

SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW



SWR

AN ON-LINE JOURNAL | POEMS • STORIES • PHOTOGRAPHY | SPRING 2010



SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

Volume 2 • Issue 2 • Library of Congress, ISSN # 1947-976X

EDITOR

Alicia K. Clavell

ART DIRECTOR

Rebecca Reeves

MANAGING EDITOR

Helen Silverstein

EDITORIAL BOARD

Linda Frost

Tina Harris

Sandra Meek

Daniel Robbins

James H. Watkins

SPECIAL THANKS

Martha Hudson

Marc Silverstein

Joey Kennedy

Veronica Kennedy

Michele Bradley



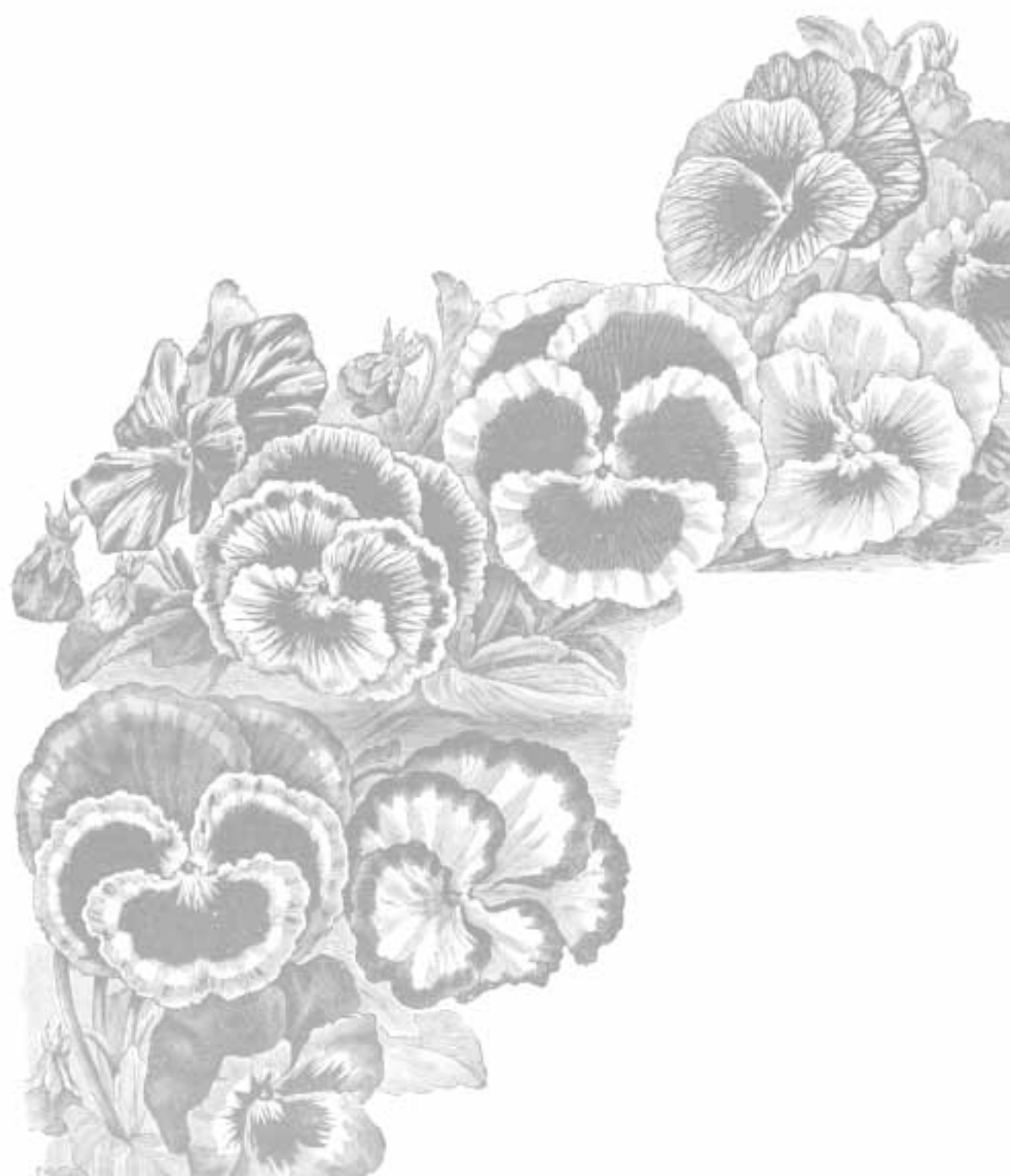


TABLE OF CONTENTS



POETRY

- 12 JEANIE THOMPSON This Day
- 13 JEANIE THOMPSON The Little Boy Next Door
- 14 JULIE BUFFALOE-YODER Pentecostal Girls
- 16 NINA ROMANO Intricacies of Cicada Wings
- 17 FELICIA MITCHELL The Other Night at Grace Healthcare & Rehabilitation
- 18 LINDA PARSONS MARION Fatherland
- 19 MELANIE HENDERSON Joy
- 20 JULIE HENSLEY Viable
- 23 EMILEIGH BARNES Blue laws.
- 24 A.E. LOVERIDGE Asian Character Tattoo
- 25 A.E. LOVERIDGE For Sale: Contact Diana
- 40 JOANNA GRANT The First Time
- 41 WENDY TAYLOR CARLISLE Things Burn
- 42 LAURA SECORD Painting the living rooms before her fiftieth birthday
- 44 ANDREA WITZKE-LEAVEY Ode to a Bear: Part II
- 45 KYES STEVENS On Screamer Mountain
- 46 LESLEY DOYLE Memory, Age 3
- 58 BREAKING DOWN IN THE SOUTH Gail White
- 59 DÉLANA R.A. DAMERON Palinode
- 60 BARBARA WIEDEMANN Trenton, Georgia
- 61 K.M.A. SULLIVAN These days are long without you
- 62 KATHERINE D. PERRY caverns
- 64 DREMA HALL BERKHEIMER was
- 76 LYNNE BARRETT How To Make A Crazy Quilt, 1906-1917
- 78 ELIZABETH SWANN Intro to Graphic Arts
- 79 GAIL PECK Sister Returning
- 82 MELISSA DICKSON BLACKBURN If You Forget Me
- 83 SANDY LONGHORN This Is What It Comes Down To

TABLE OF CONTENTS



106 ANNE WILSON GREGORY Blackbeard Retires Near the Coast

110 ANNE BAILEY Last Poem

FICTION

26 ANNA SCHACHNER Anything Else Worth Having

30 TAMMY MCELROY WILSON Mermaids

52 SARA KAY RUPNIK The Self-Consumer of My Woes

56 NANCY H. WILLIARD Grocery Store Heaven

66 JANIE DEMPSEY WATTS Under Milkweed Leaves

72 HAROL MARSHALL Growing Up With Pigs

92 DEBRA BRENEGAN Shades of Gray

96 TERESA BURNS MURPHY Irreconcilable Differences

96 TIFFANY PRIDGEN Kristy

102 ELLEN MORRIS PREWITT Full Moon Walk

CREATIVE NON FICTION

32 MAGGIE ROMIGH The Deacon and the Rattlesnake

36 SUSAN CUSHMAN The Glasses

39 PAIGE GANTT Ode to Wavy Hair

48 CRYSTAL GOODMAN Plainview Estates

50 ELLEN ANN FENTRESS Oyster Anxiety

68 CHERYL STILES Systems Failure

46 MICHELE GENTHON Sharing Rituals

PHOTOGRAPHY

84-85 ELIZABETH PLUNKETT BUTTIMER The Power of Red; Orchid Wings

86 CLAIRE SPOLLEN Left

87 GIOVANNA SUMMERFIELD Walking on Waters

88 MELANIE HENDERSON Rinse

89 PAT ST. PIERRE The Angel of Marye's Heights

90 TERESA BURNS MURPHY Ursula

CONTRIBUTORS



ANNE BAILEY lives in Birmingham, Alabama. She holds a MFA in book arts from the University of Alabama and a MA in English (Creative Writing) from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her most recent work is “Cold Stone, White Lily,” a suite of poems written from the point of view of a 14th Century anchoress, a solitary urban recluse in the Christian tradition.

EMILEIGH BARNES is a first-year poetry MFA student at the University of Mississippi whose work has most recently appeared in *Nibble*. Before being accepted at Ole Miss, she garnered more than 400 article publications working as a journalist in four newsrooms across the country. She also served as editor-in-chief at *The Daily Iowan* in Iowa City. Still fairly new to creative publishing, she is compelled by the intersection of poetry with science.

LYNNE BARRETT is the author of two story collections, *The Secret Names of Women* and *The Land of Go*. Her work has appeared in *A Dixie Christmas*, *Miami Noir*, the *Sun-Sentinel*, *Tampa Review*, and is forthcoming in Spring 2010 in *Delta Blues* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. She lives in Miami and teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University. Further information can be found at <http://lynne.barrett.googlepages.com/>.

DREMA HALL BERKHEIMER was most recently published in *Babel Fruit* and has work forthcoming in *Muscadine Lines* and *Persimmon Tree* literary publications. She is writing a memoir, *Running On a Red Dog Road*, about growing up in West Virginia, the child of a coal miner who was killed in the mines, a Rosie the Riveter mother, and devout Pentecostal grandparents. Literary affiliations include West Virginia Writers and The Writer's Garret in Dallas, where she is completing a graduate level writing program. http://web.mac.com/renkat/Summer_Autumn09/Drema_Berkheimer.html

MELISSA DICKSON BLACKBURN is both a poet for whom paint is a first principle and a painter for whom poetry is the final waking dream. That she holds award-winning credentials in both disciplines is only part of the story. She was born, facing east, near Savannah; educated facing north in Alabama; and draped imagination onto her world, facing south, in New York where she completed her MFA at the School of Visual Arts. Her painting has been reviewed by the *New Yorker Magazine*. Her poems have appeared in “*Southern Humanities Review*,” “*Caesura*,” “*The Driftwood Review*” and “*Southern Women's Review*.” A forthcoming chapbook is in the works to be published by New Plains Press. Working again from the exotic counter-factuals of Alabama, she is a prolific writer, reviewer, MFA candidate in poetry at Converse College in South Carolina, successful graphic artist with work appearing in numerous publications, and an energetic advocate for the arts who will have been known possibly to wonder: *what is west...*

DEBRA BRENEGAN received her doctorate in creative writing from The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where she also served, over the years, as co-nonfiction editor, and assistant fiction and poetry editors for *Cream City Review*. She is now an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. For her fiction, she has received a Ragdale residency, the Ellen Hunnicutt Fiction Award, and was a recent finalist for the John Gardner Memorial Fiction Prize and the Crab Creek Review Fiction Prize. She has recently had work published in *Calyx*, *The Laurel Review*, *RE:AL*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Milwaukee Magazine*, *Phoebe*, *The Healing Woman*, *The Association for Research on Mothering Journal*, *Cotyledon*, and *Gambara*.

ELIZABETH PLUNKETT BUTTIMER, a native Georgian, received BA and MSC degrees at Auburn University and her PhD from Georgia State University. She studied in London completing the Sotheby's 19th and 20th Century Decorative Arts Short Course and the Victoria and Albert Museum Study Centre Course in 19th and 20th Century Decorative Arts. Inspired by the floral works of Georgia O'Keeffe and a passion for nature, she has created the “Flower Power Series” expressing the splendor of Southern flora as cultural icon through poetry and photography.

WENDY TAYLOR CARLISLE lives on the edge of Texas. She is the author of two books, *Reading Berryman to the Dog* and *Discount Fireworks* and two chapbooks, *After Happily Ever*, and *The Storage of Angels*. Find more

CONTRIBUTORS



about her work at <http://www.wendytaylorcarlisle.com>.

SUSAN CUSHMAN'S essay, "Blocked," was a finalist in the 2007 Santa Fe Writers Project Literary Awards, and was published in *sfpw Journal*. Her feature-length piece, "Icons Will Save the World," was published in *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture and Public Life*. Susan's story of her Korean son's search for his birth mother, "The Other Woman," appeared in *Mom Writers Literary Magazine*. A native of Jackson, Mississippi, Susan's efforts to embrace her cultural roots while exploring an unconventional spiritual path are reflected in essays such as "myPod," "Burying Saint Joseph," and "Super-Sized Enlightenment," which were all published in *skirt! Magazine*. Her essay, "Jesus Freaks, Belly Dancers and Nuns," will appear as a chapter in the second volume of *All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality*, to be published by the University of Alabama Press in 2010.

DÉLANA R. A. DAMERON is the author of *How God Ends Us* (University of South Carolina Press 2009), chosen by Elizabeth Alexander as the 2008 South Carolina Poetry Book Prize. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Essence Magazine*, *African American Review*, *Rattle*, *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*, *PMS: PoemMemoirStory*, *42opus*, and *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*. She has received fellowships from the Cave Canem Foundation, Constance Saltonstall Foundation and Soul Mountain and is a member of the Carolina African American Writers Collective. Dameron, a native of Columbia, South Carolina, currently resides in New York City.

LESLEY DOYLE is a student, a poet, and lifelong resident of the bluegrass state.

ELLEN ANN FENTRESS Ellen Ann Fentress's essays have appeared in *The New York Times* and the *Oxford American*. In 2009, she won the nonfiction Emerging Writer prize from the ninth biennial Southern Women Writers Conference. An MFA graduate of Bennington College, the Mississippi Delta native writes on Southern culture and politics as a journalist and also teaches creative nonfiction at Millsaps College in Jackson. She is completing a memoir, hopefully a wry exploration of loss and revised hopes, entitled *Mighty Forces of Nature*.

PAIGE GANTT This Charlotte, North Carolina native is proud to call this her first publication. She has many short stories she has written and is beginning to put out into the world. She is also in the process of writing a fiction novel. Paige prefers to have a humorous slant to her works. *I work in the banking industry, a sense of humor helps*, she says.

CRYSTAL GOODMAN, was born and raised in East Texas. She moved to Virginia when she was 25 and lived there for 4 years. She currently works at the University of Hawaii-Manoa, but continues to be interested in Texas cultural history, women's issues, and racial relations in America (especially the South). Her work, "Plainville" is a short work of creative non-fiction that she wrote after visiting an assisted living facility in East Texas. She was intrigued by the residents' need for attention and the loneliness of aging that came through in their conversations.

JOANNA GRANT was born in Georgia, and currently teaches at Tuskegee University. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Vanilla*, *The Southern Humanities Review*, and elsewhere.

ANNE WILSON GREGORY was born and raised in Virginia and has never lived anywhere else. She received her MFA from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, and recent publications include "The Potomac Review" and "Gargoyle". She also read creative nonfiction on a panel at the 2009 Southern Women's Writers Conference.

MELANIE HENDERSON, 4th generation native of Washington, DC, graduated from Howard University with a dual degree in Spanish and English and from Trinity University with a Masters of Business Administration with a focus in Organizational Development. She is currently an MFA candidate at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. A visual and literary artist and an alum of Voices Summer Writing Workshops (VONA), her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in such publications as *Amistad*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Black Arts Quarterly*, *Commonthought*,

CONTRIBUTORS



Drumvoices Revue, Fingernails across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS from the Black Diaspora, Huang's Peace Mural Exhibition in Washington, DC (2008-2009), Jubilat, Mourning Katrina: a Poetic Response to Tragedy, Reverie: Midwest African American Literature, Torch: poetry, prose and short stories by African American Women, Tuesday; An Art Project, Warpland Journal, The Washington Informer and X Magazine (London, UK). She is a winner of the 2009 Larry Neal Writers' Award (DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities) and Managing Editor of Tidal Basin Review. She is the enchanted mother of an unbelievably charming baby boy. For more on Melanie Henderson, visit: <http://anotefrommel.wordpress.com>.

JULIE HENSLEY was raised on a sheep farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, but now she makes her home in Kentucky with her husband, the writer R. Dean Johnson, and their two year old son. She teaches in the brief-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. Her poems and stories regularly appear in a variety of literary journals, and her most recent work can be found in PoemMemoirStory, The Superstition Review, Ruminare, and Quarterly West. "Viable" is the title poem from a soon to be completed collection, one of a handful of poems which were recently awarded the Emerging Voice in Poetry Award at the 2009 Berry College Southern Women Writer's Conference.

ANDREA WITZKE-LEAVEY is currently a visiting lecturer at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She spent her high school and college years in Tennessee and spent every summer of her youth on farms, in small towns, and on beaches in Eastern North Carolina where both sets of grandparents lived. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in such places as The Pacific Review, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Translation Review, The Valdosta Voice, and Bogg. Most recently, a series of her poems appeared in translation in the anthology Contemporary American Poetry/Poezia bashkekohore amerikane, published in translation by the Albanian Minister of Culture and Literature. She has served as editor and poetry editor of the literary arts journal Sojourn, won the Excellence in the Arts Award (sponsored by the University of Texas-Dallas) in 2004 for poems published in Illyria and PENA International, and was a finalist in the Sean Christopher Britton Memorial Poetry Prize in 2002.

SANDY LONGHORN'S first book, Blood Almanac (Anhinga Press, 2006), won the 2005 Anhinga Prize for Poetry, judged by Reginald Shepherd. New poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The American Poetry Journal, Blackbird, Copper Nickel, diode, Free Verse, Redactions, and elsewhere. She is also the recipient of an individual artist fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council.

A. E. LOVERIDGE'S poetry will be featured in the forthcoming The New Yinzer and has been anthologized in Carlow University Press's Dionne's Story. She is the author of a literary fiction chapbook, Congregation (Little Book Publications), and her short play, The Man with No Pants, was included in the Atlanta Best of the 24 Hour Plays series. An Atlanta, GA native and 2009 Bread Loaf contributor, she now lives in Pittsburgh, PA.

LINDA PARSONS MARION is the author of poetry collections Home Fires and Mother Land. She served as poetry editor of Now & Then magazine for 14 years and is widely published. Marion's poems often join the inner and outer landscapes to bring about understanding and healing. She is an editor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

HAROL MARSHALL Harol is a cultural anthropologist (PhD, University of Pittsburgh) who retired from academic life in 2006. She has been writing fiction ever since. "Growing Up With Pigs" is her first published short story, and the title story of an upcoming anthology based on growing up in the 1950's. She has published two mysteries: "A Corpse for Cuamantla," set in Tlaxcala, Mexico where Harol conducted her fieldwork, and "Holy Death," a parody P.I. novel set in Hollywood. Born and raised in upstate New York, Harol (named for her uncle) has lived in Greensboro, North Carolina for twenty-five years, long enough to have incorporated 'hey' and 'y'all' into her everyday vocabulary.

FELICIA MITCHELL, a native of South Carolina who grew up in both South Carolina and North Carolina, is the author several chapbooks, including The Cleft of the Rock (Finishing Line Press, 2009), Earthenware Fertility Figure

CONTRIBUTORS



(Talent House, 1999), and *There is No Map*, an online chapbook from The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature (2008). Her poems and essays have been published in a variety of journals, and she writes a weekly column for Washington County News in her adopted home of southwest Virginia, where she teaches at Emory & Henry College.

TERESA BURNS MURPHY received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from George Mason University. Her writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Westview*, *The Science Teacher*, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, and *THEMA*. She was awarded the 1996 WORDS (Arkansas Literary Society) Award for Fiction, and she was a finalist in the 2006 Kate Braverman Short Story Prize. Her novel, *Swimming for My Mother*, was a semi-finalist for the 2005 Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel. A native Arkansan, she currently lives in Fairfax, Virginia.

GAIL PECK'S first chapbook won the North Carolina Harperprints Award, and her first full-length won the Texas Review Breakthrough Contest. Main Street Rag published *Foreshadow* and *Thirst*. Her most recent chapbook is *From Terezin*. Her poems and essays have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Nimrod*, *Rattle*, *Brevity*, *Cave Wall*, and in numerous other journals. She was a 2007 finalist for Nimrod's 2007 Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry.

KATHERINE D. PERRY is assistant professor of English at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama. She is a specialist in American Literature and women's poetry. She also teaches for the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project, and some of her work has appeared in *Bloodroot*, *Sleetmagazine.com*, *Borderlands*, *Women's Studies*, *RiverSedge*, *Rio Grande Review*, and *13th Moon*.

ELLEN MORRIS PREWITT One of my stories received a Special Mention from Pushcart Prize XXXI: Best of the Small Presses 2007; a second story was nominated. My short fiction has appeared in *Arkansas Review*, *Gulf Coast Literary Journal*, *River City* (now *Pinch*), *Southern Hum*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Hurricane Review*, *Peralta Press* (Winner, 2k2 Award) and elsewhere. A story recently won the *Memphis Magazine/Burke's Books* short story contest. Another won the Tennessee Writers' Alliance short fiction contest. My novel was a semi-finalist in the James Jones First Novel Competition (25/600 MS). I live and write in Memphis; I have never lived outside the South.

TIFFANY PRIDGEN is a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill from where she earned a degree in English. She is a writer who grew up in rural northeastern North Carolina (where most of her stories are set). Tiffany currently lives in Durham, NC with her husband and young son.

NINA ROMANO earned an MA 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*; *GULFSTREAM'ING*; *Grey Sparrow Journal*; *The Northville Review*; *The Bosphorous Art Project Quarterly*; *Strong Verse*; *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Writers Ink*; and *Lung Poetry*. Excerpts from her novel-in-progress, *The Secret Language of Women*, appear in *Dimsum: Asia's Literary Journal*, *Southern Women's Review* and *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 from Kitsune Books.

MAGGIE ROMIGH is a born and bred Southern girl of Scots, Irish, French, and Cherokee descent who was raised along the coast of Georgia and spent her whole life in the South until 8 1/2 years ago when she moved to northeastern New Mexico to attend graduate school. Her work has been published in two regional magazines as well as in the *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*. She has an MA in English with a concentration in creative writing and hopes to return to the South next fall to begin work on a PhD in Creative Writing, even if she is already 55 years old.

SARA KAY RUPNIK A native of Northwestern Pennsylvania, Sara Kay Rupnik now resides in Richmond, Virginia,

CONTRIBUTORS



and Coastal Georgia. She holds a M.F.A. in Writing from Vermont College and is co-founder of Around the Block Writers Collaborative. Her fiction, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, appears in literary journals from various parts the country.

ANNA SCHACHNER has a MA in English Lit from Georgia State University and a MFA in Fiction from Bowling Green State University. She has published over 25 short stories in such publications as Puerto del Sol, Kalliope, Ontario Review and The Sun, and has had three Pushcart Prize nominations. In addition to winning the 2009 Emerging Writers contest at the 2009 Southern Women's Writer's Conference for her story "Reptile Man," she has placed first in other national contests, including the Frank O'Connor award from descant. While her novel is being shopped, she is at work on finishing a story collection and a young adult novel. She is a Lecturer in Emory University's undergraduate Creative Writing program.

LAURA SECORD studied Literature and Theater at UC Berkeley in the 1970's. She is the author of the poetry collection, *Becoming A Mojo Mamma*, and the play, *Sanapia's Courage Medicine: A Woman Healer's Life in Poems*. Her book length poem cycle, *An Art, A Skill, A Mystery*, tells the story of two Connecticut women who were trapped in the witch-hunts of the seventeenth century. Her next project will be based on the life of Alabama's poetess, Mary Gordon Duffee. Laura blends the life of a writer and performer with a twenty-five year career as a Family Nurse Practitioner. She currently provides clinical services to HIV positive patients.

CLAIRE SPOLLEN is an artist and Alabama native enrolled in the BFA photography program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

PAT ST. PIERRE is a freelance writer and amateur photographer from Wilton, CT. She has had children's and adult nonfiction, fiction, and poetry published in a variety of places. Her photos have been on the covers of *Wee Ones Magazine*, *Pond Ripples*, *Shine Literary Journal Magazine*, *Flutter Poetry Journal*, etc. Her children's writings have appeared in *Wonder Time*, *The Kids Ark*, *US Kids*, *Stories That Lift Us*, etc. Her adult writings have been published in *The Writer*, *The Homesteader*, *The Gardener's Gazette*, *Lutheran Parenting* etc. Her poetry has been published in a variety of places. Some of her work can be found in: *Boston Literary Review*, *Wind*, *Pond Ripples*, *Flutter Poetry Journal*, etc. Her chapbook "Reality of Life" has been published by Foothills Publishing Co. Her 2nd chapbook "Theater of Life" is pending publication in early 2010.

KYES STEVENS is a poet and the founder and director of the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project at Auburn University. For more information, visit: www.auburn.edu/apap.

CHERYL STILES'S 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 (GA) native still living in her hometown, she works as a university librarian and often writes about the South.

K.M.A. SULLIVAN lives in the mountains of southwestern Virginia with her husband and four of their five children. She is writing toward her MFA at Virginia Tech. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Night Train*, *Controlled Burn*, *NOÖ Journal*, *Pearl*, *Potomac Review*, and elsewhere. She was recently awarded a residency at Virginia Center for Creative Arts and was the 2009 recipient of the Virginia Tech / Poetry Society of Virginia Prize. More information and a few of her thoughts can be found at www.kmasullivan.blogspot.com.

GIOVANNA SUMMERFIELD Born and raised in Catania, Sicily, Italy, Giovanna Summerfield has received a BA in Political Sciences from University of Maryland, College Park, an MA in French and a Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures from University of Florida. Currently she teaches at Auburn University, where she serves as the Undergraduate Advisor of Italian Studies, the director of Languages Across the Curriculum and Taormina, Italy study programs, and College of Liberal Arts Engaged Scholar. She has extensively published scholarly as well as creative works about spiritual, gender, ethnic issues. Among these are *Patois* and *Linguistic Pastiche* in *Modern*

CONTRIBUTORS



Literature (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2007), *Credere Aude: Mystifying Enlightenment* (Gunter Narr, 2008), *Remembering Sicily* (Legas Publishing, 2009), *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (Continuum, 2010) and *Vendetta: Essays on Honor and Revenge* (Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010). Dr. Summerfield is currently working on an online educational tool, *Le Siciliane*, where texts, photographs, audio and visual clips about Sicilian women artists will be posted for free access.

ELIZABETH SWANN was born and grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. Currently, she is an MFA candidate at Queens University in Charlotte, NC. She was a finalist in the 2009 Guy Owen Prize, and that poem is forthcoming in *Southern Poetry Review*. She also has work forthcoming in *storySouth*. Her poems have appeared in *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, *Kakalak*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, and two anthologies: *Only Connect* and *Journey Without*. Her work has earned awards in the Deane Ritch Lomax Poetry Contest 2008 and 2009, and in the Kentucky State Poetry Society's Grand Prix Contest in 2007.

JEANIE THOMPSON published her fourth collection of poems, *The Seasons Bear Us*, with River City Publishing in 2009. Her previous books include *White for Harvest: New and Selected Poems*, *Witness*, and *How To Enter the River*. She edited *The Remembered Gate: Memoirs by Alabama Writers* with Jay Lamar. Thompson is founding director of the Alabama Writers' Forum, a statewide literary service organization and teaches in the Spalding University MFA Brief Residency MFA Writing Program in Louisville, KY. She is currently working on an historical novel in verse, *This Day*, about the adult life of Helen Keller, poems from which have appeared in *storySouth* and have been performed at Theater Tuscaloosa's Page to Stage.

JANIE DEMPSEY WATTS writes fiction and non-fiction. Two of her short stories were honored as finalist and semi-finalist in the William Faulkner Creative Writing Competition and she was asked to read her short story "Backyard Messages" at the 2009 Southern Women Writers Conference at Berry College. She spent most of her childhood in Tennessee and Georgia, moved away to California for college and has recently returned to live near her family's farm, providing fodder for her stories. She has been published in a variety of places including four "Chicken Soup for the Soul" books, "The Ultimate Gardener," (another book), "The Christian Science Monitor," "Georgia Backroads Magazine," and "Catoosa Life Magazine," where her column is a regular feature. She has written one novel and is at work on a second.

NANCY H. WILLIARD was born in North Carolina and raised in Tennessee and Mississippi. She frequently returns home in her fiction. She lives over 7600 feet above sea level in the mountains of California. She rides a Harley and does Tai Chi. Her work has appeared in *Phoenix*, the literary magazine of the University of Tennessee, and *The Alternative* from San Luis Obispo, California. Nancy also has a tale about traveling to her 40th high school reunion - almost 5000 miles from California to Mississippi. On the web in January at <http://www.helmethairmagazine.com/index.php/readers-story.html>

TAMMY MCELROY WILSON lives in Western North Carolina. Her work has appeared in journals and anthologies including *MoonShine Review*, *Epiphany*, *Pedestal*, *The MacGuffin* and *Grist: The Journal for Writers*, among others. She is working on her MFA at Stonecoast at the University of Southern Maine. "Mermaids" is an excerpt from her novel in progress.

GAIL WHITE lives in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. Her latest book is *EASY MARKS*, published by David Robert Books. *THE MUSE STRIKES BACK*, an anthology she co-edited, has been reissued by Story Line Press. You can see more of her work at www.gailwhite.org.

JULIE BUFFALOE-YODER Julie's poetry chapbook, *Price Reduced Again*, has just been released from Backpack Press <http://www.shootsandvines.com> Her work has been published in *storySouth*, *CALYX*, *A Journal of Art and Literature by Women*, *The Dead Mule*, *Muscadine Lines*, *The Wilmington Review*, *Ouroboros Review*, *Clapboard House*, *Grain Magazine*, *Side of Grits*, *A Carolina Literary Companion*, and several other places.



This Day

by Jeanie Thompson

Into my hand the stars poured light
and I knew you,

or so I thought.

There was no way for you to know my world of darkness
and silence, but you persisted with your
questions, probing my different mind.

The dog knew
simply to press all of himself into my palm –
tongue, tail and paw were there even as I tried to touch
him lightly as cobwebs.

But you shook language
in my face and asked me to dance syntax
with you. I followed your lead, dark dancer,
and if you could have seen what I knew
through this touch, we would've made one great mind!

The night I dressed, took my valise, and quietly
moved down the stairs guided only by
knowledge of your presence in me, Alabama
again was a place to fly from.

Alone on my sister's front porch,
without Teacher, the scent of tea olive lingering, your promise
faded into morning's traffic, a rumble from the street
signaling day.

I turned back, letting loss, only loss,
guide me in its knowing current. *Not to be yours,*

Helen, not to be yours, this day.



The Little Boy Next Door

after a photograph of Helen Keller and an unidentified child

by Jeanie Thompson

I know first from a distance his ramble across the yard
toward the porch to sit with me on the rock wall:
his smell of infant sweat and something else, a milk
musk mixed with his mother's talc
and the dark rich dirt from the backyard arbor.
He plays there late. When I move
in my garden, touching the rose trees to shake their
fragrance at close of day, he runs
quickly to nestle against my skirt, his small dumb
hand patting my thigh to signal, *I am here.*

One day a visitor thought to photograph us
and so we posed for others to see, as I imagine
a mother and child do for a memory book. His warm, damp
body next to me, he pressed his head against
my breast with a quiet knowledge, let me finger
his toes to feel dust powered there and learn
where he had played.

I was younger then,
and felt the quickening of a mother's desire for his
small body on hers.

Later, when you did not arrive
to take me from Alabama, I mourned the child lost
to me. There would be no difference to lose you – one I would
never truly have – and that child, pressed from my body,
the dark smell of him rising to tell me at last who I am.



Pentecostal Girls

by Julie Buffaloe-Yoder

When it got too hot,
Pentecostal girls
went swimming
at the shore

in long white dresses,
sneakers on their feet,
braided hair covered
with bandanas.

From root to toenail,
their sins were
bound as tight
as the binding
on a new white Bible.

When us bad girls
came bouncing up
cute as hell
in silver hoops
and red bikinis,

the boys

couldn't stop looking
at those Pentecostal girls

dripping salty sin,
laughing, splashing

flashing hints
of bra straps
and panties.



Satan herself
didn't stand
a chance
against the saints
who had been
immersed
in the armor
of wet, hot cotton.



Intricacies of Cicada Wings

by Nina Romano

Today I found cicada wings on the porch.
In the fading light, they look crystallized,

“pearlized” like the insides of an oyster shell
where a grain of covered sand develops into a pearl.

Each segment of the wing is a stained glass window,
the separations like “lead came” or “copper foil”

used in Tiffany lamps and the Rose Window,
high in the south transept of York Minster.

Each division, so precise. Where is the body now?
Gone to its final resting place in the eco-system to nourish

the earth that feeds the tree that the cicada used to feast on.
Herbalists use cicada shells in Chinese medicine;

inhabitants of China eat this insect, and others feast
on it in far off Burma, Malaysia, and the Congo.

I gaze at the transparent, iridescent and shimmering wings
and I am winged away to ancient Greece, where as a handmaiden

to Aristotle we dine on these delicacies. Later, he scribbles a memo
for his: *Historia Animalium*, and says to me: Study the cicada,

ancient polyvalent symbol; note in its lifecycle these premises reverberate:
resurrection, immortality, spiritual consciousness and ecstasy.



The Other Night at Grace Healthcare & Rehabilitation

by Felicia Mitchell

The other night,
I lay next to my mother
and let my hair fall against her face.

She giggled when it tickled her nose
and reached both hands out,
as if to hug me,
but she grabbed my hair instead—

gathering one pigtail in each fist—

and laughed some more,
as if she remembered exactly
what it means to mother.



Fatherland

by Linda Parsons Marion

It slid off the tongue like my aunt's French Silk
pie, the soft-drawled *ah*, brusque *r* buffed
in the manner of my relatives themselves, their talk
languishing in the Middle Tennessee swelter. My ears
heard *Fabthulun*, Saturdays with my grandmother
on the city bus to Harvey's or Kress's, from Russell
to the Fatherland transfer downtown.

O the mornings I grabbed the silver pole, swung
up to feed the driver's musical change box, round
and round we bumped—seam-stockinged
ladies and Chesterfield ads, the bus burping
its sooty breakfast along *Fabthulun*.

No wonder I misunderstood, being shaped
or scolded mostly by women's ways.
My father's occasional grand entrance
from business trips swept me into his Buick,
big fun with trampolines or Hayley Mills,
then just as quickly without.

The real word, spoken fully, occurs to me now—
his absence spanned those jostled journeys
lurching forward, braking hard in a land passed
through to elsewhere. The company of women
steadied my bearings, the old taunt *broken home*
snapped shut in their pocketbooks with brass
tokens of names I failed to articulate.



Joy

by Melanie Henderson

sifts for black
in the blush of a summer lily,

the fat style in my upper chest,
breath given to sun,
out of light, lung plucking,
windless, spiraling,
a cork breaking cylinders
for berries, wine

anther, if you knew
how strong the absence
of your skin

touches, unsettles
pollen, sprinkled flour
in this yard, seeking
to properly break color,
mush petal & peduncle
into dye.

Viable

(A letter confessing my own lack of faith to my newborn son)

by Julie Hensley

Last January,
in the minute and a half it took
the ultrasound technician to pronounce that word,
hours after I stood up from the sofa
and felt the blood rush warm out of me,
I thought about the moments
when knowledge of your life was mine alone,
when I had sat, heart-pounding,
holding the confirmation of your presence inside me,
frozen, unable or unwilling, to rise and begin
the inevitable process of sharing you.

I thought about the pills
my sister had taken months before,
locked in the bathroom, her head bowing
to drink from the faucet, again and again.
Rain pouring off the eaves like quicksilver,
a windowed tunnel in Dulles International Airport.
Past midnight, driving south on I81,
I never turned on the radio,
certain, only through silence,
would I know if something changed,
if she opened her eyes, or
if the steady sound of the respirator
suddenly failed to sustain her.

I thought about children erased,
when my sister was young, already struggling
to tread the secret undercurrents of her illness,
the ones I had, until you, failed to consider
in terms other than my own immediate loss—
my parents, preoccupied, whispering in the kitchen,
money no longer spent on school clothes—
the ones I had, even as a grown woman, an aunt,
come to view simply as statistical fall out.
And I thought about the times I flirted,
with that possibility—breathless and spread
across an unfolded sleeping bag in the back of a Chevy S10,
the earth beneath my skin freshly tilled to the surface,

by night air and a boy's fingers,
my body suddenly ready to absorb anything.

I thought about the choice sometimes involved,
my grandfather in an electric hospice bed,
the cancer which began in his lymphatic system
now pulsing steadily through his body.
Weeks of silence, his breath
quieter, even, than the humid sigh of White Oaks
just outside, until the morning he rose up on his elbows,
called my mother in from the kitchen.
"There are some people here," he said,
"some people who want me to go with them."
My mother asked the only question she could,
"Papa, do you want to go?"
And he answered—"Yeah"—just before his breathing ceased,
"Yeah. I think I do."

I thought about the times I took it so lightly,
somehow forgot to value survival at all:
The summer I played with kids on a neighboring farm,
wading into the shifting mountain of silage
that steamed heady and deep inside a warm silo.
Fifteen, delivering meals to shut-ins—
no seat belt, limbs sticking to cracked leather,
rattle of gravel and ditch weed,
the smell of scotch across the front seat of a red Studebaker convertible,
and the hands of that church elder, damp and shaking
against the antique steering wheel.
Or, the night I drove a carload of rowdy teenagers,
windows open to dry August evening,
a sling shot passed around, quarter sticks of dynamite
sizzling into open pasture.

I want to say I knew your heart was still beating,
I want to say that your father and I passed the certainty of you
back and forth between our clasped hands
like a warm electrical current,
that together we felt your presence,
that we knew you were there, a surge of power
through a green sapling pressed to a hot fence.

I should have known
because I have seen it before,
the way life can inexplicably root and shimmer:
the damp track of a mountain lion marking a Sonoran wash,
Chestnut saplings still sprouting through wet leaves,
my sister's first born, his pink fingers uncurling like a bright starfish.

But, at the time, all I could see was the trajectory
rising up from the darker corners of my subconscious,
your life, mere weeks, burning down,
a sudden explosion in the summer night,
skid marks rutted in a back road,
sunlight disappearing
as the hatch opens and the ground gives way.



Blue laws.

by Emileigh Barnes

If upon a headstone, I want it,
mine, to say,
das ist der Fall / wir alle sagten, dass es / sein würde,
to say,
that is the case /we all said that it / would be

Listening to each movement of this
cindered gospel, this splinter,
the tacit between recapitulations.
It is this point (341460, 0895355).

The point where crushed was the praying mantis,
his emerald body in wet pine
on the sidewalk.
See his small hands curled as in that third-row pew,
the hot radiation of cracked hand muscles.

I hear you as if through gramophone,
as if across a field of parrot pitcher plant, or
bladderwort, tender and yellow,
a décolleté curtain covering sons
— According to the New York Times, grain's to blame
for fish farms drying up.

It's light like this
that turns trees into vespertine bones,
fossilized against amber sky



Asian Character Tattoo

by A. E. Loveridge

Age nineteen, carved over her heart.
She has not yet heard the words
cultural appropriation.
Her mother would say,
We don't have that here.
She replies, *We are sick physicians,*
who cannot diagnose our own disease.

Flesh not her flesh
etching faith not her faith
in a language not her own
she wants to whittle the small town
from her body
then burn it down as penance
for centuries of history
in small southern towns
engraved in un-seeable places.

Steel wool scrubbing twang from her tongue,
purging hominy, white as angry robes in the graveyard
four miles from her home
two weeks before she drove North,
she felt *something*- not fear,
she un-eats her face, her flesh, her family.

At night her lover traces the black incision,
asking her what it means,
touching that place where her heart should be.
She whispers in her own ear
thief.



For Sale: Contact Diana

by A. E. Loveridge

One invisible airplane, no longer
needed- private jets are passe'.

Bullet-proof bracelets, good
if you get shot in the wrists often,
but also decorative for those in safer neighborhoods.

One magic lasso, used, but strong.

Worn leotard in patriotic colors, plus matching boots,
one size fits Amazons



Anything Else Worth Having

by Anna Schachner

When I began my slow entrance into the world, my father was learning to crochet. It was another secret that he kept from my mother, driving to the weekly Saturday morning class at the arts center with the volume of the radio turned up, as if trumpets and saxophones pushing against the glass of the windows could disguise his mission. That week he had secured a job at a bank, as planned, awarding money to the young, those like himself who had always had ambition but now had the means to match it. He was a Loan Officer. He accepted the title with some vague yearning that “officer” honor his Navy history, although he knew that it couldn’t, that the only honor he could bring to those months at sea was memory itself. Even his uniform had been relinquished. And of the mementos he brought back from various ports, only one remained: a necktie with bottles of rum splattered against a dark green background, a tacky gift from a nervous, young woman who had handed it to him on the sidewalk in Havana and then scurried away. So the desire to crochet, to connect small squares of cotton to small squares of cotton, offered no connection to his former vocation. He did not particularly like the necessary intricate movement of needles, but he knew that creating things (his job at the bank involved rearranging, not creating) was important. And he knew that my mother would never take on such tasks. He knew that if his child were to have handmade blankets and doilies on which, years later, she could place her trinkets, he would be the one to do it. He cared little what other people thought of him, their senseless speculation, for he knew there was talk behind his back. He knew.

He had no doubt that I would be a girl. My mother did. In fact, in perfect role reversal, my mother stared the 50/50 probability straight in the eye and questioned the very suggestion of balanced odds. As she saw it, the fact that she had tricked my father into parenthood, having planned my conception as she did without asking for his complicity, would tip the scales in his favor. I would be a boy, she was sure. “He’ll probably look like you, too,” she told my father. “He’ll get those two arrows for eyebrows.”

Nevertheless, the crochet instructor that morning stood over my father’s busy hands and nodded in approval. My father was working on his seventh square, the size of two cigarette packages placed side by side. “I keep waiting for this to be relaxing,” he looked up to tell her, thinking of how a crochet needle had to be directed when a Salem, wedged between his middle fingers, had always had a will of its own. He kept thinking of smoking, a habit he had discarded when he joined the Navy, when he chose salty spray over nicotine. The instructor smiled at him and moved on to the other students, all of whom nodded politely as class convened, all of them women in various stages of middle age, a good ten years ahead of him and slightly smug about this status and their renewed creative powers.

Other than smoking, my father thought of a lot of things that day as my mother’s water broke. He thought about death. With another life so close, it was only logical. He thought about two of his boyhood playmates that had been hit by a car when they were all ten. He had seen it happen, watching in horror from the front steps of his house where his mother had sent him to shine his father’s shoes. One of the children, the boy, had cried out just before the car tried to slow, what sounded like the word “yes” to him. He didn’t know why this had returned to him as he sat, twenty-three squares to go. He stood, left class, quietly closing the classroom door behind him, and drove home to my mother, making only one stop, offering that same word when my mother called out, “Duncan, please tell me that’s you,” feeling its usual optimism heavy against his tongue.

Someone had been busy. During his short absence, my mother, restless from nine months and five days of pregnancy, began opening things. Slumping through the house, both hands on her back buttocks, she had started in the kitchen and removed the lid of every jar and container first in the Frigidaire and then from the cupboards. On the bottom pantry shelf she found a jar of pickles left behind by the previous owner, which smelled like turpentine when opened, but she persevered, a handkerchief held steadfastly to her nose.

When she was finished with the kitchen, she moved to the bedroom and opened the lid of the trunk at the end of my parents’



bed. She opened all five drawers of the mahogany dresser inherited from my grandfather on my father's side, a carpenter, exposing all sorts of attire. This included the waist-high, cotton underwear she had worn all her life serving as testament to her underlying practicality, which she had always, unfortunately, mistaken for monotony.

From the kitchen, she moved to the nursery, solemn in its anticipation of my arrival. She unscrewed the lid of every baby product on the new changing table, even the Vaseline, which was as hard and brown as stale bread when the time came to use it. She opened the door to the wardrobe where five or six blue sleepers hung from tiny wooden coat hangers. She removed the lid to the plastic diaper pail, admiring its cleanliness, soon, she knew, to be a thing of the past. She even opened the window, in March, and invited the squirrels to crack open all the acorns they could find. "Let them fill your cheeks," she said, some vague memory of a poem encouraging the words. It would have been hard for them to decline, my mother being very, very pregnant, a commanding presence to my father, much less small rodents accustomed to scrounging for an entire season's worth of food.

Opening things to summon unborn children was an old wives' tale, she knew, but for week after bloated week, she had felt like an old wife, that title still as odd to her as any. She untwisted the top of a jar of molasses she had left waiting in the kitchen and saw a tiny black bug crawling around on the surface. "I hope you get fat," she said, and meant it.

So when my father came home, my mother stood in the hallway under the Renoir print, the floor darkened just behind her where her water had plummeted. With great effort, she had changed into clean maternity pants. She wore the same light blue shirt, the one she had always hoped she would be wearing when I arrived, having given up on guessing when that would be. She held the car keys in her hand, although they started a two-door Carmigia she had sold when she married. She wanted to make a point about her former independence, waning more with every contraction. "The baby has requested today as a birthday," she said.

"Today?" my father said, after two seconds' hesitation, staring directly at my mother's stomach in hopes of seeing my quick progress downward. He didn't say it, but the fact that it was a Saturday did not seem right. Babies should be born during the week, he felt, so that schedules, jobs, lives, were rightfully interrupted.

"Does that not suit you?" my mother said, rolling her eyes.

"Is the back door locked?"

She nodded yes. He reached for her hand and they walked side by side through the front door, down the steps of the duplex and along the sidewalk until they reached my father's car where he had hidden in the trunk a suitcase full of new pajamas, magazines, and my mother's favorite chocolate with which to surprise her later.

Sixteen hours later, I came, almost a week late, and in the middle of my father's favorite television program, *Gunsmoke*. My mother had always wanted to be a gypsy, so she let my father be a cowboy, at least for an hour a week, when he sat with his expression fixed to the television screen, the contemporary world—where problems were solved without guns—forgotten. But not that week. Not that night.

That night he watched my mother. During my delivery, one vein rose to the surface of her forehead, a thin, blue line of effort that my father noted, worried it was some other demarcation, some division between two things that should never come into contact.

My mother carried me home wrapped in a pristine white blanket under which I wore crocheted booties with cloth spurs sewn onto the back, the very first of my father's projects, and one that he interpreted as playfully ironic given that I was indeed a girl. He had pulled them over my chubby feet when my mother went to use the restroom, the very first time he held me without her fussing over his shoulder. When she brought me home and unwrapped the blanket, her first thought was that she had claimed the wrong baby.

"Spurs?" she shrieked from the nursery, so tired and hormonally imbalanced the house might just as easily have been spinning, "Duncan, come tell me if this one's ours!"

My father appeared in the doorway, not the least bit sheepish for having been discovered, and said, "Lane, I would think you



would have noticed earlier if she wasn't 'ours.'"

She wasn't convinced.

He reached over, pulled the blanket away from my face, and ran a finger under my three chins. I grimaced, my whole body shuddering in only the way that a newborn's can. "She's ours," he affirmed and smiled. "She looks just like you."

"Do you think so?" my mother asked, moving closer. "Do you really think so?"

The truth was that my father had wanted a son. He never so much as said it, but everybody, including my mother, knew it. It was a dormant wish, passive at best.

My father, however, was a man of action, a man of strategy. That day, before I was born, on his way home from crochet class earlier that day, my father made a stop. He drove, never challenging the speed limit, to a neighborhood just off the interstate. Charlotte was small then, and its circumference felt to him suddenly like a big piece of elastic waiting to be stretched. The city would grow, banking money encouraging it, he knew. It was inevitable. But now the line of trees just beyond the shoulder was intact. The cement was the color of pancake batter, still clean, cracked from the weight of trucks, but clean enough. The older neighborhoods, where brick ruled out over wood, were regal, or, just beginning to deteriorate, depending on their resistance to change. He took exit 58, toward the west, and sighed. He checked his watch, careful to not be gone longer than two hours, the window of time that he and my mother had agreed upon that morning when he told her he would visit the library.

The apartment complex was quiet when he parked between two sedans, although he knew that there were dozens of children living there. He had seen them, riding bicycles in the parking lot, climbing the weathered wooden fence around the trash dumpsters. Once a little girl had asked him for a quarter, as he passed the area that held vending machines. She bought a package of watermelon bubble gum with it and offered him a piece. He chewed it for just a few seconds, surprised by the excessive sweetness, and then threw it away, careful to wrap it back in its aluminum packaging before tossing it in the garbage.

He climbed the slatted stairs and knocked lightly on the door of 4-D, not a full-force knock but not a timid one either. A woman answered the door, as he expected. "Good morning, Melissa," he said and stepped inside where the fall light hit the carpet in half-cones as it filtered through two narrow windows that looked out over the empty, discolored pool.

"Duncan," she said, kissing his cheek the way that my mother had already stopped doing, "thank you for visiting."

"I can't stay long. The baby could come any minute."

"Yes," she said simply, and swept her arm toward the sofa so that he would sit.

My father wasn't sure, but he thought Melissa to be under twenty, or maybe just twenty. He had never asked her age, preferring other details over that one—what her favorite fruit was, if she watched television for the company of voices. Yet she moved slowly, like an older woman whose bones were adjusting to less flesh. He watched her cross the room, each step deliberate, the scar from a sledding accident that she had shown him when they met hidden beneath her jeans.

"Is Hugh sleeping?"

She nodded yes and smiled. "He chews on my fingers now."

"And how's the drugstore working out?"

"It's fine," she answered. "Just fine."

He thought of Davies, Melissa's husband, how he methodically stirred his coffee in the mornings at breakfast, the sailors lining both sides of a long metal table, the ocean surrounding them. Davies wouldn't allow the coffee to cool, so he took small gulps, sucking in air as he did, careful not to scald his mouth. He was playful, impatient, and my father had liked him enough to think that they would stay in touch, even if he was much younger, barely twenty-one, and cocky, sometimes sure of nothing but himself. Davies could keep a poker face better than anybody, and he made my father consider the difference between a secret and a lie. Still, that was in the context of a game, something to pass the long nights at sea. It wasn't life. Then he had seen Davies with a strange woman in a bar when they were docked in Baltimore. The woman was not pretty, but she was vivid, colorful, sliding a row of bangles up and down her arm. She laughed with her mouth wide open, a musical laughter that my father admired against his



very strong will.

Three days later Davies died from a bad heart, a condition undetected by the Navy's initial physical. My father did not attend the funeral, but when he heard that it was in Charlotte, he knew that he would look up Davies' wife. He knew that he would offer her what he could—consolation, remembrance, comfort. He did not allow himself to think what she might offer him, for my mother was his life. His life was depending on him.

"There's a teller position at a branch of the bank over on South Boulevard that will be opening up," he told her.

Melissa looked at the carpet. Her straight brown hair fell forward against her chin. "I don't know. I'd have to sit still all day and smile at people I don't know."

"You get free checks," my father said, hopefully.

"I don't know, Duncan. I'm telling you, I feel restless. Without Davies here, I just feel restless. Like I used to."

"You've got Hugh."

She nodded again. "I know it. He's my Cracker Jack prize."

My father stood. "You know you can call me at the bank if you need anything."

"Tell your wife that you forget about the pain. There's plenty of other pain a lot worse than having a baby."

My father didn't say anything. He gave Melissa a squeeze on her forearm and opened the door. He thought about the baby boy sleeping in the room down the hallway. Boys had a surer course in the world. Maybe it wasn't right, but they did. Still, he would need some kind of father, someone to remind him of that course.

"Okay then," he said to Melissa, smiling. He turned, shifting his hips last. He didn't yet know of me, nothing beyond the abstractions of a changed insurance policy, a list of 23 names chosen from a book my mother had checked out of the library, and the underwater world replete with starfish and squid he had been projecting onto my mother's womb. But that baby boy down the hall was real. He was only one very young, very afraid parent away from being alone. "Bye now," he added. He made a mental note to bring a baseball next time, a toy one that he wouldn't let my mother buy.

Outside, he could breathe again. He felt a kind of control waft away from his body. He thought for a second. He hoped my mother would release me as easily as a sigh. He hoped that I would be truth delivered.

If I had been there, instead of pushing my way into a world, yearning already for that pull of new air in my lungs, I would have told him that even truth is bittersweet and fleeting, like just about anything else worth having.



Mermaids

by Tammy McElroy Wilson

When I was going through a mermaid phase in second grade, Daddy splurged by taking us to the Weeki Wachee. I spent time afterwards in the car drawing the fish women with their breathing tubes and their hair floating out like octopus arms. I drew in lipstick and sparkly jewelry and a cigarette for one of the mermaids.

Billy wrinkled his nose. "Nobody can smoke under water."

"Those women can. You saw them in real life."

Mama smiled as she exhaled behind cat-eye sunglasses.

"They can't smoke can they, Daddy?" Billy said.

Our father checked his Air Force crew cut in the rear-view mirror. "No, son, they can't, and I wish your Mama wouldn't smoke at all. Will you tell her that for me?"

She shot him a look.

"Mama, Daddy said—"

"I heard." She ground the butt into the ashtray, adjusted her headscarf and looked, out towards the scrub pines and billboards. "Let your sister use her imagination. She can draw how she likes."

At least she hadn't said it was dumb to draw pictures. Billy was being his usual self, making the two years between us seem like ten.

We'd been gone for several hours against Mama's wishes to stay home in front of the electric fan, the best way she knew to cope with sticky weather. Florida summers had never agreed with her. Sultry weather gave her headaches to the point of nausea, a scourge that kept her from being the mother she wanted to be.

"Hey look! Tarpon Springs, Sponge Capital of the World," Billy read the billboard.

Daddy steered toward a parking place near the sponge dock. Mama sighed. The last thing she needed was another cleaning utensil. She used a large yellow sponge to clean the bath tub every other day, bending and stretching over the porcelain that didn't look dirty. I never wanted to touch the sponge, not so much because it was unclean but for fear that something creepy was lurking inside. Wasps might buzz out of the honeycomb holes with their stingers poised like hovering hypodermics. I'd been kissed by a wasp on the lip once, or so Mama said. "That old fellow gave you a smacker." The stinger poison had sent me screaming for the better part of an hour. It was the first summer I could remember, when we still lived in Texas. Mama split open one of her cigarettes to make a tobacco plaster, but tasting those flaky brown bits made me gag.

We piled out of the car and sauntered to the gift shops. Freshly harvested sponges baked on vendors' tables: delicate finger sponges, frilly baskets and tough wools.

"Catch." Billy tossed a round sponge toward me. I ducked. The oblong ball bounced its way across the concrete.

"Fraidy cat. It's not alive."

Daddy put his hands on his hips. "Son, pick that up and put it back."

Billy sniffed it and made a face. "It doesn't smell dead." He shuffled over to the counter and did as he was told, but he poked at more sponges piled in bins and buckets.

"Do sponges swim like fish?" I asked.

"They aren't fish," Daddy said. "They stay put on the ocean floor. Divers have to go get them. In the old days, they held their breath."

He pointed to a life-size mannequin wearing a diver's suit a hundred times more bulky than the mermaid suits at Weeki Wachee. I imagined holding my breath long enough to fetch a sponge head first. It was a lot of trouble to go to for a scrub brush. Her arms folded across her chest as her fingers tapped rhythm on her forearms. She hadn't wanted to go on the outing in the first place. Sundays mornings were for church, she said, and Sunday afternoons for reading the Bible.



"Then consider this calling on the mermaids," Daddy said. It was only after a promise of a seafood dinner did she give in, though the only food we'd seen so far that day was a fish sandwich.

I busied myself with a display of shiny tiger clams. Some were packaged inside of the other and covered in plastic to be sold as a set. The smaller ones would make perfect dishes for my Barbie doll while the colorful bits of coral might turn into something else if I thought hard enough. Elena, my Cuban friend, didn't own a Barbie, so she helped think up accessories for mine. Once we removed the plastic holder from an olive jar and declared it was a coat rack. Another time we stripped the band from her father's cigar. Elena said it could be a doll's crown, though my Barbie wasn't a princess and didn't need one.

A sallow-skinned man poked his head out the door and sized up Mama. "May I interest you in something, ma'am?"

"Ask Mr. Tour Guide." Mama pointed toward Daddy in his khaki slacks and rust-colored crew cut. Like me, he had freckles to fill in the parts of his skin that weren't pink when we got sunburned.

Daddy looked over at us. "You kids want anything?"

It was a signal to think fast. Billy blurted that he'd like a tiger clam and of course I wanted the package of shells. Mama, upset that we were taking so long, slammed the passenger door.

The man asked Daddy if he was in the service, which of course he was more than happy to admit. They talked Air Force until Daddy told both of us to take our stuff to the cash register.

Mama's fuse had burned to the nub by the time we got back to the car. Her cheeks flushed, she held her forehead in one hand and fanned herself with a roadmap. She didn't look up until Daddy handed her a small paper bag. "For you, Dear Heart."

"Gale, you shouldn't waste money—"

"Just open it, but be careful. It's a fragile thing, you see."

Her anger appeared to evaporate as she unfolded the tissue paper. Inside was a perfect disc with a folded piece of paper titled *The Legend of the Sand Dollar*. She examined the sugar-white object with the outline of a cross and Jesus's pierce marks like crucifix pictures in the Bible.

Mama read the note attached. "If the sand dollar is broken, tiny white doves will fall out."

"Is that true?" I asked. "There really are little birds in there? How do they breathe?"

"There's one way to find out," Daddy pretended to grab the shell from Mama's grasp, but she slapped him away. "Not on your life, Bastard."

I'd never heard her call him that crass name before, but I remembered the moment that split the time when I knew everything was all right before it wasn't.

Daddy turned suddenly solemn, shifted the car into reverse.

We never did have our seafood dinner like he promised. Not that day or any of the days that followed. Something uneven had shifted at the sponge docks. It had flown out and stung us all.



The Deacon and the Rattlesnake

by Maggie Romigh

The Lawsons lived in a white doublewide trailer on the most desolate acre of soil I ever saw in South Georgia. The long narrow lot was fenced on three sides with barbed wire. The center part of the lot was beaten to brown dirt by their car and by the bare feet of their three children, all under seven years old. Foot-high weeds and tall dead grasses filled with thistles and stickers formed a U-shape around the fence perimeter. It was the first time I'd ever seen a yard without any green in it. Even the weeds were dead and brown.

My father was a Methodist minister, a circuit rider, and the Lawsons were members of one of the five small churches that comprised Daddy's circuit. The summer I was fifteen, Daddy got me a job babysitting for them.

Mrs. Lawson worked during the day; Mr. Lawson worked night shift and slept during the day in the back room of the doublewide. My job was simply to keep the kids out of trouble, keep them quiet so their dad could sleep, and feed them lunch. They weren't any trouble. The kids had obviously learned to be self-sufficient. Though they were only five, six, and seven years old, they rarely needed or wanted my attention. They played quietly together and seemed happiest if I stayed out of their private games.

Because Mrs. Lawson worked a full-time job, beyond caring for her husband and children, she never had time to keep her house clean the way I had been taught a house should be. I was uncomfortable relaxing in a house where dust coated the furniture, the bathtub was gray instead of white, Kool-Aid stains left the floor feeling tacky, piles of dirty laundry overflowed the hampers, and dirty dishes sat in the sink. Besides, I was bored. Daytime television consisted of *As the World Turns*, *The Price is Right*, and *Shake 'n Bake* and Tide commercials. We lived far away from the library; I didn't have money to buy books, and I had long since read every book and magazine in my own house and in theirs. So along with my paid babysitting duties, I threw in for free each day a few hours of housecleaning services. I scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom sinks and the bathtub, washed sheets and remade the beds, dusted furniture, and swept and mopped floors.

One day, I washed and dried a load of towels. When I went to put them away, I found the linen closet in the bathroom an absolute mess. Sheets and towels were shoved onto the shelves with only rudimentary folding. There was no order: sheets and towels and tablecloths tangled together on the same shelves so that when I pulled a single sheet out, a half dozen towels and several napkins fell onto the floor. I decided to refold all the linens and organize the closet.

Starting with the bottom shelves, I pulled out sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths, towels, and washcloths and folded them all neatly. I organized the sheets according to size and color, stacked everything neatly on the bathroom counter and started on the next shelf. When I pulled everything out of the top shelf, I noticed a stack of magazines in the back of the closet, fifteen to twenty of them. Delight ran through me. Reading material! I'd have something new to read! But what I found was not what I expected.

The magazines were *Playboy* and *Hustler*. I'd heard my older brother talk about dirty magazines like this, but I'd never seen them before. I locked myself into the baby blue formica bathroom and pulled out two of the magazines, careful to remember exactly where they'd been placed on the stack. I hurriedly finished folding the linens and organized them on the shelves. Then I sat on the toilet lid and went through each magazine page by page.

The first magazine I opened was a *Playboy*. I studied the photos of nude women and marveled at their beauty. They were nearly naked, but they were draped with white silk or lying on ruby red satin sheets. The soft lighting and lush settings caught the women in moments of romantic desire. They lay in seductive poses that showed their breasts and beautiful asses, but they always kept that mysterious triangle between their legs covered with a thigh or a bit of drapery. A throbbing in my groin surprised me. I wasn't supposed to get turned on looking at naked women, was I? But then they were so beautiful. I supposed that kind of beauty would affect anyone. It didn't mean I wanted them. It just meant I appreciated them, right? Maybe I just wanted to be like them.



The second magazine was a Hustler. The women were not as beautiful in this magazine, and the photos were not romantic. The women wore leather or nothing. They lay with their legs spread apart, or stood with one black leather booted foot on the floor and the other hiked up on a Harley. They didn't hide anything, and there was no seductiveness or mystery in their poses. They were tough, raunchy, and a little frightening. I preferred the women in the Playboy.

But I masturbated with the Hustler women. I stared into their cunts and wondered how they could be brazen enough to pose like that. I felt aroused by their wickedness, fascinated by their sinfulness. They opened a door in me to a feeling I'd never known before. Only years later could I identify that feeling as lust.

After that, the pattern of my babysitting days changed. In the morning, I'd hurry through the chores that had become mine by habit. Then after the kids had eaten the alphabet soup and peanut butter sandwiches I made for lunch, I'd rush them outside to play and lock myself in the bathroom with the magazines.

Each day I'd go deeper into the pile, always careful to remember exactly which magazine came from which place and how it was positioned in the stack. I removed each magazine carefully and replaced it exactly as I found it. But after three weeks, I began to realize that there was no order to the stack; no one would notice if they were misplaced because no one knew how the magazines had been placed. It became evident that Mr. Lawson reached blindly into the closet, grabbed whatever was at hand, and shoved it back quickly whenever he thought he might be discovered. So I stopped worrying about whether the magazines were in the right order.

One day Darlene, a girl I knew from one of Daddy's churches, came to spend the day with me while I babysat. I had been wondering if other girls my age were as interested in these kinds of magazines as I was. I wanted to know if I was strange or just regular. So I waited until the afternoon, when the children were out playing in the yard. I was washing dishes and Darlene was sitting on a stool across the kitchen counter watching me.

"You know what?"

I waited until I was sure I had her attention.

"One day when I was puttin towels in the closet, I found a whole stack of dirty magazines."

"Here?" Her wide eyes and raised eyebrows told me she was intrigued.

I tried to sound casual. "Yeah. In the linen closet in the bathroom."

"Did you look at em?"

"Yeah." Like a fisherman I waited for the hook to set.

She leaned across the beige Formica countertop and stared at me. "What are they like?"

I faked a yawn that became real. "You wanna see?"

"Uh huh." Her eyes had lit up, and her smile stretched, even as she bit her lip.

I walked to the front door and looked out to check on the kids. They were sitting together in the center of the dirt yard intent on a game of "house." I heard the eldest say, "Bad girl! I'm going to have to send you to bed without your supper." I giggled. I was indeed a bad girl!

I closed and locked the front door. Then I went into the bathroom and brought out the stack of magazines. Darlene was perched on the edge of the avocado green and tan plaid sofa, and I dumped the magazines on the laminated coffee table in front of her. For over an hour, we thumbed through the magazines and lay them opened out on the coffee table, on the plaid sofa, on the avocado carpet, to compare our favorites from each.

"This one's real pretty. I wish I had long legs like that."

"I wish I had hair like that."

"What color do you call that anyway? Auburn?"

"Look at her lips! They look all pouty." Darlene pursed her lips and tried to imitate the model. She looked like a goldfish.

"Do you think she really likes big dicks?" I asked.

"Well, she said she did. But maybe that was just so she'd get her picture in the magazine. Have you ever seen a dick?"

"Only a little boy's when I was five. You ever seen one?"



She shook her head.

"They're really weird looking. Funny. I don't understand why men are so proud of em."

Darlene's interest in the women didn't seem the same as mine, but it was still fun to share the sin of looking at the dirty magazines.

Just as we were opening the last magazine in the stack, there was a knock on the door. I opened the door a sliver and peeked out. The three kids were standing on the aluminum steps.

I frowned to discourage them. "What?"

"There's a snake out here."

That was not what I expected. "Oh. . . . Wait a minute." I turned to find Darlene right behind me.

"It's probably just a rat snake," she said.

"Yeah."

"We can kill it with a hoe or something."

I shrugged. "Okay."

I stepped outside, and the kids backed down from the steps. Darlene followed me. In the toolshed behind the trailer, I grabbed a shovel and Darlene picked up a hoe. The kids led us over to the fence on the left side of the yard.

There, coiled and ready to strike, was the biggest rattlesnake I'd ever seen. He was enormous! At the thickest part, his body was as big around as my thigh. His rattles quivered and sang—a castanet calling for a wild dance. I stood dumbfounded, unable to move.

Darlene said, "I don't think we can kill that with a hoe."

I turned to look at her, amazed she could be so calm. She stepped back, and, when I didn't move, she grabbed my arm and jerked me back. My paralysis broke. I looked down at the three tiny hands clutching my shorts hem. I picked up the smallest girl, carried her to the far side of the yard with the older two children following me. I put the five-year-old down, and I knelt in front of all the kids.

"That snake is bad. Very dangerous. It's poisonous. It can kill you. So don't any of you go near it, okay?"

Three wide-eyed towheads bobbed in unison.

"We've gotta get a gun and shoot it. I'm gonna go wake your daddy up. You stay here. Don't move."

Again the heads bobbed.

I pulled Darlene with me toward the front door. "I'm gonna put the magazines up and then wake Mr. Lawson. You keep an eye on the snake, but don't get too close, okay?" She walked back toward the fence, and I reached for the doorknob.

It was locked!

I tried again, but it definitely was locked. We'd locked ourselves out, and the nudie magazines were scattered all over the living room! I ran around and tried the back door, but it was locked too. I rushed back to Darlene.

"Holy shit!" I whispered to Darlene. "What are we gonna do?"

"What's wrong?" She half turned to me, keeping her eyes on the rattler that was still poised to strike. He seemed just as intent on keeping his eyes on her.

I grabbed her arm and shook her. "We're locked out!"

"Oh, God!" She sucked in air, and her breath came out in one big huff. "The magazines!"

"Daddy's going to kill me! Hell, forget Daddy. Mother's going to kill me!"

For a full two minutes, we stood, grasping each other's arms and staring in horror—first at the snake, then at the trailer, then at each other. The kids stood stock still where I had left them on the other side of the yard, watching us with wide eyes, waiting to see how we would save them from the bad snake.

Finally, I moved. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do. You go over by the door and grab it as soon as he comes out. Don't let it close. I'm gonna stand under the bedroom window, pound on the wall, and scream bloody murder. Maybe I can get him running so fast he won't see the magazines."



"You think it'll work?"

"It's the only chance we got."

Darlene grabbed my arm. "Wait."

I hissed. "You wanna wait 'til their mother gets home?"

"Oh, shit." She sighed. "Okay. Wait til I get by the door."

I watched her run. When she reached the door, she turned. I mouthed the word, "Ready?"

She nodded.

With both fists, I began pounding on the metal walls of the doublewide and screaming as loud as I could, "Help! Rattlesnake! Bring the gun! Hurry! Rattlesnake! Get the gun! Rattlesnake! Rattlesnake!"

I heard Mr. Lawson hit the floor running and slam open the closet door to get his gun. As his big feet pounded the floor of the hallway, I ran the length of the trailer with him. He burst out the front door, shotgun in hand, looking like Hoss Cartwright: befuddled and blustery yet brave. I led him close to the fence and pointed, "There."

Mr. Lawson stepped back two feet then raised his shotgun and sighted down the barrel. I turned and raced into the house. Darlene was already on her knees in the living room, gathering the magazines from the floor.

POW!

The shotgun blast scared us both. We grabbed the Playboys from the sofa and shoved them under the plaid cushions.

POW!

I cleared the coffee table with one sweep, and Darlene pushed the Hustlers underneath the couch.

POW!

We jumped up, looked around once to be sure the room was clear.

POW!

We ran into the yard.

Darlene and I were standing innocently behind Mr. Lawson when he lowered the shotgun and turned around.

"Is it dead?" I gasped, completely out of breath.

"I think so." He turned to his children. "You kids okay?"

Three wide-eyed towheads nodded in unison.

"Okay," he yelled. "Don't touch that snake you hear? It can still kill you."

"Look!" Darlene pointed toward the snake. It had uncoiled its full six foot, seven inch length and was slithering away.

Mr. Lawson raised the gun again.

POW! The snake paused, shivered, and then began slowly moving away.

POW! The snake shook its thirteen rattles once more, then it was still.

My heart was pounding as if I had fought the snake in hand to fang combat. I took a deep breath and smiled at the man. "I'm sure glad you were here. I was scared that snake might bite one of the kids."

He looked dazed. I wondered if he was still half asleep when he ran through the living room. I sure hoped so.

For weeks afterward, I waited for Daddy to call me aside to talk to me. I just knew Mr. Lawson was waiting for an appropriate moment to tell Daddy about me looking at his magazines. The fear built inside of me, and the punishment I knew would come grew huge and dark in my mind.

Finally, when I was so sick with worry that I could no longer sleep at night, I told my brother Doug about it. He laughed, "Don't you worry. Daddy ain't ever gonna find out."

"But I just know Mr. Lawson saw those magazines."

"Yeah? Well it don't matter if he did. See, he's a deacon of the church. He can't tell Daddy about you without gettin himself in trouble. He ain't ever gonna tell nobody."

I hadn't thought of that! My heart rose from a pit deep beneath my left kidney and floated up into an airy space within my chest. That's when I decided Mr. Lawson wouldn't mind if I borrowed just a couple of those magazines to keep under my bed. Maybe one of each kind.



The Glasses

by Susan Cushman

"I just can't get my glasses clean." My eighty-year-old mother was riding with me to do some shopping when she pulled her glasses off and held them up to the windshield for a better view of the smudges.

"Here, I've got a special cloth for cleaning lenses," I offered.

She fumbled with the cloth for a few minutes, but her hands wouldn't cooperate. We stopped at a traffic light and I took the glasses and tried to clean them for her.

"Mom, these are all scratched up. In fact, these are your old glasses. Where are the new ones I got you?"

"Oh, I think they fell under my bed."

"Well, when we get back to your apartment, I'll look for them."

"Oh, no! You couldn't possibly fit under the bed. There's only a tiny space there and you are much too big."

Ignoring her usual comment about my size, I pressed on. "But I could at least see if they're there, and maybe fish them out with a yardstick or something."

"No, there just isn't room under that bed, I promise you."

"Well, I'll still look for them when we get back."

Mom was in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease when I moved her into an assisted living apartment in February of 2006. About once a month I would drive down for a visit, and usually Mom would want to go out for the day. We often started at her favorite department store at a nearby mall.

"I need some new blouses, but I can never remember what I already have."

"Look at this one, Mom. It's purple—your favorite color. It would look nice with your black slacks."

"What size is it?" She squinted at the tag. "I can barely read the tag. Can you clean my glasses for me?" She started to take off her glasses.

"I already cleaned them for you, in the car on the way to the mall, Mom."

"Well, you didn't do a very good job. Clean them again."

"It won't help, Mom. Those are your old glasses and they're just too scratched up. We'll find your new ones when we get back to your apartment later. Why don't you try on this blouse now?"

"Oh, I'm not in the mood to shop. Let's go to lunch."

"But we just got here. It will only take a few minutes to try on one blouse."

Mom was already making her way through the crowded aisles of clothing towards the exit. I hung the blouse back on the rack and followed her out the door, through the parking lot and back to the car.

We ate lunch at McAllister's Deli. As we stood in line looking at the menu board on the wall, she squinted again, and then took off her glasses and began to try to clean them with the edge of her blouse.

"These glasses are so dirty I can't read the menu!"

"They're scratched, Mom. We're going to look for your new ones when we get back to your apartment later, remember?"

"Oh, these are fine." She put the glasses back on and stared at the wall again. "What are you having?"

"I was thinking about the bacon and cheese spud. Would you like to share one? You know they really use two potatoes for each order."

"But I only want one!"

"Yes, Mom, that's why we're going to share an order. That way we'll each have one potato."

"That'll be fine. Oh, and I want one of these cookies." She fingered the large Macadamia nut cookies next to the cash register. "We can share it—it's big enough for an army."



After lunch, I took her to get a manicure and pedicure. Sitting across from her and reading fashion magazines while a Vietnamese guy did her nails, I held my breath, hoping she wouldn't embarrass me. And then she started up.

"This is my little girl." She pointed to me. "She lives in Memphis. She took my car away and sold my house. She comes to visit me about once a year."

I smiled at the young women in the chairs next to her, fighting back the urge to defend myself. One of them gave me a knowing wink, and I nodded my gratitude. And then the young man doing Mom's nails said, "Now, Mrs. Johnson, your daughter brought you in here just a few weeks ago to get your nails done, didn't she?"

"Oh, I don't know. She lives in Memphis. Ouch!"

"Sorry, I didn't realize your toe was tender."

"Well, it is. Something's wrong with it. I've been meaning to get someone to look at it."

The nail on the big toe of her right foot was thick and green with fungus. I got up from my chair and walked over to the recliner where Mom sat.

"Mom, I took you to the doctor last month and she told us what to do about it. Remember? I got you some Vicks Vapo-Rub to put on it twice a day. I wrote you a note and taped it to the Vicks bottle by your bed. Have you been putting it on your toe?"

The giggles the other customers had been trying to stifle just couldn't be held in any longer. So I said to the room, "I know it sounds ridiculous, but Mom's internist told us that several of her patients have had success using Vicks on toe fungus."

The pedicure guy adjusted his surgical gloves and finished working on Mom's toenails. A few minutes later, as we were leaving the nail place, with Mom wearing a pair of disposable flip-flops, she looked at her feet and said, "What's wrong with the nail on that big toe?"

"You've got a fungus, Mom."

"Oh, dear! Is there anything we can do about it?"

"We can try putting Vicks Vapo-Rub on it. I've got some for you back at your apartment."

"Vicks? Really? Well, I'll try anything once."

Back in the car, we drove through a neighborhood that had been hit by tornadoes a couple of weeks earlier. Mom said, "I think I saw this on the news, but I didn't realize how bad it was."

"Me, either. Wow—look at that huge tree completely uprooted over there. And all those houses with blue tarps on the roofs where trees fell on them. My goodness."

At this Mother took off her glasses and held them up to the window. "I can't really see them well. My glasses are so dirty. Do you have something I can clean them with?"

"We already cleaned them, Mom. They're scratched. Those are your old glasses. We need to find your new ones when we get back to your apartment."

"What new ones?"

"The ones you think might have fallen under your bed."

"Oh, don't worry about it, these are fine."

Back at Mom's assisted living facility, we made our way through the lobby, where she introduced me to all her friends. Again. Finally, back in her apartment, I dropped to my knees to look under her bed for the glasses, ignoring Mother's protests.

"You can't see anything under there, Susan."

"I can see fine, Mom, but there's nothing under here."

I began to search her bedside table, and finally the bookcase headboard behind her pillows.

"Here they are, Mom!"



I offered her the glasses and waited for her to share my excitement.

She looked at the shiny glasses, then at me, and said, “Oh—that’s okay. I like my old ones better.” Then she turned and walked away.

I exhaled loudly, placed her new glasses on her bedside table, and followed her into her living room, where we both sat down to watch the birds on the feeder I had installed outside her window.

“Look, Mom! There’s a red bird!”

“Where?” She strained to see the cardinal, took off her glasses and began wiping them with a Kleenex. “I can’t see anything—these glasses are so dirty!”

Biting my tongue, I picked up the remote control and turned on her television. The Braves were playing. The TV was only a few feet from her chair, so she could see the fans waving their tomahawks in the air and hear them cheering. John Smoltz was on the pitcher’s mound, but Greg Maddux was Mom’s favorite pitcher.

“Strike him out, Greg!” Mom smiled at me through her scratched-up glasses.

I thought about correcting her and trying to get her to wear her new glasses. But as I watched her joyfully waving her imaginary tomahawk in the air, I just smiled back, looked at the TV, and cheered, “Get ’em Greg!”



Ode to Wavy Hair

by Paige Gantt

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, I don't want to come back as hair.

I've pretty much decided that I know why my hair is wavy. It's because of the lack of direction that emanates from the brain cells beneath, as their roots wallow in the muck. The electrical currents must constantly synapse in opposite directions as each misaligned thought becomes a permanent representation of my inner self to the world. Obviously they can't wait to get the heck out of my head and are forced to run for the surface. Confused by the lack of direction, they scatter in all directions until they burst through the inner shell to greet the world, bewildered, yet free from the internal drama, only to be mangled again daily by bristles, chemicals, heat and frustration.

You really can't blame them for feeling abused, they were born in chaos and will live in torture until they are pulled, broken, ripped, or fall from my head. Not to mention being submitted to the numerous 'I think I want to go blonder' chemicals that attack them monthly. Imprisoned in metal foil, the chemicals bake into the core of their being under the heat, and wash away any semblance of the natural God-given essence, leaving them utterly devoid of any identity.

They truly do not know their selves.

It is quite possible that once the natural is removed that nothing but the fake remains, or, the alternate identity. The one that faces the world until the real one can be left alone long enough to find its shape, accept its natural demeanor, and know its place in the world. The alternate would have no more support to function. It would have to attach itself to another victim, in another chair, draped beneath the throat gripping black cape.

The brain muck ever synapses its way to larger and larger hair styles as the experts call for straighter and straighter, unsynapsed, shellacked concoctions of fancy. The support for the fancy becomes a larger drain on the wallet. I contemplate owning a pair of shears. Could I still illicit the same whistled responses from the male population should I skin my head, or reveal my true identity?

One day, the wavy strands will be released from their internal grip, and be set free to roam the world without the constraints of personality disorders intent on maligning their natural place. Their true personality will burst forth and claim the identity they have craved since puberty realigned their purpose.

Would that I were that hair.



The First Time

Duluth, Georgia, 2009

by Joanna Grant

the first time my mother set the back yard on fire

she said it was an accident
we all believed it
she certainly believed it

a little too much gas
a change in the wind
one flaming leap

out of the leaf pile
onto the stacked cord wood

the second time now the fire leapt

burning her arms
singing her throat
melting the siding
the neighbors running
the fire reaching

for the canopy overhanging
the wooden deck leading

inside to the papers the pictures
the school certificates
the bills the policies the memories

well, we all started to wonder



Things Burn

by Wendy Taylor Carlisle

Because everything was sex then,
she called all looks to herself:
men after a night of drinking,
boys just past the ball field shout,
the yielding dust in corners.

Because her hair was a red cape
the street filled with bulls.

Because things burn, our skin
was permeable, heat passing
between us, while the sun
crawled into the world's basement
to spend another short night.

Because he was swelter,
my dark bloomed neon and sweat.

Because rain is always present
in the hollow bones
of the dead and turns the ground
to paste on my boots
I shelter in empty rooms.

Because I touch myself then, i find
a hidden knot of madness, the fire's other flame.



Painting the living rooms before her fiftieth birthday

by Laura Secord

a blue that is totally honest.
walls with the fruit of the dragon.

the past fifteen years stripped,
scraped, covered, transformed-
her only art at this shift
 of half a century

pile after pile of paint chips and
 plaster sand from 1924
swept and gathered in paper bags
that bulge with the weight of the old.

raw ceilings primed with a steel rod
that extends twelve feet above
and leaves its mark in blood bruise patches
 down her belly and thighs

a frank blue rolled over tiny poems
and painted-on drawings of crying eyes,
 again and again, until she's has sky.

then the apricot nectar,
cut in each corner,
round each door and sill

in the sun of afternoon, she covers
words of memory under the first coat,
words of longing under the second skin.
 her brushes sticky at day's end.
a whole season sneaks by under her efforts,
leaves fall and frost whitens grasses.

she takes the color of blood mixed with roses,
and hands thick with dripping, she slaps each inch of wall
til it grows into sunset sandstone womb light, and
 the mist that is left after dragon blaze.



and where is the meaning? somewhere in each coating,
applied with the hands of a woman in prime-
at the heart of her magic, doing time with what
structures surround her

doing time as time passes for her,
doing her time at this time
with a blue that is totally honest, and the nectar from fruit of the dragon
on the walls
round the cusp
of her time



Ode to a Bear: Part II

"He's talking about a girl," he said.

"He had to talk about something," McCaslin said.

—Faulkner's Go Down, Moses

by Andrea Witzke-Leavey

You said it will be just the thing we need.
I had my doubts: you knew I hated camping.
We left at five am in gray twilight.
You took my hand and led me down the paths
to places where interruptions and children
do not exist. You set up camp and said,
You watch for bears. I dropped my book between
my knees and peered into the dense, dark trees.

That night we slept curled in one sleeping bag.
I dreamed of Ben, saw Boon's knife slash his throat.
Lion was ripped to shreds. But in this dream
the bear did not die; he moved to forest's edge
and turned to stare with yellowed eyes. In fear,
I reached for you, but you were no longer there.



On Screamer Mountain

by Kyes Stevens

Outside white pines contaminate
the mountainside, a Carolina
chickadee works the cat into a frenzy
a film of pale yellow pollen coats
books stacked on the sill
the black dog snores as green leaves
shuffle in the breeze
I want to see the black bears
who pat at the bird feeders,
how they work for such small food



Memory, Age 3

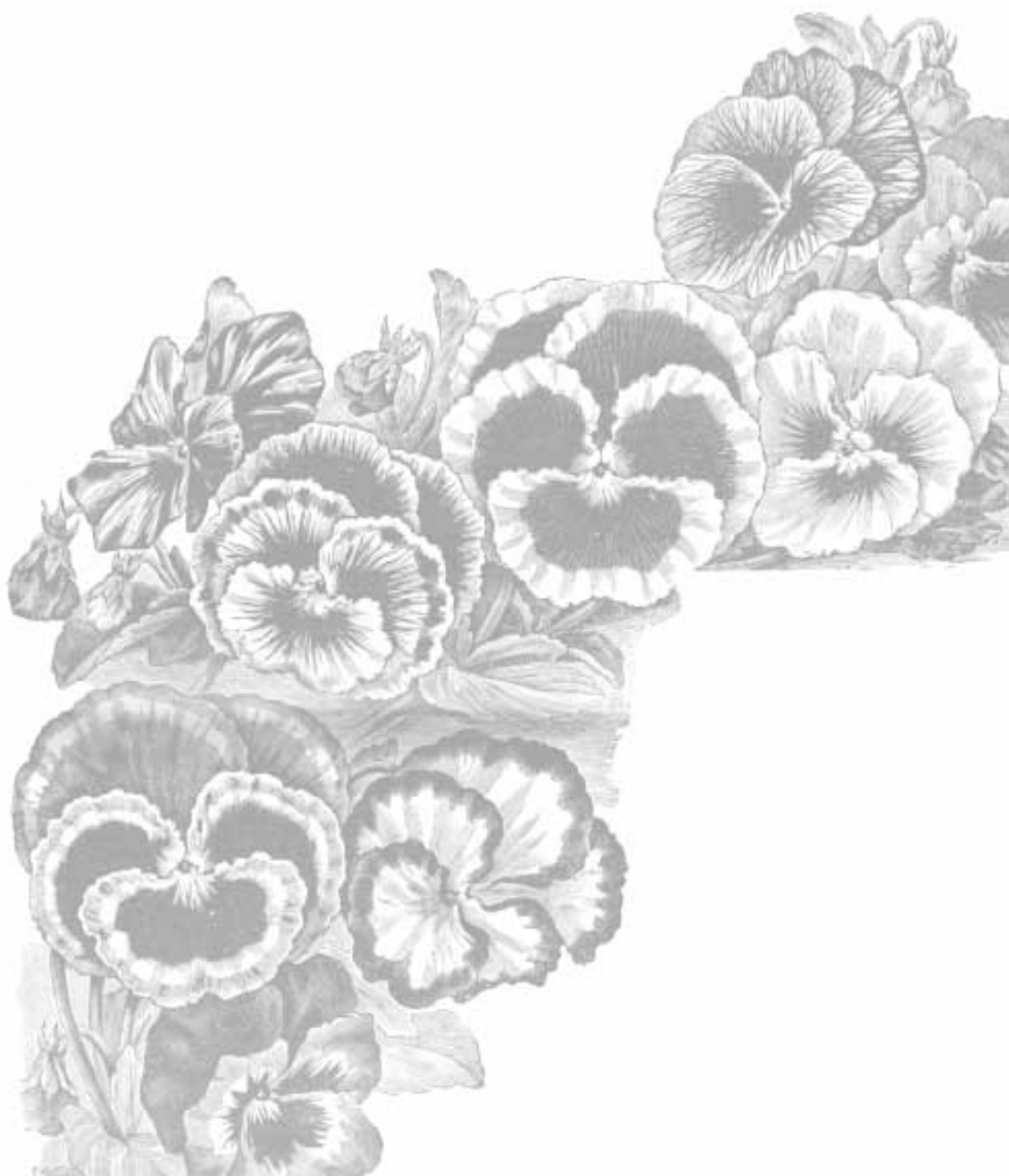
by Lesley Doyle

My father found the infant rabbit while mowing
and brought it into the kitchen to show me.

He knelt there on the cracked linoleum,
smelling of gasoline and fescue,

lifting up the shell of his palms
as if it were love itself he were offering,

a dark eyed, shivering thing
that only wanted to be let loose.





Plainview Estates

by Crystal Goodman

"Redwater? I's born in Redwater," Freida Mae interrupts. She sits on the eggplant colored Victorian-style couch next to Opal Sue wearing gaudy jewelry, including three necklaces and a pair of earrings that look like bunches of grapes with fake emeralds glaring. Thanks to the beauticians of Plainview Estates, her reddish hair is curled, and none of her true gray is showing.

"Where's Redwater?" Opal Sue tries to enter the conversation. Her purple-gray hair and lack of jewelry make her look very plain next to Freida Mae.

"An hour from Texarkana," Linda replies from the green plastic chair that sits adjacent to the couch and next to Freida Mae. The two act as if they are in an exclusive club where Opal Sue is not welcomed, but they don't mean to. Attention is hard to find.

"I used to live in Texarkana, but I lived on the Texas side. There was this postcard that had a picture of a girl standing on the Texas side of Texarkana with her donkey on the Arkansas side. It said, 'I'm in Texas and my ass is in Arkansas,'" Freida Mae says with a smirk of her bright pink lips. She wears that color of lipstick that only old women or 80s glam rock bands wear—a kind of Pepto Bismol pink.

The two women laugh as Opal Sue looks straight ahead with a smile.

"I knew a Hester and James Desoto from Texarkana." Linda sounds pleased that she can keep the conversation going. "They had a daughter who moved to Redwater."

"Redwater? Where's that?" Opal Sue has already forgotten, and she looks puzzled as she asks the other two, her frail hands folded gently in her lap. She wears red elastic-waist pants and a white sweater. She is quite small next to Freida Mae, who has always been larger than life.

"They were a nice couple. Both gone now. Most of my friends from Redwater and Texarkana are gone now," Linda looks down sadly, her face is very wrinkled, she's almost 85, but her eyes are bright—the green color of a glass Coca-Cola bottle.

"Where's Redwater? Opal insists.

"An hour from Texarkana," Freida Mae says in the way you would answer a small child who you are trying to ignore. This type of answering without listening can really get parents in trouble.

"Oh," Opal Sue looks blankly satisfied.

The pale beige walls of the lobby are covered with paintings of flower gardens and gaudy window dressings. On the side tables, there are flower arrangements full of mauve and blue flowers stuffed into silver vases. It's like 1785 collided with 1985 in the décor used to accent the waiting area of the nicest assisted living facility in Plainview, TX.

The room suddenly lights up with a flash of lighting, and a loud rumble of thunder shakes the walls.

"Ooo. Did you hear that thunder?" Freida Mae asks as she looks from Opal Sue to Linda. "I'm scared of storms. When I was a little girl we had a storm cellar."

"I wonder what time it is?" Opal Sue asks as a nurse wearing white scrubs featuring purple frogs walks by. She pushes a gray cart that carries little plastic cups of pills. Her sandy blonde hair is teased big, and she wears thick glasses that rest on her wide nose.

"Miss Opal Sue, do you want me to get you ready for bed now?" The nurse asks as she hears the question. Her heart melts for the old woman, seeing that she can't mentally keep up with her two friends.

"No," she replies. "I think I'll wait a little longer."



I sure am scared of that storm," Freida Mae pipes up to the nurse. "I wish we had Mr. Arnold's number so we could call him if something happened."

"Don't worry. I have his number if we need it," the nurse answers with a smile as she turns to face Freida Mae.

"Well, I sure wished he'd give it to us," Freida Mae says. She thinks she is being sly by asking for it without asking.

"What is today?" Opal Sue touches Freida Mae's sleeve as she asks the question.

The sound of thunder rolls miles away.

"I love the thunder. I'm going out to our lake house tonight," the nurse states matter-of-factly as she turns to look out the front door at the storm. She thinks her brave attitude will calm the ladies without having to get the manager on the phone.

"Did you hear that?" Freida Mae shakes her head as she asks Linda, who has been distracted with a needlepoint that she started working on once she noticed the nurse was not there to talk to her.

"Hear what?" Linda looks up.

"She's going to stay out on the lake tonight," Freida Mae replies like a little kid telling on an older sibling.

"You're going to the lake?" Linda's mouth falls open.

"Yep. I'll be fine. I enjoy it."

"I wonder what today is. Is it Wednesday?" Opal Sue insists on finding out what day it is, but the women don't even turn to face her. They are too engrossed by the stupidity of anyone who would go out on a lake in a thunderstorm. Freida Mae entertains asking the nurse if she also takes a bath when she's having "her monthly."

"It's Friday," the nurse says as she grabs Opal Sue's hand, but she doesn't look at her.

"Huh?" the lack of eye contact causes Opal Sue to ask.

"Friday—today's Friday," the nurse replies as she looks down at Opal Sue and walks on down the hall.

"Good fishing in the rain, though," Freida Mae can't take being left out. "When I's a little girl, Daddy and me'd go out to our pond in the rain, and pull in so many fish."

"I sure wished there was a storm cellar here," Linda says trying to build off of Freida Mae, but she never had a pond, or much of a daddy. "I had a storm cellar at my brick house over on Maple Street."

"Maple Street?" Freida Mae asks as she recalls how run-down that neighborhood on Maple Street was when she first moved to Plainview.

"Hmm? Jonathan sold my house though, or just let those Mexicans move in, one. It's probably all torn up now," Linda says as she shakes her head with disgust as she thinks about the good-for-nothin' son who visits her one Sunday a month.

"We had a storm cellar in Redwater," Freida Mae replies looking over at Linda.

"Where?" Opal Sue asks.

"Redwater." Linda answers for Freida Mae.

"Oh."



Oyster Anxiety

by Ellen Ann Fentress

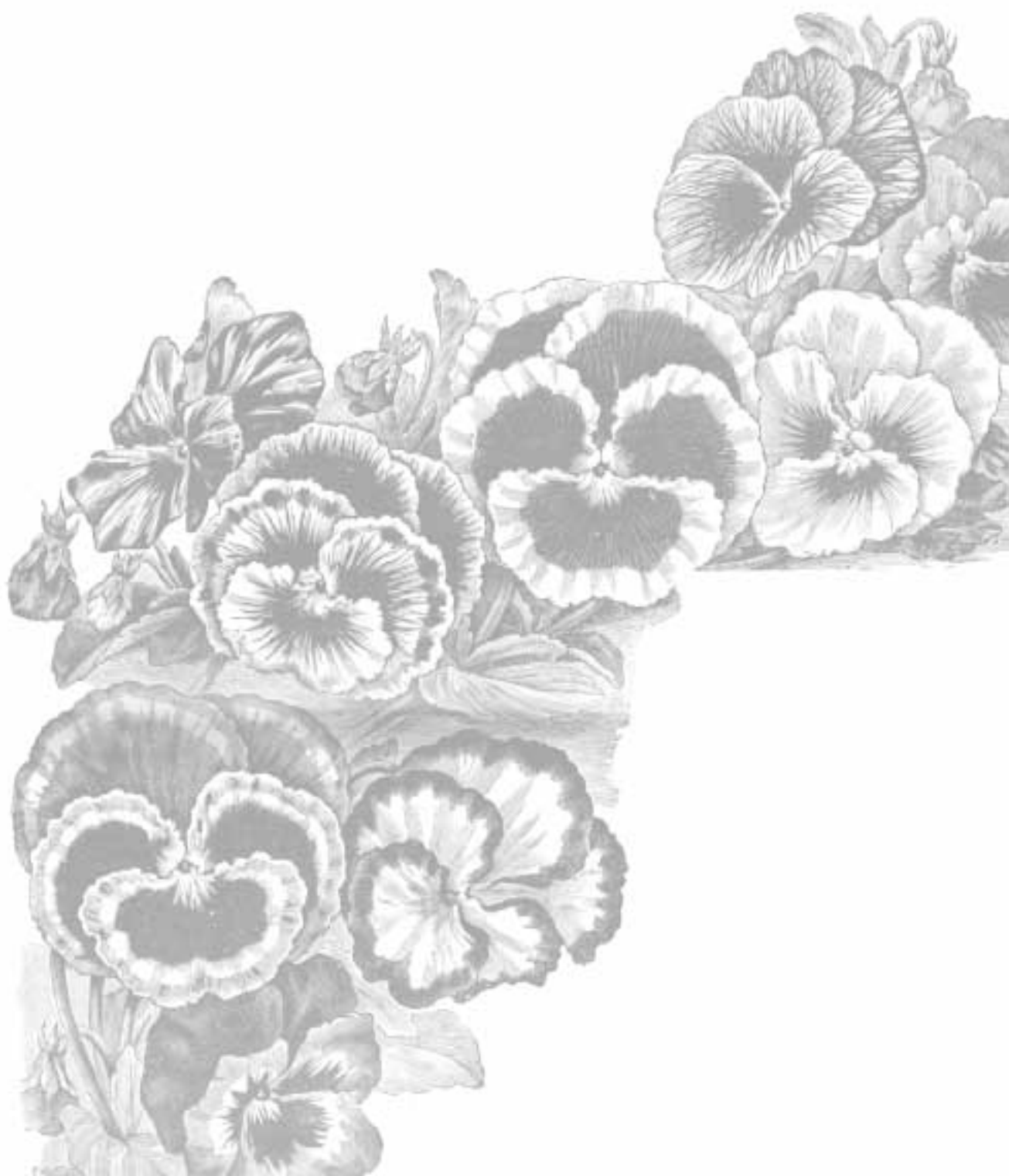
Due to the following line on Gulf oysters, I clipped a food article written by a reporter recently transplanted to the South: “they look like just the sorts of things people in other parts of the country would—and should—fear.” Squishy, raw, packed with pearls and—physical benefits—oysters are food for the body and for the neuroses. The reporter’s Freudian projection dripped from the oyster like horseradish and Tabasco. The writer blamed the poor oyster for her secret fright at the South and life in general, I suspect.

Actually, oysters aren’t the only oddity to set the minds of newcomers to the South racing. Once I took part in what I assumed was a nice, tame conversation about gardening with a woman newly resettled from New Jersey. The talk moved from daffodils to live oaks, then to that signature Spanish moss that dangles from oak limbs. She leaned closer. “When I moved down here, I found the moss threatening. I’m getting used to it now.” She had the same sincerity as if confiding she was rising above the fact that mummies keep jumping out of her new closet.

Neurotic projections are hardly modern. The French explorers along the Gulf were busy with theirs in the seventeenth century. In a Freud-worthy snit of suspicion, the French took one look at the hanging moss, and came to a unified conclusion. The moss’s peculiar swooping curls were ringers for the kinds of beards only ugly Spaniards would be low enough to sprout. The French named it Spanish moss in spiteful anti-tribute.

Then the Spaniards themselves dropped anchor along the Gulf. The moss’s looks unsettled them too, almost as much as the unease they harbored over their Gallic colonial competition. In fact, the more the Spanish entourage looked at the moss and then thought about the French and their revolting facial hair, the Spaniards could think of simply no better name for the creepy growth. *Como se llama?*—French Moss, of course.

Now back to the oyster. Katrina left oyster reefs covered with everything from silt to lumber to Mardi Gras beads. As the Gulf seafood industry woos its consumers back, it is up against plenty of suspicious minds unprepared to give its oysters a break. Oysters have always had to battle against projected fears, and now the skeptics add Katrina trauma to the list of reasons to be leery. Merely that Mardi Gras bead tidbit alone could keep the oyster wary away for years. What was going on with the beads? As new fodder for fear, oyster phobes now can add the thought of sleazy little underwater hurricane parties underway that fateful August 2005 day, with legions of slight hedonists in shells cavorting in wanton throw downs. It hardly comes as a surprise to the suggestible, that sordid image of oyster conduct during the storm: table-dancing, shot-drinking bad-girl bivalves, palm-sized marine versions of *Girls Gone Wild*, Cancun Edition. It’s an oyster season that has nothing to do with R months. In the sea of human neuroses, it’s always the month for oyster anxiety.





The Self-Consumer of My Woes*

by Sara Kay Rupnik

The First Gospel Church is full of mean-spirited folks, but I am not one of them. In spite of what you might hear. Before today's Sunday services, I take Mama's bone-handled carving fork from its special satin-lined case, and although I am sorely tempted, I leave its mate, the bone-handled carving knife, alone.

The fork fits to a T inside the designer knock-off bag Cousin Harriet gave me for my birthday. While I know in my heart of hearts that it is one of Harriet's castoffs, I love this bag beyond all reason. The orderly pleating around its creamy leather (well, likely not real leather) curves, the neat path of stitches that meander here and there and still manage to look purposeful, the bright silver (of course not real silver) beads that shape themselves into a sunburst pattern. Or might could be a moon. I put the King James smack on top of the fork and twist close the big silver clasp.

The bag drapes over my shoulder like the arm of a handsome man, and the sense of that fork swinging there next to my ribs brings back a nice memory of Mama serving Sunday dinner right here in this dining room. Her face is flushed from the heat of the kitchen and she can barely see through her steamed-up glasses, but she is smiling, proud as a princess to carry in her Haviland platter. She sets the roast, ringed by a moat of potatoes and carrots, in front of Daddy and then skedaddles back into the kitchen to fetch the gravy. Daddy's fingers, gold wedding band on the left hand and freemason ring on the right, wrap around the bone handles of the carving set, and he plunges them into Mama's lovely dinner.

I step out onto Stonewall Street, where the heat rises up from the earth in waves. A sweet moist wall that calms me down better than a shot from Daddy's whiskey decanter. Out of the goodness of my heart, I wave to old Mrs. Dupree, the bitch who stole Mama's gladiolus bulbs right out the back garden. It is Sunday after all and I must put my mind in a pure state. At the corner house that once belonged to Mrs. T. J. Samples, those little Mexican kids are hanging all over the place. Scrambling up the trellis where Mrs. Samples' roses once grew clear to the porch roof. Deep red blooms against a glazed confection of a house. Like Mama's divinity, that house was. Her best divinity with maraschino cherries.

I ignore that memory to concentrate on the style and beauty of my new purse. How very chic I must appear as I climb toward those mammoth double doors and thick white columns of the First Gospel. The usual gaggle of church-goers clusters at the top of the steps, but I see them as a flash of color and motion until Lyman Pettigrew steps forward to offer his hand. "Welcome now, Miz Beaudean. It's good to have you back at worship with us this morning."

"Thank you kindly," I say without coming to a dead stop.

He offers me a bulletin, his outstretched hand exposing a swath of wrist below his jacket sleeve. A fleshy, tanned, strip of skin that invites my imagination. In that second, beset by visions as vivid as life itself, I see two crimson dots widen into puddles and flow from his wrist to drip on the pristine toe of Cleo Jewell's designer pump. Cleo chatters at me as I pass. "Nice to see you, Lizzie. We are truly sorry for your loss."

I sit in the usual pew, the one my family has occupied since this church was built. The old church, founded by my ancestors, burned in 1924 when it was struck by lightning during a summer storm that came up from nowhere and vanished too quick to douse the flames. Sometimes I catch the scent of char and ash drifting up from beneath the floorboards and thick red carpet.

I study the bulletin, full of its usual meetings and choir practices and prayer requests, because if I raise my head someone is bound to look my way in altogether too cheerful a manner. I note that my own name, Elizabeth Ann Beaudean, remains on the list of prayer requests, even though Mama and Daddy have been dead for going on six weeks now.

When Eva Mae Griffin begins the Introit, I feel calmer, although the force of her fingers against the keys sets her chins



to wobbling in the most distracting manner. Then I notice her mouthing “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” as she plays. Singing quietly to herself, I could might tolerate, but the exaggerated motion of her silent mouth sets my nerves on edge. Quite unbidden, I imagine the fork tines lacing her bottom lip to her upper lip and how still and peaceful she would look then. Of course there would still be those chins, and the billowing of her choir robe sleeves as her fingers pounce on the keys.

I close my eyes and keep them closed through all the announcements, those same announcements, I might point out, that any soul could read for herself in the bulletin. Deacon John Barnhart does have a deep, soothing voice, and I rather enjoy floating in his dark basso vacuum for a spell. I press my purse to my midsection and cross my arms over it, holding it in place until the first hymn requires me to either stand and attempt to sing or to appear an invalid. I have never much cared for “The Church’s One Foundation,” but I swing my purse back to my shoulder and rise, gamely keeping time with the nod of my head. It is truly exhausting.

Reverend Bobby James has not been here at First Gospel all that long, so I have little opinion of him as yet. Cousin Harriet said he did a bang up job at the funeral service, keeping it short and sweet and managing not to offend any of the family. I myself was too distraught to attend.

The morning prayer is entirely too long and imploring for my liking. I lose track of who is sick and who has passed, and I am happy with the distraction of opening the clasp of my purse and reaching into its soft folds for my offering envelope. Unfortunately Roseanne Crittendon has volunteered to sing the offertory, a high-pitched piece made unrecognizable by her keening rendition. She looks directly at me as if to say, “see what talent I have, Lizzie Beaudean. See what a wonderful person I am.”

Believe it or not, high school is always with us.

Roseanne’s throat is pale, and with her chin raised up like that, it becomes a narrow canvas for two red punctures. Like the eyes of a bat, I imagine. Eyes that swell and glow before the entire pristine front of her summer dress is soaked in scarlet.

Reverend Bobby James has chosen Ephesians for the scripture. I don’t have the patience to rifle through my King James, but I catch the part about being strengthened in your inner being. “That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” Fat chance of that, I think. Unless “rooted and grounded” means tied to my parents for all eternity. And I already have that. Faith or not.

But it is the inner being part that seems the focus this morning. Reverend Bobby Jones would like me to believe that God himself already knows my inner being. He knows exactly who I am and is just fine with it, thank you very much. Hah.

What with pondering the notion that God knows what I have done and then guessing at what he might expect me to do next, I lose track of time. Before you know it, the last hymn has been sung and the benediction given and everyone is making for the door. By the time I step into the aisle, all I have to face is backsides. Which suits me just fine, but leads me to wonder whether God ever views us all from behind and what he might think of all those rumpled seats and bald heads and that sag of flesh above aging elbows. Not much, most likely.

I don’t see Roseanne scooting down the nearest pew until she takes hold of my own sagging elbow and gives it a little squeeze. “How you doing, girl?”

“As good as can be expected, Roseanne.” I glance sideways at her throat and find it as smooth and perfect as a magnolia petal. “Considering the circumstances.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Bless your heart, you have had your share of it, that’s for sure.” She takes a step back when she notices my bag. “Why, Lizzie Beaudean, I’ve been fixing to buy that very same purse. Mind if I take a closer look?”

And before I know it, my beautiful birthday purse is in her hands and her perfect fingers with their fresh, fake fingernails are diving into its midst, pushing past Mama’s lace-edged handkerchief and the tattered King James to grasp the bone-carved handle.

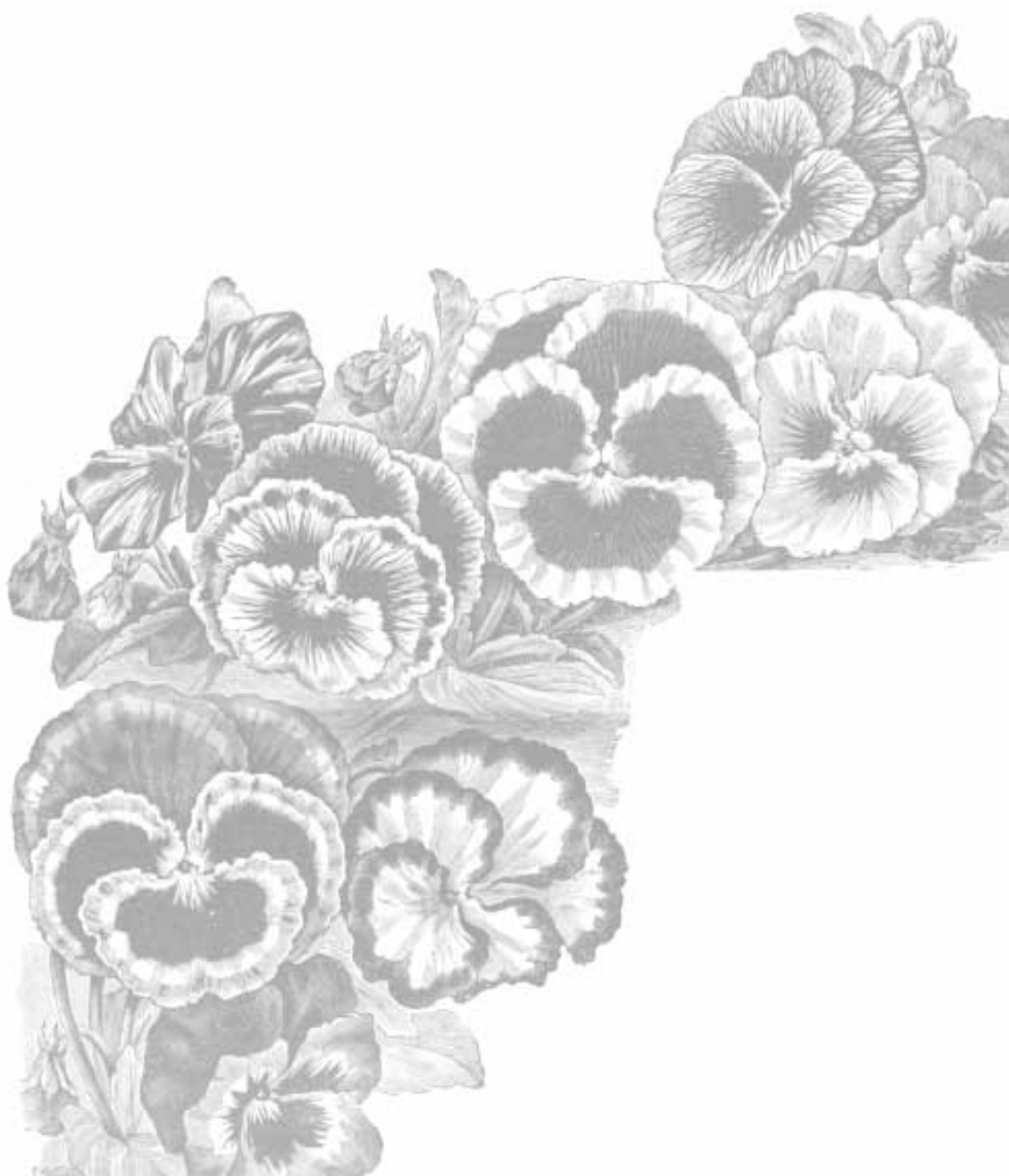


"It calms my nerves," I say before she can react.

I allow her to look me square in the face then, allow her eyes to well and blink. "I am so sorry, Lizzie. I am so sorry for your troubles." Her voice drops. "My own sweet Mama has a case of nerves herself since she got the news about your parents. She insists on keeping a hammer under her pillow now. Such an awful shame."

"Yes, it is," I say. "A tragedy." I reclaim my purse and restore it to my shoulder. I thank Roseanne for her kind words and her earnest prayers. "When I have my life back again," I tell her, "I will have you and your Mama to dinner. For pot roast and apple pie like my own Mama made." And then I tear up a bit myself for the memory of what I had and what I lost and what I have kept between God and myself.

**This title comes from the poem "I Am" by John Clare.*





Grocery Store Heaven

by Nancy H. Williard

I'd been working at the Piggly-Wiggly about six weeks when Mr. Blocker threw the can. I was stocking TP when I first saw it sailing over the paper products aisle, slow motion like a movie. It was a 26 ounce can of Delmonte baby peas with the green label. The silver of the aluminum flashed as it missed the florescent tube and sailed behind Pet Food and Housewares. I swear to you I heard the thunk. There was a pause then a woman began screaming. Joyce, my girl friend, hollered my name, "Robert!" and I hauled butt.

As I skidded around the end of the aisle, Miss Petrey was crumpled on the floor in a pool of blood. Miss Jean, who always shopped with her, was still screaming and jumping and waving her hands like she was going to fly off. It would have been better if she had, the old biddy, because she didn't do anything to help the whole time. In fact, when the paramedics came, they went to her first. I had wrapped Miss Petrey in an old blanket and hunched over her to keep the people from looking at her. Miss Petrey used to tutor me in history. "Robert," she'd say, "you have a mind like a sieve." She would have been real embarrassed if she had been awake. Everybody in the store had come running to gape at her. I did pull her skirt down and cover her legs.

Joyce, when we met after work, said that Mr. Blocker was aiming the can at his wife. I can believe that because at the softball game, he threw from first to home and hit Del, who was on third, in the leg. I can also believe that he was trying to hit Mrs. Blocker. She's one of those really pink and white blondes that uses everything to her advantage. One of those who thinks make-up takes off ten years so you're still twenty-five. I saw her in teeny high heels near the spices one Saturday. She had Del by the tie and was pulling him closer. I had to get Joyce to call on the intercom for help at the register even though she didn't really need it. Del's a friend. Mrs. Blocker came after me but I grabbed a bunch of banana boxes. Joyce would have killed me.

I know it sounds like there's a big pit of sin at the Piggly-Wiggly but all that food does get some folks in the mood. Joyce got me the job because I was always hanging around the check stand looking at her anyway. Joyce says we can get married after we both get out of high school – meaning me. I'm a year behind because of math. Joyce is good with math but she's a loyal girl and didn't dump me just because they kept me back. I would get to just staring at her while I was supposed to be stacking a tower of baked beans. They were on sale for 26 cents that week.

While the paramedics loaded up Miss Petrey (they took Miss Jean in for good measure), Joyce came up for me to put my arm around her. Mr. Blocker was sitting on a box of canned peaches in the middle of the aisle. Peaches had a coupon that week. The cops were there – Jason Baird and Tom Doyle. I wouldn't want to face old Baird for anything. I used to swim at the club when he was a lifeguard and he's hard. He'd put me out of the pool for just splashing a girl just once. Old Baird looked like he was going to throw Mr. Blocker out of the pool for the whole summer.

"Do you think they'll lock him up?" Joyce looked up at me with her big browns all double wide. I just shrugged.

"What if she dies?" I whispered and Joyce pushed me away.

"Lord, Robert Jackson, you are too sick! You get on over there and get a mop to that floor." Joyce turned on her heel and headed for the register. Five people had stacked up.

On the way to the back room, I saw Mrs. Blocker. Everybody kind of forgot about her. She was leaning on her cart in the corner in front of the eggs crying so hard her shoulders were shaking. She was making little squeaky noises and sniffing.

"Ah, Mrs. Blocker? Ah, ma'am, you want to go sit in the back a little?" I was trying to talk really gentle so when she grabbed my apron like she was going to drown, I froze. I looked around for Joyce. Mrs. Blocker was just pressed up against me. I looked at the ceiling.

"Ah, Mrs. Blocker, Please ma'am, there's a bathroom back there you could fix your hair in." I tried to pry her little fists off the apron but her fingernails looked long and dangerous.



"Hair? Is my hair messed up?" Mrs. Blocker let go to put one hand up to feel her blond puffball. It was kind of tilted and pieces were sticking out. Her little pink mouth was smiling but her little blue eyes seemed to be rolling around in her head.

"Yes, ma'am. If you would just let go, I'll show you the mirror."

Finally I go loose from her claws and she hugged her purse to her chest and kept nodding at me. I walked her back to the employees' washroom and flipped on the light. I'll never understand women. Her husband was being hauled off to jail for trying to bonk her on the head probably for misbehaving and she winked at me! She put her hand up to smooth her hair and blinked. I could tell she still couldn't focus her eyes because she was weaving a bit.

"Would you wait for me?" She fluttered her eyes again. "I'll only be a minute. Just guard the door for me?"

What was I supposed to do? Joyce was up there needing a bag boy. If I stayed, Mrs. Blocker was going to be after me again as soon as she stuck her hair back together. I wasn't sure I could get loose again without chunking her with a can. I lied.

"Yes, ma'am, just don't you worry, I'll be right here. You just take your time." I nodded and smiled and shoved her in the restroom and slapped the door tight. Then I skedaddled up to the register to help Joyce. She was already frowning at me.

With Mr. Blocker gone to the police station and everyone in town wanting to see the excitement, the Piggly-Wiggly was jam packed for the rest of the day. I guess I told the story a million times. "Yes, ma'am. Right over there in Pet Food and Housewares. She went down like a shot." Mrs. Beasley came by to kindly tell us that Miss Petrey was going to live. Poor old Mr. Blocker was not going to be sent to jail for murder. Maybe accidental assault or something. Joyce and I sent Del home at his regular time and we closed up the store. It wasn't until I got home and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth that I thought of Mrs. Blocker. I couldn't remember her leaving and she's not one to miss. But, you know how it is; I just didn't worry about it.

The next morning, I picked up Joyce so we two could open up the store. Mr. Blocker was staying home. Joyce was furious about how down he was. "That woman just snuck off and left him after driving him to the brink of insanity like that! She didn't go home or anything. I bet she's halfway to Atlanta by now! No loyalty. See Robert, That's where it will get you!" Joyce was hot.

I got in and got all the lights on while Joyce went to open up the register. As I was in the back at the switch, I heard a sound over near Baked Goods. I was nervous so I took the mop to defend myself. As I came around the corner pointing my mop, I saw her. At first I didn't know it was her and I let out a little yelp when something moved. Mrs. Blocker was under a huge pile of empty donut boxes. She was covered with donut crumbs, chocolate and raspberry filling, and powdered sugar on every square inch. There was a teeny high heel sticking out of the mound. That's how I knew she was there. She lifted her head and I could see a chocolate dip fall out of her mouth. She sat upright and sugar flew everywhere. She screamed then I screamed and then I heard Joyce scream.

Joyce made it out of the front door first and I was second. Mrs. Blocker knocked us both down coming out. She kept on running and screaming down the middle of the street. Good thing it was six a.m. or she would have been hit.

"What in God's name was that?" Joyce screeched.

After I finished explaining and we finished laughing, we cleaned up the mess together. Joyce didn't blame me a bit. She sure is a swell girl. She called Mr. Blocker and explained so I wouldn't get fired. Joyce said even he thought it was funny.

I didn't keep the job long though. I just couldn't stand working there anymore. All that dreamy piped-in music and the ladies pushing up and down the aisles, loading up on peas and donuts for their families. I couldn't even drive by and smile at the happy pig up on the sign. Not being good in math, I really didn't have a future there, anyway.

Joyce says Mrs. Blocker got fat and Mr. Blocker did community service for throwing the can. Miss Petrey got her name in the paper and is still telling her story. It was too much for me. I won't go into the Piggly Wiggly for a quart of milk. Joyce does all that for us. She sure is a loyal girl.



BREAKING DOWN IN THE SOUTH

by Gail White

It knocked me over to learn there's no such thing
as a nervous breakdown. My aunts and uncles had them
all the time. It was spoken of in whispers,
like drink, divorce, and cancer. Aunt Leona
had a Nervous Breakdown back in '69
and never took communion again – she thought
the devil had her. Envious Aunt Leona,
sure of her standing with the Lord and Satan.
Uncle Eugene got violent when he drank
and ended up in a Home. They never said
whose home it was. Some people who broke down
looked fine to me, but still the fame and glamor
of a Nervous Breakdown hung around their necks
like a name-brand diamond. Now, in middle age,
I'm told my dismal state is just depression,
reactive, mild – here, try a little Prozac.
Damn it, I don't want drugs. I only want
to be eccentric, batty, somewhat daft,
covered by Aunt Leona's mental mist.
Again, my generation gets the shaft:
I'm due for a breakdown, and they don't exist.



Palinode

by DeLana R.A. Dameron

Forget the poem about my brown thumb,
My confession, my admitted failure
With perennials. Winter is high.
The trees undress themselves
And while I pull from my closet my quilt,
The radiator rattles near the gray window
Where the sky is overcast. Here you are
Again in my bed. Didn't I doubt this blooming?
This sprouting again in a new season?
I believe in rebirth, in lifting yourself out
Of nowhere, like the chestnut tree
In my parent's backyard we thought gone,
Its trunk chopped to ground level.
We mourned it, watched as it died
Its ceaseless death, its slow death – our hands
Unable to save. Forget what I said
About my imperfect timing with sowing,
With reaping. The chestnut has reseeded itself.
I have held the harvest to know: the phone
In my hand, you on the other end
After a long absence, a long, silent separation.



Trenton, Georgia

by Barbara Wiedemann

Seated on the edge of the old red Fiero,
with jean-clad legs,
and feet inside the small luggage compartment,
the mechanic leans over the rear-placed engine.
Black grease on hands
that hold the old rotor with a bracket
that can't be removed
so a metal strip attaches the new
that dangles
but still might function.
But the car doesn't start.
Maybe it's a . . .
or maybe we should try . . .
Just another shade tree mechanic.
But with her braided hair and soft eyes,
her Georgia drawl,
and Southern independence,
but above all because she knows
that the wine in the long stemmed glass balanced on the battery
is a Merlot and not a Cabernet--
she never could be just another shade-tree mechanic.



These days are long without you

by K.M.A. Sullivan

The top of the locust tree bickers with itself (that fills a minute) and morning fog refuses to burn off, so wren and chickadee doze in bush and branch as young oaks gossip while ancient pitch pine is unmoved and even the needles on her weighted bows are still and the hammock, made for two, has twisted on itself; steel ring holds, but one frayed cord has released its load and I could untangle the hammock, swing for a while, wait for quail to rustle in the undergrowth.

But then my whole body would be counting the seconds.



caverns

by Katherine D. Perry

i scoop seeds of a cantaloupe
with a soup spoon, dropping each
ball into the sink until the orange
mass covers the drain.
switching on the disposal, i
watch the potential plants
being sucked away into a sewer
system where no soil will ever
nurture them. The expectant
house looms over me like
carlsbad
where an eight-year-old me watched
the growing mud bulge and balloon
under years of single drops
of earth and stone, blood and bone
of our planet. to spice up the browns
and whites for kids like me, the
national park system set up spotlights
of reds, blues, purples, and golds
to make the stalagmites and stalactites
pulse.
i fill my flat belly, a testament to hours
of Pilates and yoga, with fruit: no
stretch marks, no sagging breasts. inside,
no cell has ever grown, no replication, not
even a mistake that i could scrape away
like the scores of the women i have known,
crying, conflicted, contrite
as the doctor swept away the mishaps
of youth, the fertilization that came too early.
upstairs



bedrooms without beds wait for me
to make decisions, ask me how many more
years i will watch the droplets form
and then wipe them away. an echo
repeats the question, bounces between
the flat walls and the angular wedge cuts.
nothing swells, nothing grows, even the echoes
flatten.



was

by Drema Hall Berkheimer

black coaled
hair gold
eyes limed
teeth grimed
nails gnawed
bloody crawled

ain't no *is*
to my father
my father *was*

moonshining
moon shining

spilt wine
cut a shine
child bride
horsey ride
silver tongue
black lung

ain't no *is*
to my father
my father *was*

sunshining
son shining

payday come
money gone
momma crazed
roof raised
baby cried
daddy lied



ain't no *is*
to my father
my father *was*

coal slave
coal grave

my father *was*
father *was*
was



Under Milkweed Leaves

by Janie Dempsey Watts

A week before I was to move away from Los Angeles, I thought to drive north one last time to see my son, Trevor, and the butterfly groves of Goleta. It was November, near the time when thousands of monarch butterflies were expected to arrive for their annual stay in a small forest of eucalyptus not far from the Pacific Ocean.

I was in no rush to get there—it was mid-afternoon, and Trevor, had said he and his new friend would meet me there after work, just before sunset. I would meander up the coast route past Point Magu, and then cut inward through the fields of crops and the smells I loved—dirt and sometimes strawberries or onions.

It was a familiar route—the 1 leading to the 101—I had driven so regularly in the six years since my son had left home for college in Santa Barbara. In that time, so much had happened along the way and yet so much had stayed the same. At 24, Trevor was still in Santa Barbara, done with college and working full-time, and living with a house full of roommates. Mudslides had narrowed the lanes of the coast highway for a time, and fragile-looking nets had been placed along the hillsides in an attempt to hold back rocks and earth. In Camarillo farm workers wearing bright hats and scarves tended the crops that had nourished me for the two decades that I had lived in southern California. I always mouthed a word of thanks as I drove past them, a dozen or so men and women bent over green rows of vegetables. At Oxnard, I passed my old friend the plastic Santa Claus statue that stood between a used car lot and a trailer park. After a bad case of termites, his handlers had moved him away from Santa Claus Lane in Carpinteria. There was now no Santa statue on Santa Claus Lane, a fact that somehow saddened me.

I headed up the 101, past the beaches of Ventura and hang gliders dangling near the coastal mountain range, onward to where the road hugs the coast, to where the blue-green of the Pacific is punctuated with oil platforms on the horizon. Above the freeway I saw the sign for San Francisco that always tempts me to keep on driving. I never do.

The air grew sweeter, my spirit lightened, the further I got away from Los Angeles and the closer I came to the place where butterflies land to over winter. I pulled off the highway and found my way to the residential neighborhood of Ellwood that lies near the entrance to the groves. A dusty path through scrubby terrain took me to some signs that tell the monarchs' story.

Much is known about these fragile gold and orange creatures yet some things remain a mystery. They fly over from somewhere west of the Rocky Mountains, or perhaps points north, returning every October to the Australian eucalyptus groves in Goleta. After resting there for a few months, they unite in mid-air to mate, then fall to the ground coupled together. The males die soon after while the females flutter away to lay their eggs before dying. This generation of butterflies will not make it back home. Their offspring's offspring will continue on the migration path, somehow knowing which direction to fly. Even the scientists have not figured out exactly how the butterflies know which way to journey.

I continued walking, past a creaking and groaning stand of eucalyptus, headed for Ellwood Main, a large grove of trees ringed by a low rope to keep away human intruders. No one was in sight and the grove was as quiet as an empty cathedral.

"Please do not disturb the monarchs as they mate," a sign instructed. Why was it so easy for butterflies to find a mate but so difficult for people? Why couldn't Trevor find a girl who really cared for him?

I hated moving so far away, all the way to Atlanta, leaving my son alone except for his roommates and no one special. He was very guarded about his romantic life. I remembered the time a year earlier when Trevor had snapped at me after I had tried to introduce him to a friend's daughter. She was, he said, not his type at all, and he could find his own dates. I had tried to stop wondering what his type might be. Probably smart, perhaps a brunette, definitely a non-smoker. When I had called to tell him I was driving up to Goleta to see the monarchs, he had said he had someone he wanted me to meet. I secretly hoped this one might be the one.

Wandering along the forest's perimeter, I stayed outside the roped-off area and scanned the green limbs and gray bark for butterflies. With their wings folded in, and hanging from the slender eucalyptus trees, the monarchs can sometimes be hard to see. As I moved closer, I spotted them, yellowish clusters dangling from the limbs, nature's ornaments. In the hush of the



woods, thousands of them hung together, warmed by their collective body heat.

In the grove, there's an opening in the tree tops called a "magic circle" where the sun comes through. As the temperature shifts throughout the day, butterflies fly in and out of this "magic circle" warming themselves in shafts of sunlight as needed. I stared up at the break in the canopy, at this circle of blue sky and light ringed by the stately eucalyptus trees. I was rewarded with the sight of a single butterfly drifting towards the tall branches, returning to this place that was now his home.

With no sign of my son, I decided to take a quick hike out to the ocean view bluffs to see the sunset. I headed along the path leading out of the butterfly groves toward a grassy meadow that smelled of sea and tar. A seagull flew overhead and a seal barked in the distance. I heard muffled voices ahead of me and looked up. In the smoky half-light of the forest I made out a silhouette, a couple walking towards the grove, their arms linked together. In the waning light, the two of them looked like a giant butterfly descending into the forest. And then I heard a man's voice—Trevor's—and another voice—also a man's. They laughed together. A happy couple, a couple who looked like they cared for one another, just not the one I had imagined. I felt a shifting inside, old expectations making way for new realizations. My emotions threatened to tumble out of control. I struggled to hold them back but felt as ineffective as one of those delicate nets I had seen along the hillsides on the coast highway to hold back the mudslides.

The couple moved closer, and the taller one waved.

"Hi, Mom," Trevor called. "I got off early and we took a hike to the bluffs." He pulled away from the other man and walked over to give me a hug. His big hands felt warm on my shoulders and he gave me an extra squeeze. He was, and always would be, my son. He introduced his friend, a willowy young man wearing double earrings in his left ear.

"This is Edward," he said. Edward extended his slender hand. I had never felt a gentler handshake, so different from Trevor's sturdy grip. It was an awkward moment.

"Good to meet you," he said. He looked me in the eye as he spoke.

"I'm pleased to meet you, too," I said, but I wasn't. I couldn't say what I really thought, that I was expecting a woman, not a girlish looking boy. I stepped back and pasted a brave smile on my face, leaned down to re-tie my shoe strings. Bending over caused the blood to rush into my head, and gave me a chance to sort out my thoughts. No wonder he had been angry when I had tried to set him up with a girl. I began to understand his secretiveness about his social life, his decision to stay on in Santa Barbara after graduation. Trevor coughed and I looked up from my lacing to see Edward reach for something in his backpack. He pulled out a water bottle. They exchanged a smile as Trevor took it from him.

"The pollens bother him when we hike," Edward said.

"Thanks, Hon," Trevor said before taking upending the bottle and taking a gulp. Edward watched him drink and as I saw, I felt myself softening towards this man who so clearly cared for my son.

"Have you seen the monarchs? Edward asked.

"Yes," I said. "Aren't they magnificent?" Edward nodded, and then continued.

"They love it up here in the eucalyptus groves because the *Asclepias*—milkweed—is nearby. The females lay their eggs under milkweed leaves so predators won't get them."

"Acting on instinct," I said.

"Exactly," Edward answered.

"He's a bio major," said Trevor, "in case you hadn't noticed." He offered Edward a hand and pulled me in with the other. The three of us walked back towards the grove, Trevor in the middle. Our threesome didn't feel quite right, yet it didn't feel wrong. Trevor's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Look at that," he said, pointing up at the sky where the light filtered down. All three of us stopped, turned our gaze upward, to the magic circle.

Two monarchs floated above, their translucent orange-yellow wings kissed by sunlight. The pair flew toward the welcoming branches of the eucalyptus where they would be safe and warm together in their winter home, steered there by an internal compass, a mystery of nature.



Systems Failure

by Cheryl Stiles

In the course of a year almost everything in my old rental house on Nelson Street failed—the gas space heater, the electric water heater, the television, the electrical wiring of the antique fuse box, and the plumbing. Even the doorknob for the front door fell off in my hand. These were actual problems to be corrected but tend to take things too personally, too symbolically. What, for example, could I not get a handle on?

“Cheryl, you’ve got a problem,” my neighbor Clyde says.

We stand at the street on the cold October morning, staring at the small needle on my water meter. It whirls and spins like a mad dervish, but there is no water running at all in the house.

For months I heard the faint sound of running water, a slow but sure hiss. I heard it while standing near the kitchen sink, looking out the window, past the sill loaded with its colored glass bottles. Something stirring, but I couldn’t put my finger on its origin, or see water bubbling up from the ground behind the house. No telltale damp spots, no new sunken ground. For months the water bill crept up. I use water sparingly, and since I live alone, I was seldom charged for more than the minimum one thousand gallons of water per month. For the past six months though, the bill crept higher—two thousand gallons, then four and six, finally to eight and ten thousand gallons. Precise two thousand gallon increments in a six-month period of time. Still I could not pinpoint the problem. Like an ominous house mystery waiting to be unveiled, a plumbing adventure in the making, I knew the source of the problem would soon be revealed.

One morning I got out of the bathtub, put on my robe, and went to make my coffee. In the makeshift utility room, home of the cat litter boxes, and chest freezer, and the water heater, I could see a small cloud of smoke waft upward toward the low ceiling. The smell of burning wires mixed with the aroma of brewing coffee. The smoke and the smell of burning electrical wires were coming from the water heater. The breaker on the heater failed to perform.

I traipsed to the porch, out to the old metal fuse box mounted on the front of the house—a relic of the 1950’s with its cartridge fuses. I pulled the one for the water heater. No hot water now. But no burning house either. How lucky that I was home—home to see the smoke, to smell the wire, to pull the power. No doubt about it, it was time for a new water heater.

In a house where nothing is built to code, where everything is “grandfathered” in terms existing plumbing, building, wiring, and heating codes, who would install a new heater? Not Home Depot, not Sears, not Lowe’s, not even the local Cobb Hardware on Roswell Street, a Marietta institution for fifty plus years. Who would help me? Clyde, my neighbor, adopted Dad, good soul, and a former pipe fitter.

“Yeah, I’ll help you, but it will cost you,” Clyde joked.

“I don’t know if I’d ever have enough money to pay you for the things you’ve done for me. When can we replace the heater?”

“As soon as you get a new one. And the pipes and fittings you need.”

“Well, tell me what I need.”

Clyde and I made the pilgrimage to the do-it-yourself Mecca, Home Depot, a periodic pilgrimage made by many faithful restorers, renovators, and repairers. We loaded our oversize orange cart with a General Electric hot water heater—240 volts, 40-gallon capacity, nine-year warranty, several lengths of galvanized steel pipes, two u-joints, plumber’s tape, and cutting oil.

The new water heater unboxed, the shiny new pipes lined up and newly threaded, joints ready, Clyde and I begin our project. Clyde does most of the real work, the physical work, the work of sinew and sweat and muscle. I have no experience with water heater replacement. I’m just the moral support, or a needy neighbor. But I can hold pipes and u-joints and plumbing tape in place. I can tote supplies and spray cutting oil. The whole process takes about four hours.

∞

A Thursday morning in early November. I am at work at my local university library when a phone call comes in.



"Is this Cheryl Stiles?"

"Yes."

"This is Dr. Voll calling from Cobb General Hospital. Your sister is in the emergency room waiting for a room in the intensive care unit. We've been trying to call you. She was brought in last night by ambulance. Her blood sugar was almost twelve hundred. I've never seen a blood sugar go that high. Her face was blue, but she was still conscious and talking. She wanted Cokes and cigarettes. Can you come to the hospital right away?"

"I'm on my way. It will take me about thirty minutes to get there."

Something about this call was different. Different from all the other calls from all the other hospitals over the last twelve years.

Cobb Hospital is fourteen miles away in the city of Austell. When I arrived at the parking lot, that familiar wave of grief hit me. My breath became short, labored. I remembered other hospitals, other visits—my mother's death from pancreatic cancer, being at my Grandmother's side for her passing from heart failure—the feeling of death and departure. I know that people make full recoveries in hospitals, that they walk out with long lives still to be lived, but that was not my experience of hospitals. And my memories formed knots in my gut, the smells of sickness and antiseptic hit me, and I was seized with a wave of nausea as I walked through the sliding glass doors and into the hospital lobby. I found the nearest bathroom, collapsed to my knees, and threw up my scrambled eggs and morning coffee.

"Where's the emergency room?" I later asked the desk attendant.

"Follow the painted yellow line on the floor all the way to the back of the hospital. Ring the bell at the doors. Someone will let you in." Past the gift shop with its brightly clothed and cheerful volunteers, through numerous corridors of elevators and shining steel gurneys, in stuporous apprehension I followed the yellow line.

∞

From Tammy's second day in the hospital, the day they moved her to the ICU from the emergency room, things did not look promising.

"Her amylase and lipase levels are through the roof," Dr. Vollrath indicates, "and we think now she has acute pancreatitis."

"What's the prognosis now?"

"Not good. Acute pancreatitis has a mortality rate of fifty percent. That's when a patient is otherwise healthy. Acute pancreatitis is a condition where something goes wrong with this organ. One of the enzymes, trypsin, goes into overdrive. Many of the other enzymes get out of whack too. The pancreas literally starts to digest itself. Sometimes it's call tissue necrosis. That's why the disease is so often fatal. In your sister's case, I would honestly say that the mortality rate is ninety percent. She has all the cards stacked against her. Her longtime use of all the psychiatric medicines, her abuse of drugs, all those cigarettes."

He didn't have to say more. From men too numerous to count, sexually transmitted diseases to addictions, she could never say no. Multiple suicide attempts, too many sleeping pills, razor blade or any sharp object, any pill that she could hoard from the mental health day treatment facility might do—Tylenol, Benadryl. So many hospitalizations. In the span of a year after our Daddy died, she had fifteen hospitalizations—most of them suicide attempts. The ravages of mental illness. First, the borderline personality disorder, a psychotic break after the birth of her only daughter, and then the diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

It was a too-familiar, too-sad scenario. The phone would ring. Intuition always told me who was on the other end of the line.

"Cheryl, I'm in the hospital again."

"What happened this time, Tammy?"

"I took too many pills."

Without even a second's pause, she would ask, "Can you bring me some Cokes and cigarettes?"

But she was tough, almost oblivious to pain, indomitable, Sisyphian in her attempts at self-destruction. I once watched her, cigarette in one hand, light another one, and I watched as the butt still glowing red started to burn her hand. She did not



even notice. She had a nicotine-yellow scar like a tattoo on top of her right-hand middle finger. She could never get enough cigarettes, Cokes, coffee, and stimulation.

∞

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Long ago I left my Baptist roots, but it is now that I return to them, the rhythmic, comforting recitation of this psalm. Perhaps it is no comfort for my sister, but it is for me. I hold her warm, oversized hand. It is swollen from all the fluids and her failing kidneys. I stroke her hair, thinning and graying. Part of her face is Betadine yellow—from the regular necessity of cleaning the many tubes. She wears a scab from when the nurses change the tape for the ventilator. A single drop of blood sometimes seeps from her nose. I wipe it away with tissue.

On the green chalkboard at the nurses station my sister's last name, her married name Golden, is written near the bottom. It had her date of admission and beside that the initials "DNR"—do not resuscitate. A difficult decision made by my youngest sister Becky and I.

The recovery scenario is unlikely. Even if Tammy survived the pancreatitis, she would remain in the hospital for months. Then she'd have to move to an extended care facility, have daily dialysis because her kidneys failed, take pancreatic enzymes because her pancreas failed, be on a highly restricted diet, never smoke or drink alcohol again. This isn't going to happen. And I would need a status that I did not possess—I would need to be her legal guardian—in order to keep her wherever she could be cared for.

A part of me now wants her to die. I feel like the bad sister. Not just because she's been in an ICU for 25 days. Not because she now has to have dialysis each morning and evening. Not because she's no longer responding neurologically. Or so edemic that she's splitting open like a too ripe fruit, a bloody bed sore lengthening at the base of her spine. Or, because of the paralytic drug necessary for her to be on the ventilator, she has not opened her eyes or spoken. Because I want to be free. Finally free of the incessant phone calls, the relentless news of suicide attempts, the incalculable trips to emergency rooms, the endless requests for money, her mania and manipulation, and the feeling of remorse that dogs me mercilessly.

At night I go home. Now the Grandmother house is my refuge, cave like and comforting. The November cold has settled in. I want to unplug the phone but can't. A nurse might call from the ICU. Though beyond exhaustion I cannot sleep. The semblance of sleep teases me, cruel and mercurial. I have no appetite. I make myself eat something each day. The food at home is tasteless, nondescript. The hospital food is convenient and at least the idea of banana pudding or mashed potatoes comforts me.

I have walled off my heart—like so many times before, dulled my feelings, hidden from close friends. A knot grows and hardens in my throat. Soon that knot will become rooted, like a new hardwood—an oak or walnut or cherry—and choke even my thought to speak. I am too beyond exhaustion and despair to cry.

My friends and co-workers offer comfort and help, offer to drop food by, to spirit me off for a few hours to lunch or to a movie.

But anyone who has ever known this scenario knows this. The ICU, that single room, that singular patient—a mother, a wife, a child, a lover—consumes all energy and attention. There is no energy for other endeavors, no matter how brief, how necessary.

∞

One morning in early December, just four days before Tammy will die, I walked into her room. I counted 21 IV lines going into her. The bags were double-and triple-hung on seven metal IV stands like bizarre Christmas trees decorating the room. Potassium, pure water, dextrose, Versed, platelets, insulin, meperidine, morphine, and A-negative blood. The monitors and machines hummed. The ventilator's rhythmic breath sounded like some discordant metronome. Back-up IV bags were stored on the small utility table along with syringes, latex gloves, and betadine.

A few cards hung on the room's cork bulletin board—from me, from my younger sister Beck, a card from the group home where Tammy lived, a card from her counselor and friends at the day treatment facility. There was no space for flowers though, except maybe for a single rose that Michelle, our favorite nurse, brought to brighten the room.

∞



After the ventilator tube was removed from her mouth, and another tube placed down her throat, and a feeding tube placed directly into her stomach, nurse Michelle decide to be aggressive about Tammy's mouth care. Although on a paralytic drug, Tammy had fought the ventilator. She'd bitten completely thorough her tongue. Michelle took a medical instrument, like a metal tongue scraper, and scraped it hard across the bottom of Tammy's foot. It left a raised white line of skin on my sister's callused foot. No response. Michelle pinched the skin—again very hard—on one of Tammy's forearms. No response. And the telltale sign—opening a penlight and shining it on her pupils. They were no longer responding. A sure sign that neurological activity was greatly reduced or nonexistent.

Like a tortuous litany I could not escape from hearing, the abject pain I felt for my sister was intensified by this latest news from Michelle. Dialysis twice a day, a ventilator and feeding tube for the rest of her life, no neurological response. It was time. My decision was made. I called Beck. I asked her to drive down from North Carolina, speak with the doctors and nurses, look at Tammy's deteriorating condition, then decide. Together, we would make the choice about discontinuation of life support. Together we would stand at her side when the machines would be silenced.

Friends and other relatives, co-workers and neighbors say, "Oh, what a hard decision to make. I could never make the decision." The truth is that a point comes when the decision is made for you. There are no other choices. To keep someone alive, like a great medical experiment reliant on technology and round-the-clock-care, to touch an edemic, swollen hand which will never move, to lightly kiss a tearing eye, once clear blue, which will never open. To touch a puffed-out stomach, too swollen for a hospital gown, these things make a choice easier.

∞

That night, the night the decision had been made, that night I slept a bit, but fitfully. The cats kept close company. My longhair calico cat Willow was especially attentive. I dreamed of my house as a human body. I dreamed of the old refrigerator, no longer able to cool, of a television with its broadcasts snowy and ethereal, of a smoking hot water heater smelling of an electrical fire, of a burning oven, of a failing house heater, of a fuse box with frayed wiring. I dreamed of rusting pipes, unable to function, spraying water and rust pieces at the backside of the house. I dreamed of the needle of a water meter whirling ecstatically like a dervish. All at once I was all the things, the failing things, the things that could not be fixed. And I dreamed of my sister too, lying flat for twenty-five days on a hospital bed, paralyzed because of the drugs necessary to keep her on a ventilator, unable to move or speak. Multi-organ systems failure—for my house, for my sister.

But I could not fix my sister, nor even know for certain that my presence comforted her.



Growing Up With Pigs

by Harol Marshall

"I've been reading up on pigs," my father announced one night at dinner between bites of a center cut pork chop cooked the way he liked it, slightly pink in the center and juicy. 'Nothing worse than a dried out chop,' he would tell my mother if the chaos of our household distracted her from monitoring the doneness levels of his meat.

His statement peaked my interest. I looked around the table assessing the reaction of my mother and four younger brothers. "What does that mean?" I asked, the only person other than my mother, who wasn't shoveling food faster than fritters fry in bacon fat.

"I'm thinking about raising a few pigs," my father said. My mother grimaced. We already had one milk cow, a dozen rabbits, half a dozen domestic ducks and three hundred chickens not including the fifty baby chicks under the incubator in the hayloft. I'm purposely omitting our thirteen cats because for reasons I've never understood, they don't count as farm animals. However, if you've ever lived on a farm, you understand the necessity of cats.

In the mid-1950's, which is the era in which my father became enamored of pigs, we lived on ten acres in a section of town rapidly converting from rural to suburban. Our next-door neighbors' houses were the width of a driveway away, so closeby that one of my brothers accidentally skipped a stone through Mrs. Flanders' picture window while strengthening his pitching arm. For years, Derek insisted it was an accident, but since none of us liked Mrs. Flanders we never believed him and secretly hoped he broke her window on purpose. To this day I don't know the truth.

"Don't you think we have enough to do now?" my mother asked, always the practical one. "I don't have time for pigs."

"You won't have to do a thing," my father said, plying my mother with gallantry. She shot him a skeptical look. "They're easy to care for," he looked around the table, "and the kids can help. Pigs like kids," he said, "they have a lot in common."

My turn for the skeptical look. Being the oldest, any pronouncement involving help from the kids invariably resulted in additional responsibilities landing on my skinny shoulders. Nevertheless, I found the idea of a new set of animals intriguing.

"Can I have one for a pet?" my oldest brother Brandy asked.

"Sure, why not," my father said, sensing an opportunity. "You'll have to take care of him, though." This statement deterred any additional pet requests on the part of my other three brothers.

Interested as I was in adding pigs to our menagerie, I wasn't convinced they made good pets. "People don't keep pigs for pets," I informed my brother, "unless you don't mind eating your pets." I figured Brandy needed a reality check here even though I knew he wouldn't take advice from me.

"I'll name him Porky," Brandy said.

"Brilliant," came the response from my middle brother followed by, "are there any more pork chops?"

My brother Derek, who loved animals, sat by silently and I felt I knew the reason. His second trauma of the year concerned his pet duck. For reasons unknown to me now, our ducks ran loose in the yard and one duck in particular took a liking to my brother. Ducks, being not as dumb as they look, are highly social animals who mate for life and bond by imprinting. Derek must have been the first person this duck saw and it was love at first sight. Derek's duck followed him everywhere even to the point of hanging around our back door waiting for Derek to come out and play. Then one Saturday toward the end of the summer, Derek's duck disappeared.

The next day following our customary Sunday chicken dinner, my father asked Derek how he liked the fricasseed chicken my father'd prepared while the rest of us attended church. Derek said it was really delicious.

"That's good," my father told him, "because the chicken was your duck."

Living with my father wasn't easy even though he told great stories, loved a good joke and brought a lot of fun into our lives.



Two three-word phrases summarized his outlook when it came to raising children: 'life is tough' and 'quit your whining.' I can't remember Derek's response to the realization we'd eaten his pet duck for Sunday dinner since it wasn't something we would have dwelt on. However, I recently asked my brother about the incident and he assured me that after fifty years he was over it.

"How many pigs are you considering," my mother asked, a forkful of mashed potatoes halfway to her mouth, "and where do you plan to keep them?"

"I thought I'd fence the area between the barn and the garden and build a simple lean-to for shelter," my father said. "We'll only have them for five or six months at a time. Purchase a few wieners in early spring and by fall they're ready for slaughter."

The mention of wieners sent my brothers into paroxysms of laughter.

"Knock it off and finish your dinner," my father ordered. He was the family disciplinarian and we kids were well acquainted with the meaning of the phrase 'wait until your father comes home.'

Contrary to the recommendations of most child rearing manuals his discipline methods were neither consistent nor patient. I'd hate to think of his reaction to a child psychologist recommending positive feedback approaches and the importance of setting realistic expectations, and since more than one of my brothers felt my father's belt across their backsides, we can safely eliminate corporal punishment from the list as well.

Being the only girl, I was exempted from physical penalties but bore my share of what my father referred to as 'toughening up' measures.

"You're too sensitive," he would tell me, "you can't cry your way through life."

Either as part of my education or the first step in his plan to damp down my sensitive side my father dragged me along at the age of eight, to a slaughterhouse. I still remember the sledgehammer the butcher swung into some poor cow's forehead. I won't describe the episode, which I've tried for the most part to expunge from memory, except to say this was another childhood experience that can't be found in the pages of Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care manual.

Fortunately, kids are resilient and I can't recall worrying too much about the fate of the cow later that evening as we dined on some really delicious T-bone steaks the butcher provided to my father. Which isn't to deny the traumatizing effect of my slaughterhouse encounter. I always wanted to accompany my father on any of his various outings, but even when offered the opportunity, I never again agreed to visit the butcher. I'm not sure my father ever noticed.

Can I go with you to buy the pigs?" I asked, setting off a firestorm of requests from my brothers begging to tag along.

"Your sister asked first, she gets to go," my father said, happy for an excuse to leave my brothers at home since he claimed they never knew how to behave, a statement suggesting his children's behavior was out of his hands. "There's not enough room for the rest of you. The pigs will take up the whole back of the car."

The image of baby pigs propped in a row along the back seat of our car popped into my head, but in reality they came tied in four burlap bags that my father placed on the plastic sheet covering the floor of our back seat. Pigs are incredibly smart animals and they stress easily, hence the plastic. If you can imagine being trussed in burlap and carted off in the back of a stranger's station wagon, then you have some idea what a baby pig goes through. I never followed them to market, but I can guess at the stress levels there. I wish the knowledge were sufficient to turn me into a vegan but pork happens to be my favorite meat, an attachment I blame on my father.

One aspect of growing up on a farm is dealing with the death of animals, a necessary part of farm life that paradoxically increases your love and respect for animals, and may explain why hunting societies worshipped the very animals they killed and ate. My brother Brandy is a good example of this anomaly. No one loves spareribs more, and he's been known to chew every available piece of meat off each rib and then turn to munching the bones.

The day my father and I arrived home with our four feeder pigs and my father cleaned them up and set them out in their pen, Brandy, as predicted, adopted one for a pet. Being soft-hearted, he chose the runt of the litter and despite my parent's admonitions about keeping the pigs inside their pen, Brandy would climb through the fence and gather up his pet pig for fun and frolic in the back yard.



Unfortunately for both my brother and the pig, the runt came down with some form of pneumonia or maybe swine flu, and died within a month or two. Fifty years later, Brandy can still point to the precise spot in the back yard where my father buried his Porky, an event, however, that never dampened his enthusiasm for barbecued ribs.

Early in September in the year of my father's big pig purchase, I came home from a date one Saturday night, climbed out of my boyfriend's car and started for the front door only to be greeted by a two hundred pound hungry sow rounding the corner of the house. In addition to high intelligence or maybe because of it, adult pigs can be dangerous. My father's words rang in my ears, "be careful around the pigs, one of those sows could take off your arm with one bite."

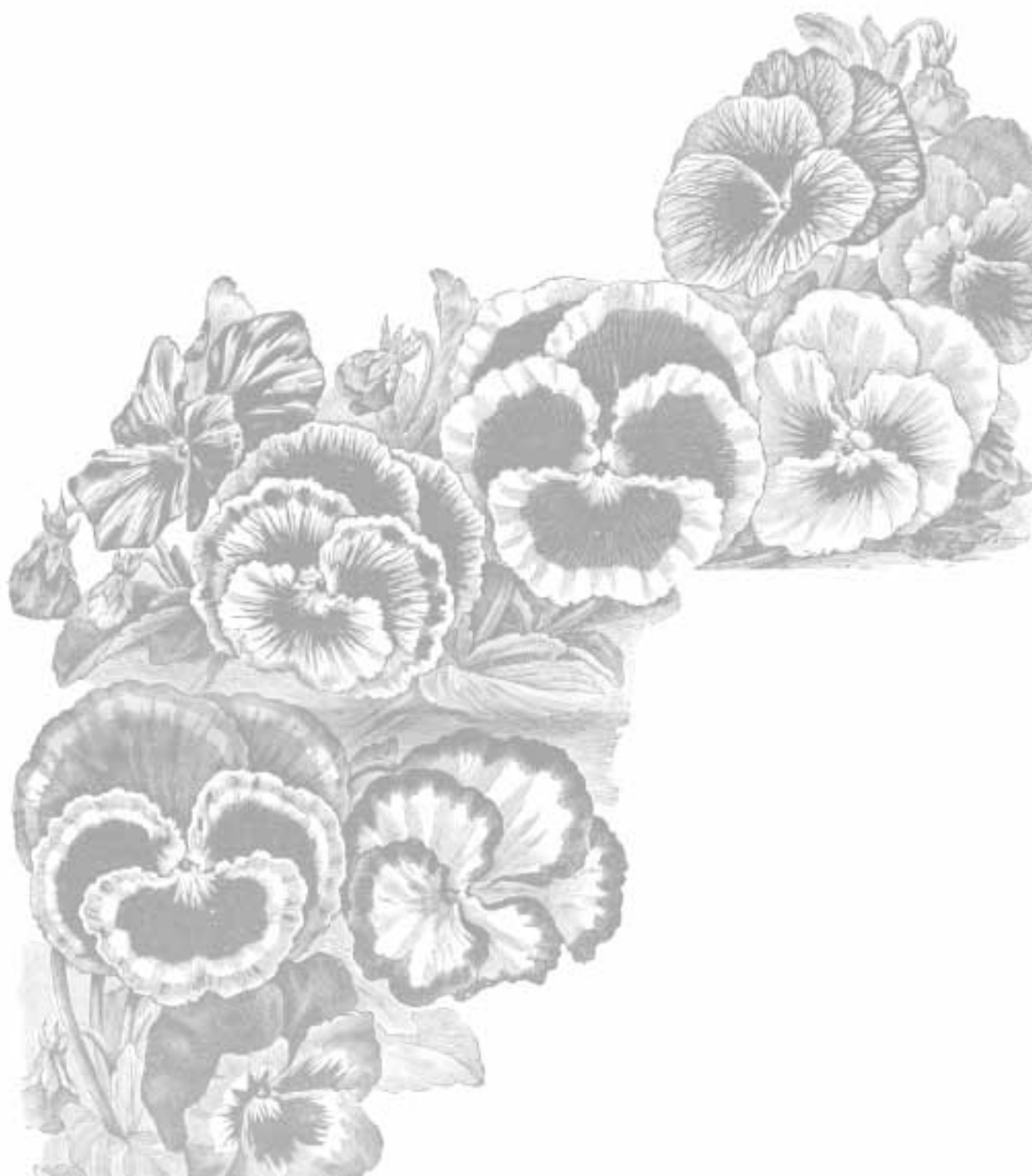
I screamed for my boyfriend to stop the car, jumped back in the front seat and asked him to lay on the horn until my parents came to the door and rescued me.

My mother stuck her head out first. "What's the matter?"

"The pig's loose again," I hollered, pointing to the sow standing in the driveway fixated on my boyfriend's car wondering which parts might be edible. I could hear my father swearing in the background as he headed out the back door. His strategy for herding porcine escapees involved an eight foot two by four. As soon as our runaway porker spotted him with the board in his hands she hotfooted it back to her pen. As I said, pigs are highly intelligent animals.

Less than a month later we were pig free if you don't count the pounds of pork cuts stashed in the commercial freezer lining the back wall of our garage. Sometime later that fall, my father took down the fence around the pig sty and dismantled the lean-to saving all the lumber, which lay for years alongside the back of our barn.

I never thought to ask why he gave up on raising pigs, but I suspect the thought of one of his children losing an arm or a leg to a hungry sow may have played a role in his decision. On the other hand, it's possible he discovered like my brother Brandy, that pigs are more like people than he realized.





How To Make A Crazy Quilt, 1906-1917

by Lynne Barrett

On foundation muslin stitch the fine name—*Lawrence*—then
cover with taffeta you wore when George was courting.
Make that your start. Over-

lap it with shantung
from your honeymoon travel suit. Fingerpress,
and baste along the curve. Cut pinwheel sections from bright party

dresses, dissecting flirtation, finery, the grand times that got you
here. Don't plan, let it develop. A day has
so many corners to adorn.

George likes to see
you in your crimson silk kimono. Fragile,
yet he says the Bombyx mori spins the strongest filaments

in nature, so you picture steel cocoons. Place scarlet, bronze,
midnight velvet: each color tames
the next. This sapphire

was your favorite—it hurts
to scissor it now. But you'll never have
that narrow waist again, since your second child, the boy.

When you prepare Oolong, in the alone afternoons,
pour another cup, and drop in pale
brocade, let it sip

the stain of distance.
Ecru and gold set off this dark
foulard you wore when Lawrence visited with the wife

he met in Birmingham. He looked ill, or preoccupied,
ashen. Fortunately, Mr. Maxwell—
Lionel, he insists—

your new neighbor,
diverted you with chatter. Embroider
across every seam where fabric touches fabric. Learn



featherstitch and herringbone, and lazy daisy, exploring
the complexities of meeting.
Piano notes join ivory

satin to topaz velvet
in a tune you have to bend close to notice.
Silent waltzes, haven't they whirled you? Overstitching

with silvery twist brings light, the play of fancy. A spider-
web on this patch, near a picket fence, with its gate
ajar. To go through or not

is every decision. Add
morning glories, the blue Lionel says becomes
you. He has a moustache like brass threads around his mouth.

Drowse in the warm afternoons, listening to your children
in the garden, and his gramophone.
This faille,

pink, ripped that
night you went to him and learned
he was not in earnest, even as he took. The twill skirt

that dragged mud the rainy shopping day when
you ignored that he ignored you:
Useful pieces.

To your daughter insist
the cerise broken heart is whimsical. "You
know I'm never serious. Honey, run tell your father

it's time for supper." Add fans, flowers, a pearly owl who
gazes at the name Mary, your mother's, but she's
the owl, too, ever-

watchful. She brings
news that Lionel volunteered for France,
the many rumors of his amours. And Lawrence—never liked

him, did she? Now he's in that mountain sanatorium. You must
wonder at the involutions of the design
you've made. Apricot



satin you saved for some
occasion glows, today, too youthful.
Your girl can have it for a frock. Time to square off

your work. While George reads in the evening lamplight,
back it. Bind it. Finished, the quilt
is heavy, bright,

and slippery. Drape
it over the fern-green chaise where you
rest, and let its curious combinations divert memory.

When its silk starts to shatter, roll it, don't fold, between
old, immaculate linen sheets.
Store in the attic

cedar chest where
your great-granddaughter will someday
find it and marvel that you were so busy, so inventively confined.



Intro to Graphic Arts

by Elizabeth Swann

So proud she'd learned
to write her name at three,
my sister laid claim
to the all forbidden world. We found
her scrawl crayoned onto walls, carved
into the antique cherry table.
With the ragged edge
of a dirty rock, she scratched
all five crooked letters, one backwards,
on the rear door of the station wagon.

Mother stood in the driveway,
hands on hips, clouds coalescing overhead.
Wait until your father gets home!

We laugh to tell it still,
how Daddy arrived to find
no sign of Sarah's name
carefully engraved
with her chubby right hand.
She'd scraped it all out with that same stone,
the scribbled lines like lightening bolts,
etched deeper, desperate.



Sister, Returning

by Gail Peck

When my sister was dying,
a friend offered
to fly from New York
and go with me to Port St. Lucie.
But my sister didn't want me
to see what the alcohol had done,
so we never went.
Now this longing is like the time
I watched a small boat drift out to sea.

*

Her green thumb
must have willed
these four peonies—
plant that hasn't bloomed
in ten years.
A blossom, heavily drooped
for each of us left behind.
I can't bring myself
to cut even one to take inside
where the ants would wander
over my table.

*

I find a card
written years ago.

*The damn rooster, Sam,
goes with me to the drive-through
at McDonalds. He loves French fries.*



She'd mentioned Sam earlier,
how he'd grown, leaving
his Easter-self behind.

Whatever happened to him,
I wonder, and now since I didn't ask
I'll never know.

Maybe he just toppled over one day
from old age, and she bent to touch
the feathers of his wing,
so warm in the Florida sun.

*

Because I couldn't find out
about her ashes
I imagine them cupped
in the dogwood blossoms.

*

My friend is coming to visit.
The one who gave me these napkins
that say: lemons and oranges,
lemons and lemons, oranges and oranges.
I spread goat cheese on crackers
then add hearts of artichokes.
I light candles for my sister,
and for my friend's brother who died of AIDS.
In the center of the table tulips
bend every which way towards light.
Here she is at the door, ready for wine.
We'll sit in the white rockers,
the rhythm of our voices
tilting forward and backward.



If You Forget Me

(For the native Sycamore)

**after Neruda*

by Melissa Dickson Blackburn

I want you to know
one *thang*,

the only lover I've ever sown
knew not an anther or leaf
of me. He never held
my Eastern Red Cedar heart
against his own of True Cypress.
He did not plunge the midnight
hollow of my plain or stroke
the softness of my limbs, the moon
swell of my perimeter or the secret
shallows of my claim. He did not
catalog the humid reserves
of endangered trillium, or brush
the jasmine cup of my shoulder
or kiss the columbine of my open
lips. Not once did he explore
tea olive arbors or press
his wrists against the flanked
orchard of my ribs. No,
his fingers never traced
bright rosebud peaks, my
tempered cry against his cheeks.
Never, never did he hold me,
a garden crowning fragrant
around him or call my name
into petaled sheets
or close my eyes
in scented pleasure
or in rooted sleep.



This Is What It Comes Down To

by Sandy Longhorn

A woman stands
on a porch on the prairie's edge,
her hands knuckled into the damp black soil

she's mixed for her planters.
To her right is a riot of waving petunias,
a froth of pink on green. After the last hard frost,

she has given herself permission
to surround the house with color. Her eyes
drift down the horizon to the setting sun, now masked

by building clouds. Before she plants,
she says a prayer against the coming wind
for the continued strength to hold this house together.



The Power of Red *by Elizabeth Plunkett Buttimer*



Red Open Rose Floral Photograph. Part of the “Flower Power Series” of photographs and poems meant to speak to the traditions we learn of honoring our mothers or those who were like mothers to us in the love and care they bestowed.



Orchid Wings *by Elizabeth Plunkett Buttimer*



Orchid Wings part of the Flower Power Series expresses the sense of personal freedom and self fulfillment as the Southern woman spreads her wings and uses her gifts.



abandoned chevy

by Claire Spollen



This photo was taken in an abandoned car lot located near a fairgrounds.



Walking on Waters

by Giovanna Summerfield



Walking on Waters was taken in Giardini Naxos, in the summer of 2009, during an all-girl trip to Sicily, where my two daughters and I (re)discovered peace, pleasure, and the importance of roots.



Rinse *by Melanie Henderson*



This summer, my son and I were following a dragonfly near the koi fishpond at the National Arboretum (Washington, DC) and it led us to this gorgeous water lily.

*Please also refer to Melanie's poem on page 19.



Angel of Marye's Heights *by Pat St. Pierre*



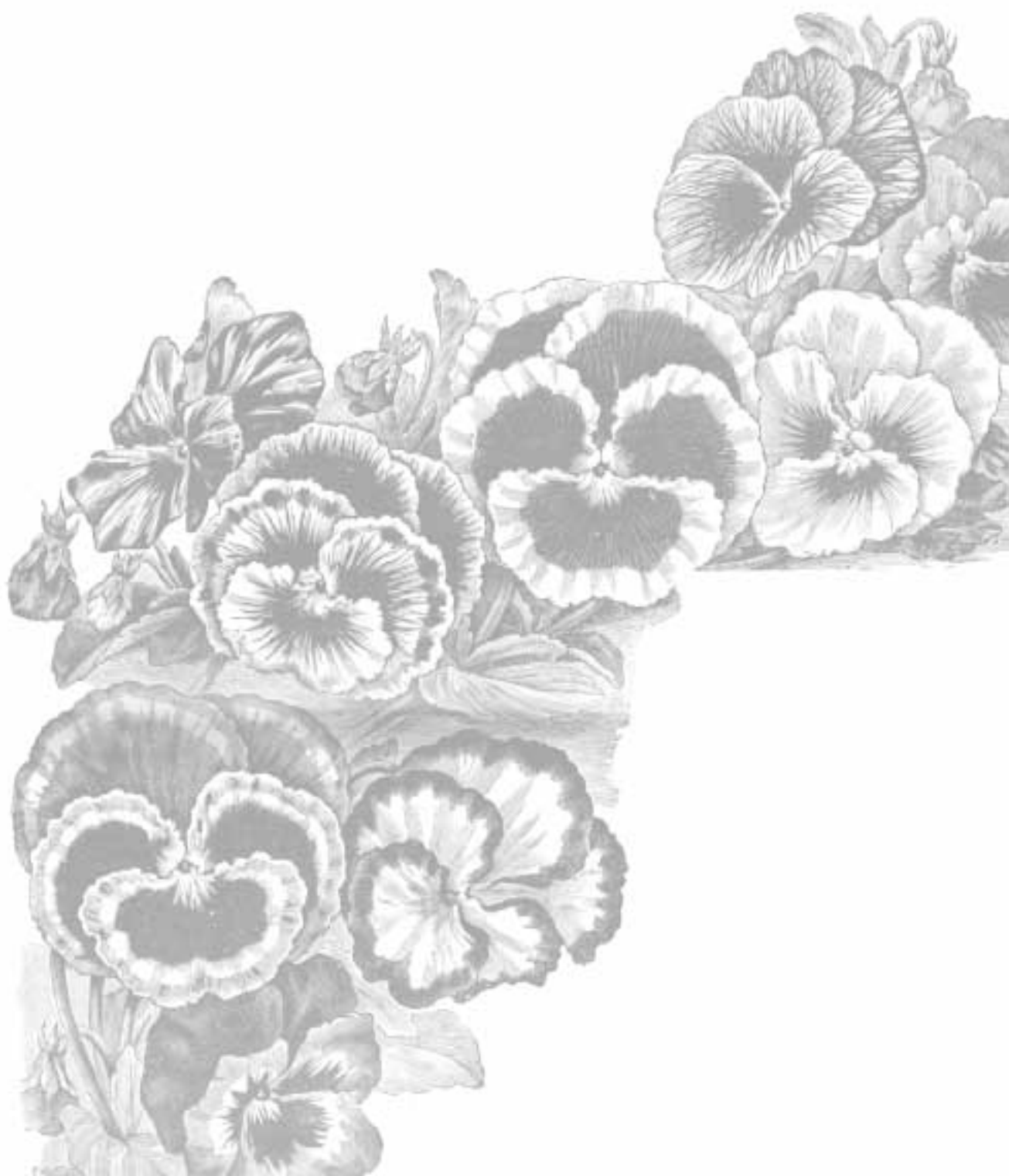
The Angel of Marye's Heights was a Confederate soldier who risked his life to bring water to wounded Union soldiers. National Cemetery in Fredericksburg, Virginia.



Ursula *by Teresa Burns Murphy*



Ursula, a dog whose sense of smell is matched only by her sense of humor, tells the story as she is being dog-napped. When Ursula finds herself in the middle of a custody battle, she realizes it is impossible not to side with the “owner” whose personality is more closely aligned with her own. See page 96.





Shades of Gray

by Debra Brenegan

It was ridiculous, saying I'd meet him. What had I been thinking? He'd obviously meant it as a joke, that casual and vague lets-do-lunch sort of invitation not meant to be taken seriously. But he was adorable, and so, well . . . *young*. When he beamed that dimpled smile and crinkled the uncrinkled skin at the corners of his eyes last Tuesday, I found myself transformed. It was as if someone else had temporarily inhabited my 45-year-old body and made my mouth speak affirmatively, made my hand reach into the cash drawer and pull out a business card, scrawl my home phone number on the back of it, and giddily press it into his outstretched palm along with his change – \$1.63 – and the receipt for his new hard cover best-seller.

It was an overcast day, last Tuesday. My wrinkles don't show up as well in such light. With that sort of illumination, how could he know my age? How could he guess I had a semi-trailer of emotional baggage labeled recent divorce and three kids? How could he know how wrong I'd eventually be for him? Too bad it hadn't been a sunny day. Then he wouldn't have even asked. Then I wouldn't be sitting here, ridiculous in my suck-in-the-gut black jeans, sipping a cup of the *Java Joint's* Guatemalan special of the day. Too bad.

He had to be all of twenty-five, I decided, and I was a fool. I was old enough to be his mother, for God's sake, old enough to understand how pathetic that cliché really sounded rattling around between my ears like a piece of candy corn in a plastic pumpkin. I whisked the headband out of my hair and fluffed my bangs with my fingers. Headbands, after all, looked matronly, could only advertise my status.

"Can't a person get a refill around here?"

"Refills are fifty-nine cents, ma'am."

Ma'am. As if.

The *Java Joint* employees wore hideous black and white uniforms – crisp little white shirts tucked into black trousers. They buzzed around like so many little bees. Working, working, working. Probably all caffeine-wired. Probably all smokers too. At least we didn't have to wear uniforms at the bookstore, could dress as we pleased, thank you very much, could dress for comfort, for personal style. For what would a bookstore be with all the employees dressed alike? How could we promote the expansion of the mind wearing uniforms? How could we properly attend to our customers?

He was probably a student. He seemed young enough. He probably liked to buzz around, too, like the black and white size-two workers, high on caffeine and nicotine and who knew what else. I knew the type. He probably couldn't appreciate the sleek quiet of a balanced woman, a woman comfortable with herself, comfortable with her mind, comfortable with silence.

I rummaged through my purse for a breath mint, only one and a half calories a piece. They probably never ate, those size-two black and white workers. Probably lived on liquid stimulation, powdered stimulation, smoked stimulation. Well, I liked my steak and potatoes, thank you, and, by God, nobody, would cheat me out of my one-hour lunch, let alone my two fifteen-minute breaks. It was normal, after all, to want to eat lunch, to want to feel full and content, to want to eat for an hour. I was normal.

He was probably dirt-poor. A dirt-poor student, hence his suggestion to meet at this *Java Joint*, a convenient two blocks from campus. Just what I needed, to get caught up with another money-sucking man. No thank you. Been there, done that. Jeff had been all that and more. His marital resume read like the blurb of the latest how-to-avoid-unhappiness-in-love self-help paperback – gambler, alcoholic, shiftless, lazy, good-for-nothing parasite. Make that a *handsome* parasite, though. Oh, yes.



I knew about those self-help books. I'd read them all, here and there, in bits and pieces, as I straightened shelves and counted inventory at the bookstore, comfortable in my colorful easy-to-be-me elastic waist pants. The books had similar themes, I liked to tell my therapist, themes even *she'd* approve of, as they were rooted in *reality*.

"What is your reality?" she liked to ask me.

"Jeff only drinks coffee in the morning," I'd reply. "I fix it the way he likes with a nice long glug of whiskey."

"Yes," she'd answer.

Sometimes I thought I must have a neon sign on my forehead – *gullible individual, inquire within*. My therapist said I'd attract what I projected. Was I projecting dirt-poor? Was I projecting the fact that I was used to being a doormat, used to giving everything over to someone else – money, control, attention? How was it I attracted a dirt-poor student? Did he think I could get him free books? Did he think I'd steal them for him? How could he think that?

I glanced at my watch. It was still early. He wouldn't arrive for at least another half hour, assuming he'd show at all. I had thought I'd come early, read a little, sit serenely alone and wile away the hour waiting for him. I had forgotten about the piece of paper – how I, very likely, would need to work on it. And so I tried to. But those black and white workers buzzing around distracted me. They were too thin, too hyper. I wanted to feed them, to settle them. They washed the front windows with a squeaky length of rubber, scrubbed the countertop's grout with toothbrushes, actually *shouted* to one another above the blasting samba music.

"New pot on!"

"Decaf's dead!"

I shuddered, despite the hot sloshing in my stomach. "Wake the dead, why don't you?"

Maybe the coffee was too strong. I'd get decaf on the next refill. Then I wouldn't be so jumpy, so nervous, so twitchy. Nothing worse than a twitchy old woman. Nothing worse.

I rolled up my shirtsleeves, attempting a casual look. I didn't want to look too prim, too middle-aged, tightly-buttoned, shriveled-up, half-dead. I unbuttoned the top two buttons of my blouse. Casual, loose. It was getting stuffy, what with all the smoke and noise and activity. We would never be allowed to *shout* to one another at the bookstore. It disturbs the patrons, of course. Then again, there was the caffeine everyone was soaked to the gills in. It probably *made* them shout.

What was I *thinking* – unbuttoning my blouse? Oh, yeah, that's just what he'd love. Probably had it all figured out – leave me waiting in a smoky coffee house, caffeine sweaty, and jangly. Of course, I'd start unbuttoning things. Clever, clever. I re-buttoned one of the buttons. He wouldn't get the best of me. I could see through him like water. Seduce the old woman. Get her to give me books, a home, her life. They were all the same.

Jeff had done that. He'd seduced me with his playfulness, with his dimpled smiles, with his shocking blue eyes – eyes that at first looked friendly, like little waving forget-me-not flowers, but of course were anything but. First, he seduced me, then he trapped me with a toast. Once we were married, though, he only toasted himself. (My mother saw it coming.) And he hoarded his smiles, even hoarded his eyes – keeping them from me as he stared at the television, at the newspaper. I was bound, then, you see, like a mummified fly in a spider's web, watching him, waiting for him to descend upon me and suck me dry.

I never let him, of course. Thank God for attorneys. They froze the kids' college fund before he could drink that up too, before he could gamble it away, before he could *steal* it from us. And I felt dirt-poor now, since I'd never touch the college fund myself. Of course not. I was their *mother*. Still, living off an assistant bookstore manager's wages meant a lot of macaroni and cheese. Kid food. Hot dogs. Frozen pizza. Peanut butter.

And I didn't care *what* Mr. Dirt-Poor Young Scoundrel was planning. He wouldn't touch their money, no sir. I wouldn't even tell him about it, if we were to marry. An independent woman has to take care of herself. She has to take care of her children. She has to have a few *secrets* here and there.

Secrets, yes. And dreams. I told my dreams to my therapist – both kinds, the night dreams and the day



dreams. They were very much the same. I always ended up finding true love. And she'd almost always answer me in the same way. "Yes, but the reality is?" Then she'd make me say the obvious to her. You know – the reality.

I took another big drink of coffee and smiled at *reality*. He probably *wasn't* a student. How could he be? Why, when he came into the bookstore he'd known the owner, he'd known we were going out of business, and he'd bought a book from the contemporary fiction shelf – full-priced, not exactly what a student would read or could afford. No, I decided, he's probably *not* a student. He's probably . . . *rich*! Yes, that made more sense. Maybe one of those quiet, humble, rich, young entrepreneurs. Someone looking for a fellow traveler, a best friend, a life partner. Someone looking for maturity, wisdom, you know – *experience*.

I studied the piece of paper I was working on and scribbled over something I'd written on it. Actually, I'm not an assistant bookstore manager, not yet, not officially, even though Ms. Carlson told me if she didn't have to close down, I'd surely be considered for the position.

And, of course, there is no college fund either. I just remembered that. No college fund. Not anymore. Not after the attorney's fees. But, I had no choice. I *had* to use it, you see. To get free.

I doodled on the piece of paper in front of me. It all looked fine now. Flowers and patterns covering some of the words. You could sometimes lose yourself scribbling on a page.

The little bell on the door jingled and I looked up. He was early! He didn't notice me right away but went straight to the counter and began talking in earnest to the black and white workers. They swarmed around him, seemingly anxious to please. One brought him a clipboard, another a mug of coffee. I decided to surprise him. I gathered my bag and stood, smoothing my white blouse – the one he'd actually *suggested* I wear – and straightening the waistband of my black jeans.

Here goes nothing.

I shimmied toward the counter, where he stood, surrounded by the smiling workers.

He turned and saw me then – I'd only managed to get half-way to him. His eyes lit up with delight. "Why Greta! You're early!"

My face warmed. Maybe it was the neon sign flashing on, or maybe, this time, it wasn't.

"Well, don't be shy," he said. "Come here and let's have a look."

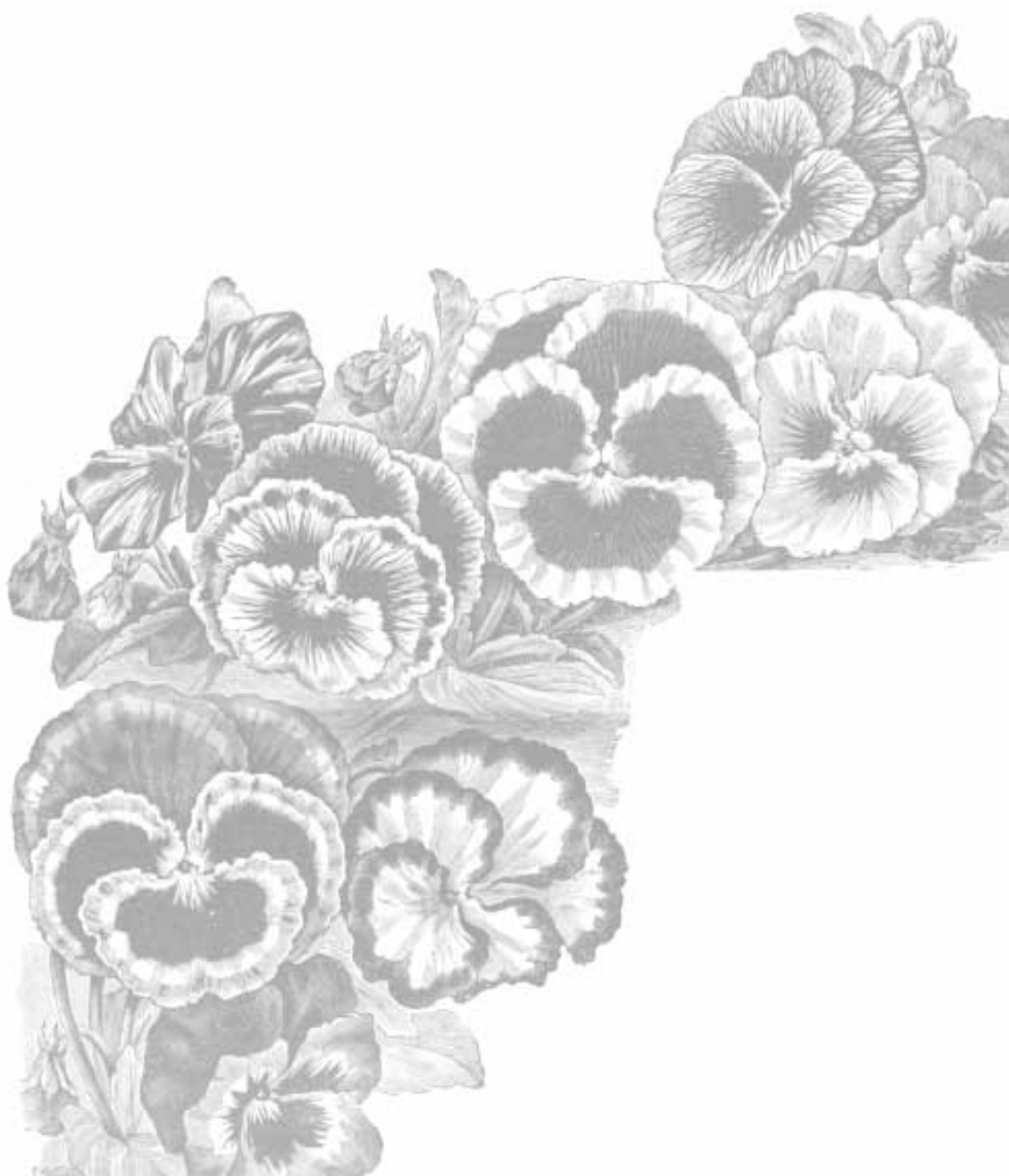
I approached him, grinning, and handed him the sheet of paper. I knew he'd expect that, at least at first.

He studied it. I could tell by the crease between his eyebrows that he was giving it serious attention, especially the scribbled-over place where I'd first written "assistant bookstore manager." After a few minutes he lifted his eyes from the paper and looked me up and down. He didn't say a word. Nothing. Not for what seemed like an eternity.

Eventually I noticed him breathing and that reminded me to do the same.

He finally made a sweeping gesture with his hand that included both me, head to toe, and the piece of paper. "This all looks fine," he said with that gorgeous gleaming smile. "You. This."

I stared at my shoes, painfully aware of the way his dimples must be winking at me as he told me I was hired.





Irreconcilable Differences

by Teresa Burns Murphy

I smell trouble before we even get out of Independence County. Merry Dell must smell it, too, because she is sniffing and her eyes are watering the way they do when she peels onions. When her cell phone jangles "I'll Be Doggone," she picks it up off the dashboard of her truck. My hearing's always been extra good, and as I turn around and sit down in the seat next to Merry Dell, Raleigh's voice comes through as shrill as a dad-gummed dog whistle.

"Merry Dell, you know the judge specified that I get custody of Ursula. I paid good money for her, and she's mine! I snapped this picture of her as you were heading down Liberty Road. Just look at Ursula's face, and tell me she doesn't look forlorn. I'm also afraid I'm going to have to report you for negligence. I can't believe you're endangering Ursula's life by letting her ride like that."

When I see the picture Raleigh took, I snort and rest my head on the seat next to Merry Dell's leg. Merry Dell snaps her phone shut and slams it down on the dash. I wish I could tell Merry Dell I'm not the least bit forlorn. Fact is I'm as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine to be taking off with her like this. I might look a little worried in that picture, but that's just because I'm afraid Raleigh will catch up with us and make me go back to that mausoleum he calls a house.

Merry Dell picks up the phone and texts Raleigh.

U R an *

It takes me a second to figure out the *, but then I think of our neighbor's Weimaraner, Poindexter, and how he's always waving his * (among other things) in my face and trying to sniff my *.

"Raleigh thinks he can put a guilt trip on me. Well, he can't," Merry Dell says and steps on the gas.

Merry Dell says "can't" like "cain't"; whereas Raleigh says "can't" like that philosopher he's got so many books about, but never reads.

I put my head a little closer to Merry Dell's leg. She smells like bacon and the loamy soil I like to bury my bones in. I lean closer to her and she pats me with her slim, brown fingers. She used to have long pretty fingernails all polished up and dusted with little sparkles. Sometimes she even got her nails decorated for the holidays, which I thought was real festive. But then Raleigh threw one of his big old hissy fits about it right in the middle of my Sunday afternoon nap.

"Merry Dell, why don't you take that cheap-looking shit off your nails?"

Merry Dell shrugged and said, "Okay," like it was no big deal.

But after Raleigh went to bed, I heard her in the bathroom cutting off her pretty nails. She was crying, and when she reached out to scratch my ears, I felt like crying too. Merry Dell sure could give some killer ear-scratches with those long sparkly nails.

"Don't you worry, Ursula," Mary Dell says. "Raleigh Everett Randolph will never find us where we're going. We're going to my momma's house. She lives way out in the woods in Arkansas, and nobody, I mean, nobody messes with my momma. She's just going to love you."

When we get to the Blue Ridge Mountains, I stand up and look out the window of Merry Dell's truck. Merry Dell told Raleigh she got a truck with a window like that just for me, and boy did that ever set him off. He pitched the biggest fit you ever saw and said I was not to ride like that ever again. Then he went out and bought one of those new-fangled doggy seats at the Pampered Pet Doggy House Boutique.

One time, just to pay him back for that ridiculous contraption, I put a big old mud stain on one of the tan leather seats of his Jaguar. Of course, Raleigh, being Raleigh, found a way to blame Merry Dell. He said it was her fault because she took me down to Burke Lake Park and let me swim and roll around in the dirt. Raleigh said he wouldn't be surprised if I didn't come down with tetanus.

"*Oh come on*, Raleigh," Merry Dell said. "Ursula's a *dog*. You can't keep her cooped up inside all the time."

Raleigh leaned toward Merry Dell like he was going to pounce on her and through his clenched teeth he said, "You'd better stop undermining my authority with Ursula, Merry Dell."

Merry Dell opened her soft brown eyes wide and said, "Undermining your what?"

"You heard me. Miss Rose told me if two people were in charge of one canine, he could get confused and one person needed to take responsibility for his discipline because if the dog noticed a hint, a mere hint, Merry Dell, of discord, he could become unmanageable."

"In case you haven't noticed, Raleigh, Ursula's a she, and she's not unmanageable. She's just got a mind of her own."

When he stalked off, I had to sink my teeth into the toe of one of Raleigh's Farragamo loafers to keep myself from taking a plug out of his skinny behind. Just hearing the name Miss Rose of Miss Rose's Dogs of Distinction Obedience Academy releases something primal in me. Yes, it is true that I took a tiny chunk out Miss Rose's bony ass, but that's because she wouldn't stop yelling, "Ursula! Ursula! You are defying me again!" I heard her tell Raleigh that I was the most unruly dog she'd ever tried to train, and then she expelled me from her pissy little old school. Well I got news for Miss Rose. She can just bite me.

I could forgive Raleigh for most of the stuff he put me through, but I can't forgive all the things he did to Merry Dell. When he took down all Merry Dell's country music posters because he didn't want the people down at his law firm seeing them when they came out for his high-faluting cocktail parties, that did it for me.

When Merry Dell asked Raleigh where he put her posters, he got his hackles up and snarled, "Away, Merry Dell. I put the posters away."

Merry Dell was standing in the doorway of the little room she used to make her fishing lures in. Even I knew better than to mess with her stuff, especially her blow-up Kenny Chesney doll.

"Ursula," she used to say when she was giving my coat a good brushing. "Isn't Kenny just the sweetest-looking guy you ever laid eyes on? I don't know why that Renee girl didn't stay married to him. Just can't understand it."

But Raleigh took the Kenny doll and all Merry Dell's posters on a one-way ride, and it really upset Merry Dell. He said Merry Dell needed to branch out and learn to appreciate some different kind of music. I guess he meant that opera mess he put on every time he called Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer while Merry Dell was at work.

I kept hoping Merry Dell would find out about Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer. Then she would be free to find herself a nice man like Kenny or just divorce Raleigh on general principles. Irreconcilable differences is the term Raleigh used when he talked to his big bug clients.

When Merry Dell was at Fontana's Family Restaurant where she worked greeting people and handing them menus and making them feel at home because that's what Merry Dell is best at, Raleigh, that lowdown cur, invited Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer over to the house. I couldn't really see what was going on because after that first time Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer came over, Raleigh kept me inside my crate in the laundry room. I guess it had something to do with me chewing up her silk Christian Dior thong. If she didn't want me getting hold of that silly-assed thing, she should have kept it on. From down in the laundry room, I could hear them talking and laughing upstairs, and it teed me off big time. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Raleigh didn't have to totally redo that whole section of the house just to get the smell out. The next time Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer came over, I hid from Raleigh, and while he was having his good time upstairs with old Sonya, I took at big dump right on her fancy Louis Vuitton purse.



The poop hit the fan a couple of weeks later when Merry Dell was vacuuming and found a love note from Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer to Raleigh. I knew as soon as she unfolded that note she was going to need somebody to hug.

"Why, Ursula, why?" Merry Dell kept saying, as her tears fell into my fur.

"Because Raleigh's a scallywag," I wanted to say, but I just leaned close to Merry Dell and let her hug me as hard as she needed to.

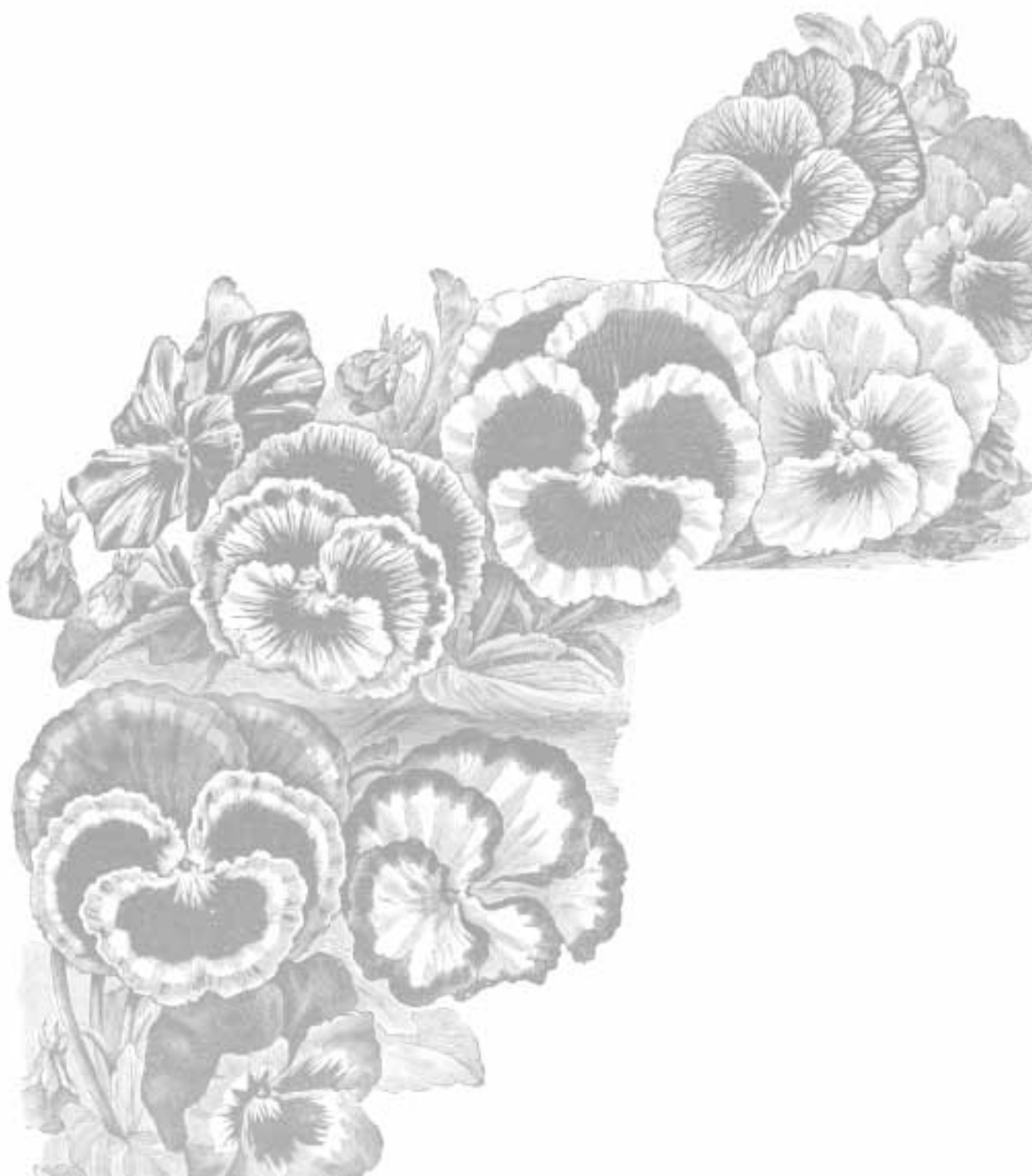
When she confronted Raleigh about the note, he didn't even have the decency to make up a good lie. I thought he could have at least said the note was intended for another man named Raleigh and that he'd just gotten it by mistake.

But noooo, Raleigh looked straight at Merry Dell and said, "I guess the cat is out of the bag. Yes, Merry Dell, I'm having an affair with Sonya."

Merry Dell didn't say anything. She just crumpled up on the floor. Raleigh, that brute, turned tail and trotted right out of the room. I went over to Merry Dell and licked her face. She wrapped her arms around me and said in this voice that sounded like she was choking, "Oh, Ursula, how could he do something like this to me?"

Raleigh, being a lawyer himself and knowing who scratched whose back (among other body parts) in our so-called justice system, got this real fancy-pants lady lawyer to represent him. Even though all Merry Dell asked for in the divorce settlement was me, that dad-blamed judge awarded me to Raleigh! He said since there had been no pre-pup agreement signed and Raleigh had paid for me, I was his! That night I heard Merry Dell tell her mother it was like I was just a piece of furniture and that she had no other choice but to dognap me and bring me to Arkansas.

I settle my head against Merry Dell's leg and close my eyes. I've always been a little far-sighted and the way I see it, Raleigh will never come after me. I may not be the smartest dog on the leash, but I figure it won't be long before Raleigh moves old Sonya Bennett Pfeiffer in with him. That will settle it once and for all because in any house, there's never room for more than one bitch.





Kristy

by Tiffany Pridgen

Kristy unfolded the brown paper bag, shook it open, and dropped three dirt-caked rhizomes inside. She folded the top closed and after uncapping her black Sharpie marker with her teeth scribbled "Barbara's Kiss" on the front.

"I can't believe you're digging up all my bulbs. I'm not gon' to have no flowers this year." Sythia Fleetwood skillfully spat through the porch railing from her plastic porch chair and relit the cigarette she had stubbed out earlier.

Kristy pretended not to hear and pushed her spade into the ground to dig out the next clump.

"You're not gon' take my tiger lilies, are ya?" Sythia smogged the air with her exhalation as she watched Kristy prop her shovel into the ground and lean on the handle.

"Momma, I planted the damned things."

"Whatever. Don't get your panties bunched up, I was just askin'." Sythia stubbed out the cigarette one final time and watched as Kristy tossed the bag into the open trunk of her car.

"Besides, you still got your namesake up there by the bird bath," Kristy said, gesturing towards the massive forsythia. It was just beginning to show its yellow blooms for the spring. Kristy had planted the bush from a clipping from the schoolgrounds during a plant unit in her ninth grade Earth science class. When the unit was over she took the rooted plant home and put it in the only place in the yard that wasn't in danger of the lawnmower. It had left to its own devices for ten years and Kristy wouldn't molest the beast even if she wanted to.

"You were always good at growin' stuff, even as a little girl." Sythia took a swig of her warm beer and made a face when she realized it was flat. She drank it anyway as she was accustomed to such due to the stockpile of cheap beer in her shed.

Kristy labeled another bag "various daylilies" and folded it shut as she cut her eyes sideways at her mother. Sythia fit the "rode hard and put up wet" stereotype to a tee and although her state-issued identification proclaimed her to be forty-two she could easily be approved for a senior citizen discount. "If you weren't such a drunk you could do it too," Kristy said, barely above a whisper. "Most folks drink coffee at ten a.m."

"You're a shitty daughter," Sythia said, too drunk for the insult to register.

"Yeah, wonder why? All I meant was that you used to do all that stuff with 4H. You won all those ribbons at the fair for stuff you grew. It ain't that you don't know how. You just don't want to." Kristy dug one last clump from the bed nearest the trailer steps and marked the bag "Declaration Canna."

"Whatever." Sythia struggled to her feet to go inside, slamming the screen door behind her.

Kristy was glad to be moving away from her mother and the influence of the legendary "Fleetwood curse." She was expected to be a whore, lush, or both, and was frequently told by her mother during childhood that she "ain't gonna amount to nothin', noway." Everyone in the county knew about the hundred-year-old series of incidents the family had fallen into and Kristy reckoned that if she got away from her mother she wouldn't be so susceptible. Sythia didn't understand why a single young woman would want to live on her own and told Kristy she was a damned fool for wasting her money. Kristy suspected that Sythia had been the one spreading the rumor that she was a lesbian. "Why else wouldn't she have a boyfriend?" she heard her asking friends on the phone. Kristy's half-sister Louette was almost two years younger and she already had four kids. "It ain't natural for a woman to not want nobody," Kristy heard her say.

"Maybe you'll get a job now that I'm gone," Kristy shouted through the door. Sythia would have to find a way to make ends meet. Without the room rent Kristy paid her and the groceries she brought home from the store she worked at Sythia would have to come up with cash money to maintain her lifestyle.

Kristy had been saving up to move since she was fourteen and entertaining thoughts of going off to college. That consideration didn't last long: Kristy was no academic. Instead of college prep courses she devoted herself to the early release job program where she worked at a plant nursery every day between noon and three.



When she graduated she worked two jobs so she could tuck some money away. As soon as she had saved up ten thousand dollars she got a mortgage on an acre of converted farmland on Happy Home Road. It had once been a cotton field and her little lot hadn't a tree within half a mile.

Kristy knew that she wanted a real sticks-and-stones house and not a mobile home, so she bided her time and waited some more to save up the money she needed to build one from scratch. She had begged every able-bodied peer she could think to call for free labor and each weekend for a year they could be found on site hammering and painting. She went no-frills and got it built for fifteen thousand dollars.

Sythia came back out and propped herself against the stair railing. "You gon' give me my key back? I could sure use it."

Kristy gritted her teeth, but pulled off a single work glove to regain some dexterity and felt around in her back pocket. She tossed the key copy at her mother after unwinding it from her keyring and watched her catch it in two hands. She knew that copies of that key were floating around all over the county in the possession of various "friends" and "uncles" who came and went as they pleased depending on whether or not there was another car parked in the driveway when they drove up. "I need you to go open up the shed so I can get my stuff out," Kristy said, refitting the glove around her fingers.

Kristy loaded her tools into the Camaro, wedging her shovel in at a diagonal in the backseat, and tossed her dirty gloves onto the floorboard behind the driver seat. She hadn't heard her momma creeping out the back door and padding to the shed in her bedroom shoes, but saw her bending over some crates stashed just inside the door. Kristy jogged through the overgrown grass to join her before she started getting nosy enough to open lids.

"What you got in here, anyway?" Sythia said, blowing cigarette smoke sideways.

"Stuff for the house. My house," she quickly corrected. Kristy took a storage crate handle in each hand and dragged them behind her. There were only two of the 38-gallon containers, but they were going to be hell loading into the car. She might get one in the trunk if she tied the lid down with some rope, and if she pulled the front passenger seat up far enough she could wedge the other one into the back. The Rubbermaid crates held everything she owned other than the few sticks of furniture she'd already arranged in the little brown house and the clothes she'd transferred in yard waste bags. They were filled to the brim with sundries such as dishes, plastic cups, queen-sized sheets still in their plastic package, a shower curtain, and other items Kristy had gleaned from a list intended for college students moving into a dormitory for the first time.

Sythia clamped the padlock back in its place and trudged after Kristy. "Where'd it come from?"

"I bought it."

She seemed satisfied with that answer and parted ways with Kristy at the trailer's backdoor where she entered without further conversation or farewell.

###

Kristy dragged her new water hose from the unfinished garage and clamped it onto the outside spigot. She lined up the paper bags she'd retrieved from her musty car trunk and soaked each pre-dug hole with water. She'd dug the holes the day before while she watched the phone company run their line. When all of her transplanted bulbs, roots, and rhizomes had been covered and watered she wiped her hands on her pants, kicked her boots off on the concrete steps, and unlocked the door to her empty home.



Full Moon Walk

by Ellen Morris Prewitt

The Talbert girls live with their mom in newly-sophisticated Oxford, Mississippi, not two blocks from downtown, but Little Mary Amna and Gertie can tag a ripe persimmon, they know when blackberries are sweet to the tongue. Big Mary Amna—who is my only sister and hates to be called Big Mary Amna—buys the girls' shoes on sale at the Wal-Mart, but the girls will lecture you on the dangers of bare feet and ringworm, rusty nails and lock-jaw. And, most important, once a month, the girls follow their mama on a full-moon hike around the Courthouse Square. As Big Mary Amna recites the oldest stories of our family, Little M. A. and Gertie march right behind, curving past the art gallery and the burger joint, spinning around the Courthouse, listening to stories about our ancestors, long dead and strange even when alive.

"Those 'strange ancestors' are these girls' relatives, Suzannah. And not all of 'em are dead, so you better be careful what you say."

The girls, of course, listen to perfectly divine stories of their perfectly normal family. Tromping in the moonlight. Behind their mom.

Big Mary Amna's husband is no impediment to her child-rearing decisions. Billy Talbert allows his wife to do the raising ever since he flipped his tractor while pulling stumps from the ground. The accident didn't kill him, but it broke his bones and scared him about the end of life so that he took off across country and returned with a Mexican woman who understood his panic. Now the two of them live in a shotgun shack out from Taylorsville, and Billy only shows up to sign official forms the girls bring home from school.

"He crushed his big toe. Francena was his physical therapist, helping him to learn to walk again without the big toe. You know that."

Billy Talbert ruined his foot and shackled up with his new squeeze. It doesn't matter. The problem we're talking about lies with the girls.

Time was, I'd be down for a visit, all of us sitting on the front porch shelling peas (bought from the Farmer's Market for the sole purpose of being shelled on the front porch) when one or the other of the girls would start talking about dirt.

Little M.A. would claim black dirt as the best. Loamy, she'd say, as peas popped into her stainless steel bowl. Gertie would correct her: No, Aunt Suzannah, red dirt, with sand, because it sifts better. Then they'd get into a squabble over slimy clay made with the garden hose, while Big M. A. ran her thumbnail down the seam of the pea pod, scraping peas free from the clinging flesh.

"What's wrong with doing something deliberately? I want these girls to know what it's like to shell peas."

Long steeped in the ways of old, the girls were happy. Then, as is their want, the tykes grew up. Little M.A. turned twelve and Gertie hit eight. They began to rebel.

"Are y'all rebelling? Is that what's going on?"

Their mother was confused, because the girls were too imaginative to follow an ordinary arc of rebellion. They didn't succumb to hip-hugger jeans held up by the pubic bone or red candy nestled in a plastic baby bottle, waiting to be teased out with the tongue. No. The girls knew they couldn't win that game. Instead, they chose to outdo their mother. Gertie took to wearing her golden hair in Heidi braids, and last week Little M.A. brought a slug into the house. She let the slimy thing crawl across her bedroom floor all night, then in the morning painted bright purple and green blotches in between the slug's trailing silver lines. Folk art, the budding artist said. 'Stained Glass on Wooden Floor,' she called it.

"I'm the one ties Gert's braids. Left M.A.'s picture on the floor for three days, too."

Not an aunt to stand by and watch things disintegrate, I invited the Talbert family to my home in Memphis, to see if we could throw a crimp in the situation. Big Mary Amna immediately said yes they'd come, but only when the moon was full so that we could trot down Beale Street in its round light. That's how the three of us ended up in



a bar on Beale at nine o'clock on a Saturday night in June, waiting for our T-bone steaks to arrive.

"A restaurant, Suzannah. Bluff's Blues is a restaurant."

Well, restaurants don't have bouncers. But restaurant, bar, whatever, we hadn't been there long—Gertie dancing a hoppy Scottish dance beside our table, Little M.A. flipping a fork into the aisle like a game of mumblety-peg while Big Mary Amna, silly blue kerchief on her head, sat buttering a saltine and humming, "You Are My Sunshine"—when a floozy woman with crinkle permed hair and red lipstick and a purple halter top switched past our table on her way to the back room, causing the two little Talbert's to stop what they were doing and erupt into a riotous discussion about the Civil War and General Hooker.

"You got that right, doesn't she, girls? That woman was a floozy. Fringe on her purple vest. Skirt tight across that big butt, black and white cowboy boots, too . . . You don't like my kerchief?"

I was admiring my sister's head kerchief and trying to decide if there really had been a General Hooker in the Civil War when a scrawny man in hitching overhauls lunged past the bouncer. He staggered into the aisle next to us, wagging his head from side to side like a drunken bull. The antenna of every person in the place zoomed in on the man's discontent, except for my youngest niece who'd stepped into the aisle to resume her Scottish dancing.

The man stopped, brought up short by Gertie's ramrod leg.

"He was drunk!"

When Gertie realized that the man was drunk and wasn't going to weave around her, my niece—brave? naive? or just as stubborn as the mule of a mother who raised her?—said flatly, I was here first.

"Well, bravo for her. I was watching out for you, wasn't I, baby? Nothing bad was going to happen to you."

Big Mary Amna, ever vigilant over her children, snapped her fingers at her daughter, but the child only said, This is the mad washerwoman, tired of washing the Englishman's clothes. She balled her fist into the rebellion of the dance and swept her arm emphatically towards the floor.

"Caught the man's pointed chin on the way down. Toppled him to the ground."

The man sprawled across Little M.A.'s clattering fork, opened his gummy mouth and bleated, Patricia!

"That floozy woman came switching out of the back room, her high heels clacking. You grabbed Gertie by the arm, caused her to plant her foot between the man's skinny shoulder blades."

Gertie inexplicably stepped on the man and Little M.A. yipped while the floozy woman stared at her man, down for the count. Bay-bay? the woman said, her red lipstick quivering.

"Oh, I love that. Quivering. Her lipstick quivering."

Regal even in the midst of chaos, Big Mary Amna wiped her mouth with her napkin, set the cloth on the table. Madam, she said to the floozy woman. My children don't mean any harm. They're just full of foolishness, brought on by an absentee father living with a Mexican woman in the wilds of Mississippi.

The floozy woman fingered the fringe of her purple vest. Wilds? she asked.

On pastures full of spiking grass, my sister said, where responsibility cannot tramp and even the past itself is afraid to intrude. And you? Surely a woman with such lovely cowboy boots has a story to tell?

"You're making me sound nicer than I was. Smarter, too."

The woman, charmed by my velvety sister, lifted her black and white clad foot and said, Brady's—Beaumont, Texas. Her boyfriend rose on one elbow. Bought by me, he said, and thumped his chest.

Little M.A. nodded to Gertie who said to the man, Surely a man with such wonderful coveralls as yours has a story to tell. She leaned over, tapped the man on the shoulder. Bleat again—for us, she said.

"Bleat again. You girls like that part, don't you?"

To the delight of the girls, the couple ended up at our table scarfing down chunks of red meat, salted French fries and oily salad. When I excused myself to get some fresh air, no one even noticed.

"You ran out! Embarrassed for making Gertie stomp on the poor man's back. You ran away!"

Fortunately, the moon over Beale was lovely. Big and round and low in the sky. I thought about making a wish, something about my sister's happiness and a plea for kindness from her treacherous, growing-up children, but it occurred to me that maybe it wasn't the full moon but the new moon you were supposed to wish on. Or the



harvest moon?

"Stars are for wishes, girl. Stars are for wishes."

I was puzzling this out, thinking maybe it was stars, when my sister appeared with her brood. She stopped in front of me, a toothpick wiggling between her teeth. The breeze off the river ticked at the end of her blue kerchief.

You take the lead, she said. But you've got to tell a story.

So I led us down Beale under the moonlight and told about Granny Durchet whose long hair plaited down her back in a thick braid that Mary Amna and I hefted in the evenings, then unbraided and stroked with a silver-backed brush, one hundred loving caresses down the length of its flat weight. That was Granny Durchet—married at nineteen, gray at twenty-two, silver until the day she died.

"It was a good story, the Granny Durchet story. You did good."

But when I got to the end of my story, Little M. A. asked, What's so special about that?

I told her that Granny Durchet hadn't cut her hair since she was six years old. She cried so bad at the scissors that her daddy promised: Never again. When we buried her, her hair reached to her knees.

"You smoothed Gertie's braids, pretended to tug them to the sidewalk."

I don't know if the girls were subdued by the story, or if they were just stuffed with T-bone steak and fries.

"It was the fries. That and the floozy woman."

Either way, their jaws slackened, their lips parted and their eyes lost focus, seeing not moonlit Beale but their great-grandmother in her coffin, her hair flowing in a mermaid's everlasting dream. Then the girls straightened, cried to their mother, Your turn, your turn!

Their mother, who knows exactly what her girls need, gladly accommodated them, launching into the Great Aunt Sadie story.

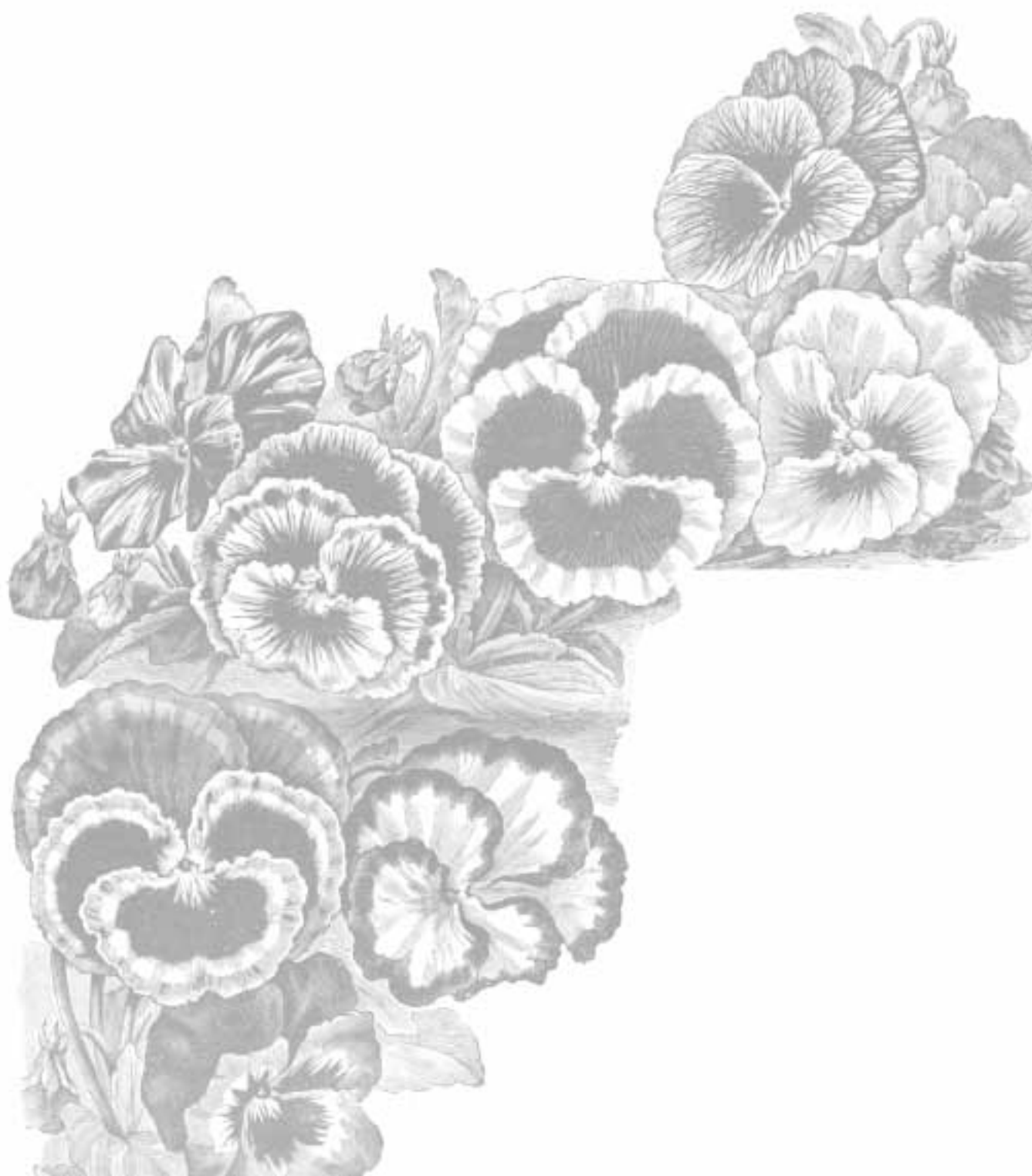
"You're acting like your proud of your big sister after all."

In years to come, Little Mary Amna would ask to live with her dad and the Mexican woman Francena, with whom she'd stand barefoot in the kitchen learning to make milk cakes. Gertie would forget the Scottish dancing so thoroughly it would be remembered only in the twitching of her toes as she thrashed in her sleep at night. As for me, I never again yanked my sister up to Memphis to teach her how to raise her kids. Because it takes a brave woman to walk through the darkness of child-rearing with the fully deliberate, bright-shining, intentional eye of the full moon.

"That's nice, Suzannah. That's nice. Thank you."

So I enjoyed that night, that moment—fleeting, destined to pass into a time remembered—when my sister traversed Beale and her children trailed behind her: blinders on, necks outstretched, straining just to keep up with their hazel-eyed mother.

"I love you, too, sweetie. Always have. Now, everyone to bed. Kiss your Aunt Suzannah. Tell her you love her. Tell her you loved her story."





Blackbeard Retires Near the Coast

by Anne Wilson Gregory

Blackbeard and his wife, Mary, live quietly
in a gated community on the Eastern Shore
of Maryland. Originally they'd planned to settle
on the Outer Banks, but for Mary the place was haunted
by memories of the night she'd paced the floor
until first light, when he appeared, bloody, wounded, out
of his head. They've since lived out his pardon in relative
peace and obscurity, which pleases Mary, who'd just
as soon have the thirteen previous wives believe the urban
legend of his demise. For his part, Blackbeard bemoans
how commercial the Outer Banks has become, due, largely,
to the strength of his own sordid reputation. It really ticked
him off when, as they toured the area with their Realtor,
a perky woman in an orange blazer, how many subdivisions,
restaurants, even souvenir shops, have cashed in on his name,
like "Pirate's Cove," and "Treasure Chest," so it made good sense
for the couple to migrate northward a state or two.

Folks in their new subdivision have largely accepted
the couple. Eddie, as he prefers to be called
on the cul-de-sac, hits the links a couple of times
a week and Mary, known for her green thumb, is a cornerstone
of the garden club. Occasionally people stare at Eddie
in WalMart; sometimes they even ask about his hemp hair
extensions, but except for one unfortunate accident
at the Japanese Steak House, the only time he now lights
them afire is for the grandchildren's birthday parties. People
unaccustomed to Eddie's eccentric wardrobe and unruly
facial growth assume he's a rock star intent
on avoiding the glare of the paparazzi, a notion he does nothing
to disavow. Eddie finally located a reliable pet
sitter who will come to the house to care for their exotic
birds, so the couple is free to travel, though not as extensively

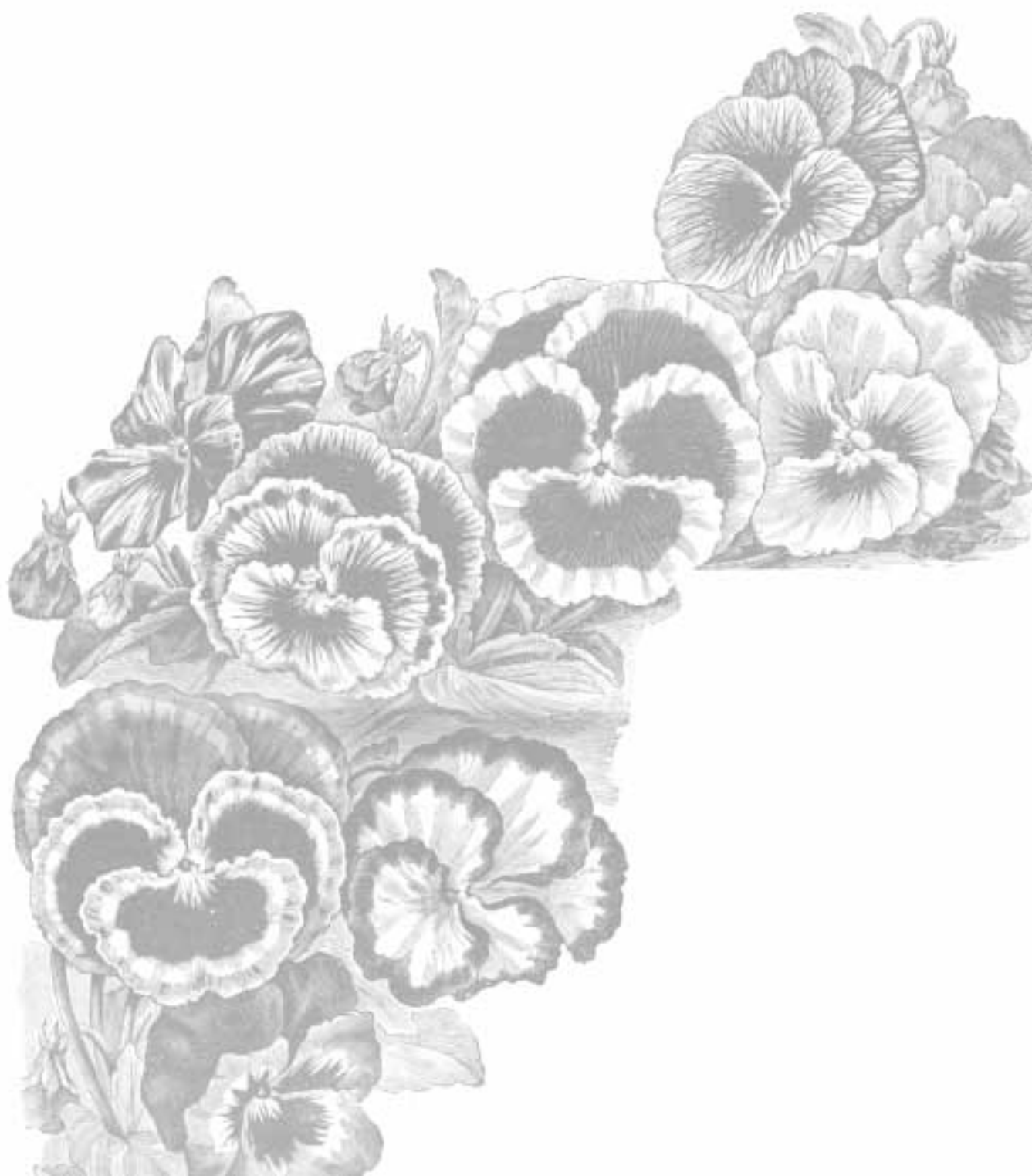


as they might like. Every fall Eddie joins Elvis for a long weekend at Lake Tahoe, during which Elvis is invariably sighted, titillating the public, but Eddie, virtually unknown to schoolchildren and forgotten by most of their parents, bristles inwardly at the curse of anonymity. Unfortunately, the Teaches have repeatedly been obliged to decline Jim Morrison's invitations to holiday in Argentina, because obtaining a passport has become an ordeal. In fact, Eddie has lately encountered difficulty even on domestic flights. Just last month, on a red eye to Vegas, his boarding was delayed by a ticket agent who, noting Eddie's swarthy visage and the bandana knotted about his forehead, raised the alarms when Eddie, even though he had checked his swords through baggage, attempted to purchase his ticket with gold doubloons. And though Mary dreams of taking a cruise, particularly since she misses their balmy days in the tropics, dares not suggest such a voyage to her husband. When their children were small, the entire family witnessed Eddie's attempt to stage a mutiny aboard the Staten Island Ferry during a sojourn to New York City. Mary realizes she risks great humiliation should Eddie attempt to overpower the captain or, even worse, the proprietor of a duty free shop, aboard a luxury liner bound for the Caribbean.

At home, when he's not golfing or lunching at the club, Eddie appears content in command of his spanking new Bayliner, which Mary christened Queen Anne's Lace, in deference to her gardening talent, an irony not lost on Eddie. Whenever Eddie, as retired husbands are wont to do, remains too much underfoot during Anne's domestic pursuits, the gentle suggestion that he go for a turn about the cove is generally all the impetus he requires to rev his engines. Another of Eddie's favorite



pastimes is scanning the shoreline with the industrial-strength
metal detector his youngest son gave him two Christmases
ago. Eddie devotes hours to scanning the strand
in search of loose change, old metal, and long-lost class
rings, the collection of which he makes no effort to return,
but displays proudly in a shadow box affixed to the den
wall. Recently, on a particularly fruitful weekend, Eddie unearthed
a gold Rolex, still ticking, that he wears among the dark,
tangled hairs of his left wrist.





Last Poem

by Anne Bailey

When the lily frees her petals
onto the dark earth of my seventieth year,
I sit and smile at her vigor.
Bloom runs in her, pushes her
to unfold golden throats to the sky,
to stretch open blanched petals flecked with pink,
like fleet fish on running days of warm stone.
I sit in the garden, still but for breathing,
head and feet bare, a thin old woman in the sun.
The May wind scatters apple blossoms,
white boats riding the air,
a chaotic phalanx,
of single winged angels,
children loosed from a captive home
after days of gasping cold.
I drift into the thrum of bees,
the smallest of birds,
indolent with industry,
proboscis intent on honey and wax.

My back is to the hold.
I relax in the old chair
whose grain I feel like my skin.
The pair of turtle doves
purrs on the roof, the backdrop for wind and bees.
They mate a single time for all the days and nights,
Or remain in lonely faith, not choosing again.
Hollow bones in hollow trees,
ready for flight.
She plucks under feathers, plump and soft,
lines the nest for the eggs, for the fledglings
while her lover pushes air through his throat,
accompanies the bees, ruffles in the petaled wind.

At my waist I wear a small red bag,
my father's gift sixty years ago.
I open the bag,
draw out the flint
with my sharp talons,



flexed around the leather glove.
But mine are stiffly hooked,
do not straighten now.
In my palm I lift the stone relic to the soft sky,
No saints' remains but holy,
spied on the road,
when my body grew big,
my belly like the hold,
babies enclosed as I am.
I listened for their voices,
I pushed them to my arms.
We all travel the same roads.
We launch from one sacred theater to another,
from womb to anchor hold to gardens in spring.
Love is the core.

Two years ago, they took Sawtre
from Lynn and locked him up.
I embroidered a cloth for him,
to make him brave.
The threaded lion sleeps with an open eye
like Jesus crucified, the flesh dies
but spirit lives.
Sawtre burned in March.
He took back his word
after nineteen days of torture
in a cell not built for human life,
as mine is, and I control my door.
Burn me instead, I sang.
If I were in that square,
roped upon the pole,
flame leaping at my feet
like foaming dogs in a pack,
I could see my sister curled
deep in the night.
In a cold stone cell
or in a summer barley field,
or astride my muscled husband,
flame is my Lord's call.
I am so old and dry.
I can ignite in a rush,
kiss my Lord,
and fly.



TO SUBMIT:

www.SouthernWomensReview.com
southernwomensreview@gmail.com

Attention Alicia K. Clavell
1125 22nd Street South
Suite 5
Birmingham, AL 35205