on to one sorry soul that I ever 0seen such.

Dear Prothonotary Warblers in the Birdhouse,

by Susan Meyers

Nothing satisfies hunger like dull habit
pinched in the mouth of beauty.

Awed by your recent shelling?

Lost like a new moon?

What matters to you comes and goes, full
of what matters more, then empty.

Long, gaping desire: beware of.

All music in these woods is sweet,
sweet to somebody.

Night, when all isn't.

Soon—I can't tell you, and you can't imagine—
the widening.

This cup of moss, a feathering.
Tomorrow, the swamp's solitary hour.

Believe me, that small sun you are privy to,
there is more light than.

Daughter of the Confederacy

by Alison Pelegrin

Down here, news travels slow. Fathers and sons,
they fall and rise, they raise the Southern Cross,
they pilgrimage to battlefields in Vicksburg,
Richmond, and swing the metal detector
with prayers for a crop of stunted bullets.

Photo op all through childhood: Me and my brother
beside Fort Jackson's blackwashed cannon
in order of height. Picnic and relic hunting after.

We found skipping stones, nothing more,
but kept the faith, believed ourselves transformed
by a stroll through damp brick caves.
Chilled ankles while we stooped
for a cannon's view of the river's curves—
we thought it was dead man's breath.

Ancestor worship. One foot in the past.
In Baton Rouge retirees underfoot
at the front desk of the special collections library
where I fetched their maps, disarmed them
of contraband ink pens and coffee thermoses.

One could be a vandal with a vat of paint,
and the curators so mistrusted enthusiasm
I crept by, traitor with a whitewash heart
set against my name written in gray
in the roster of Union and Confederate dead.

Reckless before I quit. Sloppy, bored, irreverent,
tempted to alter the files, the endless files
in rows like headstones in Arlington cemetery.
Hardly wrong when no one knows to come looking.
If a scholar wastes her footnote summer, so what?

The whispers hounding me down the halls—
at first I chalked it up to white guilt, or a Yankee ghost
showering dust on the displays, karma hounding me

for all those school trips to the Confederate Museum
where I marveled at a guide detailing hacksaw amputation,
Confederate bills stamped with cotton bales,
and what seemed ladies' hats behind the glass . . . .
Did they have shrunken heads?

The whispers came from preservationists,
idolators of factoids and fading paint,
plotting how best to preserve portraits
of southern generals. Their battle plan?
When no one is looking, flip them nose-to-the-wall.

I know about their reenactments and period falconry,
the farbys and thread counters, buffs
groomed with pockmarks and period grimaces,
the beards in shaded portraits their hand mirrors.

Perhaps you have seen them at close of day—
the regiments, moth-bitten, gray,
that slouch towards a battle lost long ago,
bottlenecking all the back roads.

I wait them out at the gas station
that sells moonshine and meat pies.

Across the street, reenactment brides.
In a circle they pray—thanks be given—
again their rebels rise up from the dust
stinking of sweat and antique wool.
They call themselves the new endangered species
and walk among us resurrecting history.

The Southland

by A.M. Garner

The Southland is a long-standing 'meat and three' Southern restaurant, complete with fluffy meringue pies and Elvis memorabilia, located in Sheffield, Alabama.

Queen of the Coondog Cemetery *by A.M. Garner*

The Coondog Cemetery is located in Colbert County, Alabama, near the Natchez Trace Parkway and the Tennessee River.

Jesus Barn *by Nicole Cartwright Denison*

"Jesus Barn" was taken in April 2007 and includes one of several rustic barns in the Sweetwater/ Tellico Plains, Tennessee area with scripture printed on their roofs and lofts. The barns stand as a reminder of the past—not only our agricultural roots but also a time when people lived more simply, perhaps looking only heavenward for guidance instead of to the secular world. Now, they're a testament to what Flannery O'Connor dubbed our Christ-haunted landscape.

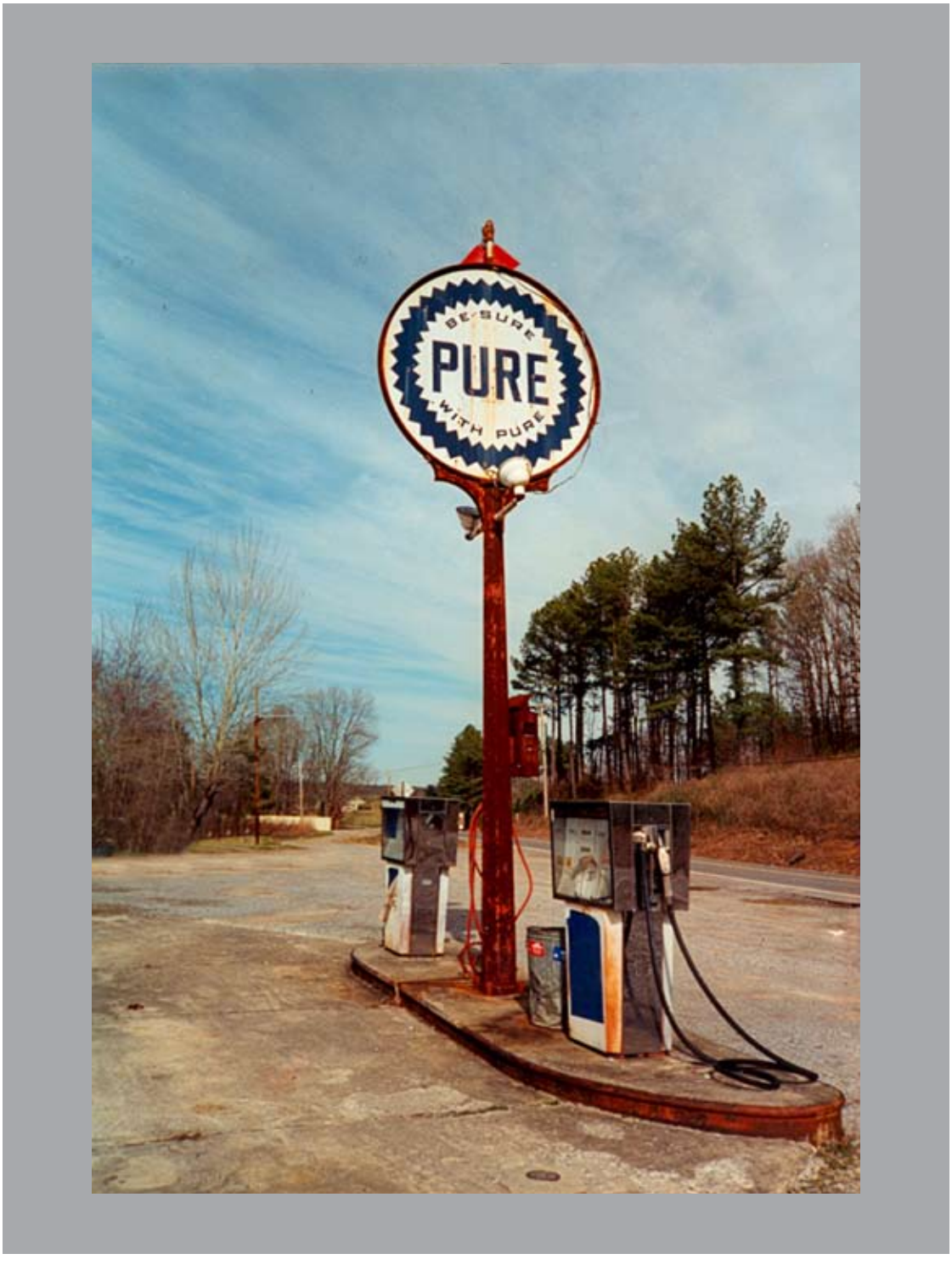
Prepare Now *by Nicole Cartwright Denison*

"Prepare Now" is near Cherokee, North Carolina and was taken five years ago with my first digital camera. This sign is an icon for so many traveling Highway 19 and a powerful one of my youth as I remember passing it years before during trips along the old highway. Seemingly, good advice is hard to come by these days but this sign still serves as a guardian of sorts, giving us pause as we ponder the implications of the plain spoken.

The Day Lily *by Beebe Barksdale-Bruner*

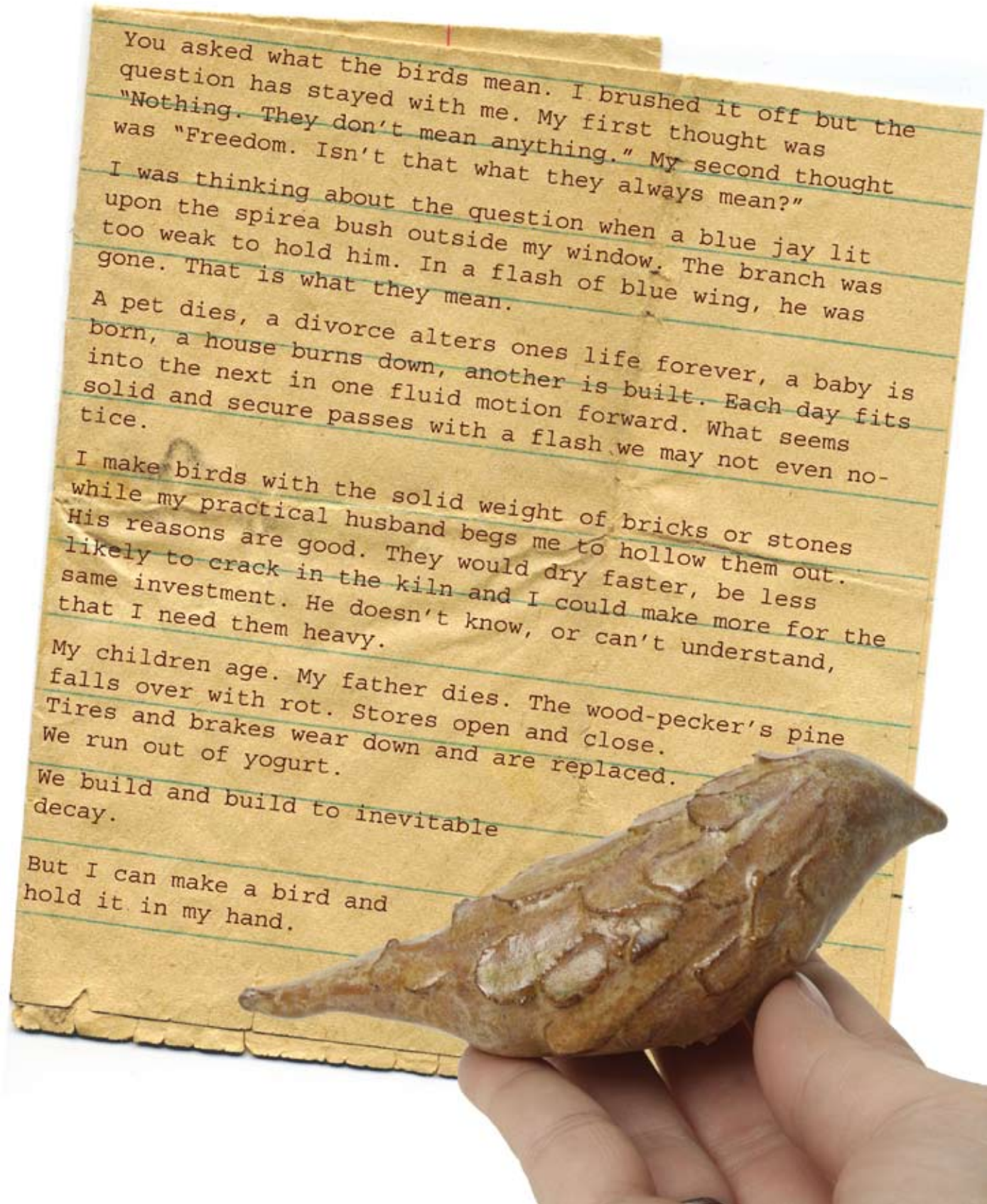
"The Day Lily" I call this my miracle photo. I wasn't close and had no tripod. The day was windy but I noticed the sun lighting up the inside of the flower and zoomed in. It's a Blue Ridge mountain Day Lily photographed while I was taking classes at Wild Acres in Little Switzerland, North Carolina.

Be Sure With Pure *by Rebecca Reeves*



Abandoned gas station in Cullman County, Alabama. Near Good Hope.

You Asked What The Birds Mean *by Melissa Blackburn*



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