

POEMS · STORIES · PHOTOGRAPHY  
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**SOUTHERN**  
**WOMEN'S REVIEW**

SUMMER/FALL 2010





# SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---



## POETRY

---

- 12 **STEPHANIE PRUIT** Picture
- 13 **NELLJEAN M. RICE** Postcard from Culver City
- 14 **VALERIE NIEMAN** The Weight of Cold
- 16 **DANIELLE JONES-PRUETT** When a Potato is More Like a Prayer
- 17 **LIZ KICAK** Destiny, Florida
- 18 **PIA TAAVILA** Hovering
- 19 **PIA TAAVILA** Cut
- 20 **WENDY VARDAMAN** Winter Circus
- 21 **LESLIE CONTRERAS SCHWARTZ** THE MOSQUITO COUNTER
- 22 **DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN** SEATED IN HIS LIVING ROOM FULL OF PAPIER MACHÉ  
DRAGONS AN ATHEIST FRIEND EXPLAINS THAT ANGELS ARE EASIER TO LOVE THAN  
HUMAN BEINGS
- 23 **JENN BLAIR** So a man's
- 24 **BARBRA NIGHTINGALE** Cold Front in Miami
- 25 **SUZANNE NIELSEN** Decaf
- 40 **ANGIE MACRI** In the Labyrinth of the Smallest Bone
- 41 **ELIZABETH J. COLEMAN** Cumberland Island
- 42 **LYNNE BARRETT** Hatteras Bride, Knitting
- 43 **DESTINY BIRDSONG** Unravel
- 44 **DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN** ON THE GIFT OF AN ANTIQUE BLACK FAN
- 45 **AMY WATKINS** Housekeeping
- 46 **JOYCE KELLEY** Alabama Creation
- 58 **JESSIE CARTY** 1990's Fat Girl
- 59 **JENNIFER HOLLIE BOWLES** Flagging the Rabbit
- 70 **KYES STEVENS** Just Before an April Full Moon: Life Not So Still
- 71 **ANGELA TURNER** Untitled
- 72 **BRANDI DAVIS** Those Shoes are to Die for
- 94 **TARA MAE SCHULTZ** The Bagging
- 95 **DAWN LEAS** Moving



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---



## FICTION

---

- 28 **JANIE DEMPSEY WATTS** BACKYARD MESSAGES
- 30 **SHANNON ZIMMERMAN** Throb
- 36 **TAMMY MCELROY WILSON** Dog 'n' Suds
- 39 **NANCY H. WILLIARD** Head to Toe
- 48 **DEBORAH L. REED** RIOT OF WEEDS
- 52 **PEG DANIELS** My Sister, A Girl
- 56 **JO WHARTON HEATH** The Invisibles
- 60 **MARY BELK** THE SPINSTER
- 64 **STACY BARTON** A Girl Named Agnes
- 82 **ANN SEXTON** Small Doses

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

---

- 27 **ELLEN ANN FENTRESS** Your Call Is Important To Us
- 66 **JULIE SCHARF** Signals
- 86 **KEL MARTHE** Breakdowns
- 90 **CINDY SMALL** Narcissism Dressed

## PHOTOGRAPHY

---

- 74 **KYES STEVENS** Schoolhouse Photo: Untitled
- 75 **KYES STEVENS** Schoolhouse Photo: Untitled
- 76 **WHITNEY VINCENT** Dockweb
- 77 **WHITNEY VINCENT** Wherever the Tracks May Take You
- 78 **AMANDA LYNCH MORRIS** Talladega Pumps
- 79 **WHITNEY VINCENT** Summer Barrels
- 80 **A.R. PARLAMENT** Flower Blur



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**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*, *Delta Blues*, *Tampa Review*, *Saw Palm*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. She lives in Miami and teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University. For more information, check <http://sites.google.com/site/lynnebarrett/>.

**STACY BARTON'S** stories have appeared in a variety of literary journals including *Potomac Review*, *Relief*, *Ruminate* and *Stonework*. Her collection of short stories, *Surviving Nashville*, was released by WordFarm in 2007. In addition to short fiction, Stacy has written a children's picture book, two stage plays, a *Ringling Bros. Circus*, and an animated short film. Currently, Stacy is editing two new books with her publisher and working as a free-lance scriptwriter for the Disney Company. Visit her at [stacybarton.com](http://stacybarton.com) or follow her tweets @stacybarton.

**MARY ADAMS BELK** lives in Auburn, Alabama where she teaches Creative Nonfiction and Short Story Writing for the Auburn University Outreach Program. Her column, *Second Cup*, appears weekly in the *Opelika-Auburn News*. She has published a number of short stories and nonfiction articles over the years. Her short stories have earned awards in several contests, including the Alabama Writers' Conclave competition. She taught anthropology at Auburn University for sixteen years. Because of her love of anthropology and writing, she combines the two whenever possible.

**DESTINY BIRDSONG** was born and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, but has been living in Nashville, Tennessee off and on for the past ten years. She earned an MFA in poetry from Vanderbilt University in 2009, where she is now a fifth-year PhD student writing her dissertation on mother-daughter relationships in African American literature. A Fisk University alumna and Cave Canem fellow, Destiny's poems have appeared in *Torch: Poetry, Prose and Short Stories by African American Women*, *Georgetown Review*, and *Tabula Rasa: A Journal of Medical Humanities*.

**JENN BLAIR** has published in *The Tusculum Review*, *Kestrel*, and *Copper Nickel*. She has work forthcoming from the *Santa Fe Review* and *James Dickey Review*. Her poetry chapbook "All Things are Ordered" is out this month from Finishing Line Press.

**JENNIFER HOLLIE BOWLES** lives in Knoxville, TN, where she hears trains at mid-evening and plays guitar with the ghost of her father. She is the editor-in-chief of *The Medulla Review* ([www.themedullareview.com](http://www.themedullareview.com)), and she recently had a short e-chapbook, "Every Moment, Breakdown," published with Gold Wake Press. As of June, 2010, her poetry and prose has been accepted for publication in over thirty-five literary journals, including *The New York Quarterly*, *Echo Ink Review*, *blossombones*, *Dew on the Kudzu*, *Word Riot*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, and *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*. Jennifer is like baklava—composed of fragile layers, held together by sweetness, yet all together very firm.

**JESSIE CARTY'S** work has appeared in such journals as *MAGIE*, *Weave* and *The Northville Review*. She has two chapbooks in print *At the A & P Meridiem* (Pudding House 2009) and *The Wait of Atom* (Folded Word 2009). Her first full length collection, *Paper House*, is to be released in 2010 by Folded Word Press.

**ELIZABETH J. COLEMAN'S** poetry has appeared in, among others, *Connecticut Review*, *32 Poems*, *The Raintown Review*, *J Journal*, *Per Contra*, *Blueline* and *The Legal Studies Forum*. Her chapbook, *The Saint of Lost Things*, was published in 2009 by Word Temple Press. Elizabeth's translations of poetry into French have appeared in *Per Contra*, and her poems will appear in *Peregrine* in 2010. In November, 2009, Elizabeth was chosen to be introduced by the publisher of *32 Poems* at "Periodically Speaking: Literary Magazine Editors Introduce Emerging Writers at the New York Public Library." Elizabeth is also an attorney and classical guitarist. She lived in Atlanta, Georgia from 1974 to 1997, and her children were born and raised there. She now lives in New York City.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**PEG DANIELS** writes both fiction and nonfiction. Her creative nonfiction has been published in *New Mobility Magazine* and her fiction in *Gnu Writers' Series Literary Magazine*. A fiction piece earned an award in the 2010 Alabama Writers' Conclave competition. She recently completed her first novel, a mystery. Her latest project, in addition to writing a sequel to the mystery, is to turn her blog into a book; the blog shares her experience of her husband's recovery and rehabilitation after a car accident left him permanently paralyzed. Her former career as math professor has trained her to respect that the Devil lives in the details—but so does God once you get the details cohered.

**BRANDI DAVIS** is enrolled in the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. For more information, visit: [www.auburn.edu/apae](http://www.auburn.edu/apae).

**DEVON MILLER-DUGGAN'S** poems have appeared in *CutBank*, *The Indiana Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*. She has won a fellowship from the Delaware Division of the Arts and the Editor's Prize in *Margie*. One of her poems was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She teaches in the English Department of the University of Delaware, is married to an historian, and has two grown daughters. Her first collection, *Pinning the Bird to the Wall*, appeared in November 2008 from Tres Chicas Books.

**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*.

**JO WHARTON HEATH**, a new writer in Auburn, Alabama, has read several of her short stories at The Gnu's Room, and has written three novels: the first faintly auto-biographical made more interesting than the true version, the second a mystery wherein the reader is the only one who knows everything, and the third a chronicle of two months of a run-away wife.

**JOYCE KELLEY** was born in Norman, Oklahoma. She received a PhD in English from the University of Iowa in 2007. She teaches as an assistant professor at Auburn University, Montgomery. Joyce is currently working on several children's picture books.

**LIZ KICAK** lives in Tampa, Florida. Her work has appeared in *The Muse Apprentice Guild* and *The New York Quarterly*. She was the 2009 Finalist in the Bettye Newman Poetry Award, judged by Catherine Barnett. Liz is a graduate of the University of South Florida's MFA program and now works for the Humanities Institute. She and her dog, Finnegan, enjoy reading poetry at the park and eating Skittles.

**DAWN LEAS** spent part of her childhood living in New Orleans and Texas, and her forthcoming chapbook includes poems about both. "Moving" will be included in the chapbook, which is scheduled to be released on October 30, 2010 by Finishing Line Press. She earned a MFA in Creative Writing from Wilkes University, and her work has appeared on Gold Wake Press, *Willows Wept Review*, *Writer's Bloc*, *Interstice*, and 2009 *Poetry in Transit*. Currently, Dawn teaches at Wyoming Seminary in northeastern Pennsylvania.

**ANGIE MACRI'S** recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Nimrod*, *Quiddity*, *Redivider*, and *Southern Indiana Review*, among others. A recipient of an individual artist fellowship from the Arkansas Arts Council, she teaches in Little Rock.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**KELLY MARTHE** is an MFA student at Florida Atlantic University. When she's not actively suffering the ills that go along with being a high school English teacher, she dotes on her Australian Shepherd, Hudson, and plays dress-up with her dog-of-questionable-origin, Jazzmatazz. She lives in South Florida with her husband and two sons.

**AMANDA LYNCH MORRIS** is a photographer, scholar, writer, and traveler. She seeks to artistically capture the personality and essence of people, places, and pets with her camera, words, and research. Currently, Amanda is an Assistant Professor of Multiethnic Rhetorics at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. Her PhD in English (Composition & Rhetoric) is from Auburn University (2010), where she spent four wonderful years exploring the state with her camera.

**SUZANNE NIELSEN**, a native of St. Paul, Minnesota, teaches writing at Metropolitan State University. Her poetry, fiction and essays appear in literary journals nationally and internationally; some of these include *The Comstock Review*, *The Copperfield Review*, *Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Foliage Oak*, *Identity Theory*, *The Pedestal*, *Word Riot* and *580 Split*. Nielsen was recognized by *storySouth's* Million Writers Award in 2005 for her notable story, "Fists for Hands." So'ham Books released her first collection of poetry titled "East of the River," in December 2005, a collection of short fiction titled "The Moon Behind the 8-Ball & Other Stories" in 2007, and released her third collection of poetry titled "I Thought You Should Know," in March 2009. Her fourth book, "Cool Dead People," a collection of essays, will be released the end of 2010. Nielsen holds a doctorate in Education from Hamline University.

**VALERIE NIEMAN'S** work has appeared in such journals as *Poetry*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Arts & Letters*, and *West Branch*. Her books include a poetry collection, *Wake Wake Wake*, a short fiction collection, and two novels. Her third novel, *Blood Clay*, will be published in late 2010. She has received an NEA fellowship, two Elizabeth Simpson Smith prizes and the Greg Grummer Prize. She is the poetry editor for *Prime Number* and teaches writing at NC A&T State University.

**BARBRA NIGHTINGALE** has had over 200 poems published in numerous poetry journals and anthologies. *Geometry of Dreams* (2009) is her latest collection of poetry. *Two Voices, One Past* will be published as a Runner Up in the 2010 Yellow Jacket Press Chapbook Award. *Singing in the Key of L*, won the 1999 Stevens Poetry Manuscript Award and was published by the National Federation of Poetry Societies (June, 1999). She has five previous chapbooks, *The Ex-Files* (2009), *Greatest Hits* (2000), *Lunar Equations* (1993), *Prelude to a Woman* (1986), and *Lovers Never Die* (1981). She has also completed a memoir: *My Year of Ex-Husbands and Other Strangers*, as well as a companion book of poems, *Endings Are Only Beginnings in Disguise*. She's a Senior English professor at Broward College, South campus, Hollywood, Florida.

**A.R. PARLAMENT** is a Canadian born transplant to the great state of Alabama where she attends Auburn University Montgomery as an undergraduate Psychology student. She started photography as a hobby in 2006 and has continued with it through out the last few years as a way to have fun outside of her classroom endeavors. This is her first photo publication, though she loves to write poetry and fiction as well.

**DANIELLE JONES-PRUETT** is an MFA candidate at The University of Massachusetts at Boston. Her creative work has appeared in *The Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Freethought Today*, *MSU Read This*, *Poets Against War*, and *Something Else*. She is currently serving as poetry editor for the *Breakwater Review*.

**STEPHANIE PRUITT** is a writer and arts educator. She earned her MFA from Vanderbilt University and won the 2010 Academy of American Poets Prize and 2009 Sedberry Prize. *Essence Magazine* selected her as one of their "40 Favorite Poets." Stephanie is a Cave Canem Fellow and member of the Affrilachian Poets who gardens and receives her bills at a Nashville, Tennessee address.

**DEBORAH L. REED** currently resides in a small bedroom community in Central Texas with her daughter,



## CONTRIBUTORS

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grandson, and two dogs. She is a retired Science teacher who now works in Code Enforcement. Recent and upcoming publications include: *The Scrambler*, *Bannafish*, *Pocket Watch*, *Toucan*. *Cynic Magazine*, *Joyful*, *5923 Quarterly*, *Ranfurly Review*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Poor Mojo's Almanac*, *The Camel Saloon*.

**NELLJEAN M. RICE** is the Director of the University Academic Center at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina. She is also an Associate Professor in the Department of English; she has taught at Coastal since 1987. Her areas of specialty include Children's and Young Adult literature, British and American poetry, Creative Non-Fiction, Asian Literature in Translation, and First Year Writing classes. Additionally, Dr. Rice helped establish the minor in Women's and Gender Studies, of which she was the program director until 2005. Dr. Rice's monograph, *A New Matrix for Modernism: A Study of the Lives and Poetry of Charlotte Mew and Anna Wickham* was published by Routledge in 2003. Chapter four of the monograph will appear in *Poetry Criticism* Vol. 107. Her poetry has been published in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Calyx*, *Negative Capability*, the medieval discussion blog "In the Middle," and *Cold Mountain Review* among others.

**JULIE L. SCHARF** is a lover and writer of creative nonfiction, and has published several short stories, essays, and poems. She is the author of short CNF pieces titled "The Train of Bobby's Life," "Remnants," "The Christmas Towel," and "Coming of Age." Born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, she now resides in a small town in Colorado.

**TARA MAE SCHULTZ** is a second year MFA poetry candidate at the University of Memphis. She has work published in or forthcoming in *Touchstone Literary Journal* and *The Los Angeles Review*. She is also the senior poetry editor for the award-winning literary journal, *The Pinch*.

**LESLIE CONTRERAS SCHWARTZ** is a poetry student in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers. Her work is forthcoming in *Pebble Lake Review* and has also been published in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry* and *The Adirondack Review*. She is a freelance writer and teacher in Houston, Texas. Her work can be seen at [www.schwartzwriting.com](http://www.schwartzwriting.com) and <http://motherhoodwideopen.wordpress.com/>.

**ANN SHANNON SEXTON** is originally from Auburn, Alabama. She graduated from The University of Tennessee with a BS in Chemical Engineering then attended UAB School of Medicine. After receiving her MD, she was accepted to UAB's Internal Medicine Residency Program in Birmingham, AL. She trained in the University Hospital system, including Cooper Green Hospital, for three years. Currently, she lives in Auburn, where she works as both an internist and a hospitalist. *SMALL DOSES* is her first novel.

**CINDY SMALL** lived five decades in New Orleans, Louisiana and was born into a Jewish, Viennese family. A strange strain of cultures invaded her childhood as she quickly graduated into adulthood at a very early age. Cindy graduated from Tulane University with an undergraduate degree in Journalism and Masters in Historic Preservation Studies. Since Hurricane Katrina, she has relocated to North Alabama. But, nevertheless, floodwaters could never obliterate the sweet memories of New Orleans in her mind. Sounds of clipping horse shoes in the French Quarter were traded for the quiet droning of trains running through cotton fields. Her life is now surreal. As you read her memoirs, you will notice that she survived childhood and adulthood by the ability to laugh at the train wreck of her life.

**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/apae](http://www.auburn.edu/apae).

**PIA TAAVILA** lives in Fredericksburg, VA, and is a professor of English at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. Her BA and MA degrees are from Eastern Michigan University, while her interdisciplinary PhD is from Michigan State (English, Philosophy, Sociology). Pia has six children, four grandchildren, plays mountain dulcimer and enjoys gardening. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *The Bear River Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *Pegasus*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Southern Review* and *The Threepenny Review*, among others.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**ANGELA TURNER** is enrolled in the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project. For more information, visit: [www.auburn.edu/apae](http://www.auburn.edu/apae).

**WENDY VARDAMAN**, [www.wendyvardaman.com](http://www.wendyvardaman.com), grew up in Arkansas. Co-editor of the poetry journal *Verse Wisconsin*, [www.versewisconsin.org](http://www.versewisconsin.org), she is the author of *Obstructed View* (Fireweed Press 2009). She works for the children's theater, The Young Shakespeare Players, and does not own a car.

**WHITNEY VINCENT**, a native of Nashville, Tennessee received a BS from Auburn University in 2007 and is currently pursuing her BSN from Belmont University in Nashville. Photography being her passion and hobby, she has taken numerous photography classes from Watkins University in Nashville, and currently photographs events for the Nashville Scene Newspaper, local weddings, and maternity and infant sessions. Her passion lies in photographing people and places of the South. Please visit her website for more examples of her work, at [www.whitneyvincentphotography.com](http://www.whitneyvincentphotography.com).

**AMY WATKINS** grew up in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the Central Florida scrub and a big, loud, oddly religious family, the kind of childhood that's produced generations of Southern writers. Her poems have recently appeared online in *LiteraryMama*, *Poemeleon* and *The Glass Coin*. She is co-editor and host of the weekly poetry podcast *Red Lion Sq*.

**JANIE DEMPSEY WATTS** has lived in Tennessee, California and now Georgia. She writes fiction and non-fiction. Her short stories have been published in "*Southern Women's Review*" and "*Blue Crow Magazine*," and twice honored by the William Faulkner Creative Writing Words & Music Competition. Her non-fiction pieces have been published in "*The Christian Science Monitor*," "*Georgia Backroads*," "*Catoosa Life Magazine*," the "*Chicken Soup for the Soul*" series and "*The Ultimate Gardener*." She is at work on her second novel, set in the South. Please visit her at [www.janiewatts.com](http://www.janiewatts.com).

**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. Her work first appeared in *Phoenix*, the literary magazine of the University of Tennessee. She is working at present on a series of prose poems and a novel titled : *Ask at Night, Listen in the Morning*.

**TAMMY MCELROY WILSON** lives in North Carolina and is a past contributor to *SWR* and a number of journals, most recently *Rockhurst Review*, *MoonShine Review* and *Lavanderia* (New American Press). She is currently working on her MFA at Stonecoast. "*Dog 'n' Suds*" is an excerpt from her novel in progress.

**SHANNON ZIMMERMAN** is a graduate of the MFA program in fiction writing at the University of South Florida. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Opium Magazine*, *Tiny Lights*, and *Black Market Review*. She works and writes from an old bungalow in Tampa, where she lives with her husband, beautiful daughter, and dog.









## Picture

*December 1843*

*by Stephanie Pruitt*

Joanie says she can stitch a snatch of cloth  
smaller than two ham hocks into something  
fine to wear. Says her needle never goes  
dull and stays on the ready. Ready to bind  
what needs binding. Reconnecting seams.  
Says, her dresses are New York-strut-ready.  
She thinks, I'm gone 'be the one to show her  
frocks to the whole wide world up North.

Lymen says all we need is a dry spot to lay  
and a kettle to put over the fire. He'll make  
everything else. Been shaping this idea of us  
for at least twelve hog killing seasons. He's carved  
out a space for me. Says he has a knack  
for turning bits of nothing into wanted things.  
He wants to serve his goods to me and open my blossoms.

Adelia says we will wake to new suns. All hard  
places will be soft. She knows ways to mix  
letters. Makes them say just what anybody  
on our path will want to read. She wants me  
to put on those shoes she got and smooth my hair  
to lay under a bonnet. I'll play her servant.  
Says she knows the ways of white folk  
and I just need to follow behind her 'til we're free.

There's no picture in my mind  
of this freedom thing. I haven't been stirring  
over any ideas for some dozen of winters. I know  
my thick-skinned feet were made to walk bare  
on Tennessee earth. No new soil will soften me.  
No thread to bind this together.  
Not enough smoothing. No blossom  
that hasn't bled and dried.





## Postcard from Culver City

*by Nelljean M. Rice*

It's Friday night and my first visit is free  
At Happy Hour Heaven. Is this really  
Culver City?  
Alley-way Thursdays and pink hotels  
For the times I need a little  
*of course you can* struttin' its stuff  
and cruisin' through time.  
Where's peace of mind?  
She's a brand-new chubby little handful  
working the numbers of daddy's  
little girls, nutty fingers and all,  
a barn-fresh find. I feed her needs,  
not playing it safe, punctuating the date.  
Just don't get hoodwinked at the Post Office.  
Or let the wolf through the door.  
If history is any indicator, petty cash is not  
required. Shouted orders, money orders,  
Holy Orders. With its limited services,  
Duffy's Tavern is on the left, full  
of out-of-place Incompletes,  
those time's-running-out Slackers,  
those do-it-yourself, cook a half  
hour in a slow oven, "So I asked my Doctor  
for Zoloft," next-up, check under the hood  
LOSERS. Hansel and Gretel People,  
Dreaming of something spread out under  
a lemon tree. What is it a memory of, really?  
Homeless, lacking heat, whistling,  
"How much is that doggie..." I  
remember the Bomb, and Joe DiMaggio.  
That nice cop in Madison, although not unique  
to my experience, still qualifies as the single  
most important factor, really, after Andrew Lang.  
All in all, I know now that there never will be  
a replacement for home. Culver City. *Really?*

PS: Come get me. I mean it. Really.





## The Weight of Cold

*by Valerie Nieman*

Sweat,  
breath, all so

light, snow barely falling,  
a sky like down,  
the silence,

the accumulation  
of what scarcely is  
in wet wool

heavy mittens  
and frozen socks,  
weight from spun nothing,

insubstantial as the batt  
of air and fiber plumping  
the pieced quilt

now spread over the cold  
child – triangles of father's shirts  
and mother's skirts,

his familiar overalls,  
so what burdens the boy?  
Fever wheels of color?

The stitching?  
Ten regimented stitches to the inch,  
the cotton twist,

grandmothers' hands  
piercing and pulling,  
like the cold





working air into snow –  
and what's barely  
there, like vapor,

pressed into presence,  
quilt piled onto quilt,  
snow layered to ice:

the sweating child  
hallucinates glaciers.





## When a Potato is More Like a Prayer

*by Danielle Jones-Pruett*

He's always home in time  
to wring the rabbits' necks  
for Sunday supper.

She holds the potato rump  
firm in her hand, fingers the hide  
like a different kind of animal.

She skins it with short, stiff strokes:  
each one a little yelp, but underneath  
satisfying white—no blood,

no fur, no writhing guts  
to untangle. When she finds  
decay boring holes into flesh,

eyes open and staring, she goes outside  
and tosses it back to earth, hoping  
for something good to be reborn.





## Destiny, Florida

*by Liz Kicak*

What could the grazing cattle be eating?  
Nothing but roadside spiky scrub brush.

Fire lines hoed into the ground.  
Burned grass, parched skeletons of leafless trees.

A billboard reminding me a baby's heart beats  
eighteen days after conception.

In Nebraska, these would be fruitful fields of ripened wheat  
but here, just miles of death gone to seed.

An old tire, tethered to a fence,  
with the words "Jesus Saves" painted around the rim.

Surely the cows are starving.





## Hovering

*by Pia Taavila*

Son with the acid-laced pupils,  
what hollow thing eats at you?  
Is your mind/body meandering  
nothing more than youthful gaming?  
Or does death knock at your ribcage,  
its filthy fingers picking at your mortar?  
Stand down from this ledge  
before the quicksand covers you over  
and I can no longer cup your fleeting pulse.





## Cut

*by Pia Taavila*

A saw-tooth blade, circular, rips  
into planks of white oak. Chips  
and dust fly off the guard plate.  
Sweet smell of sweat and oil;  
the high, plaintive whirl and whine;  
the scream of splitting, brutal  
contact as the wood yields:  
sharp, hot, spinning rasps.





## Winter Circus

*by Wendy Vardaman*

They have to revise  
their choreography after back-to-back falls  
split up the act  
put them in hospital, then rehab,  
return them to the multi-storied  
white elephant they've lived  
with thirty years, as well as steep  
stairs everywhere, down and up  
its back. They refuse  
to sell. She says,  
"I'm not strong enough to pack,"  
and tells me about their breakfast high-wire act:  
my father—his own partner  
in a three-legged race—shuffles refrigerator  
to stove with each ingredient, one  
at a time, while my mother waits with a pan  
to catch his toss, to catch a swinging door in the face. Then he edges  
forward through the narrow passage  
kitchen to table  
balancing each plate on his tail,  
pushes the walker along with his nose,  
honks a chorus of "Arkansas Traveler," while she sends  
forks and fresh-sharpened  
knives winging wild from behind.





## THE MOSQUITO COUNTER

*"Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!"—Sylvia Plath*

*by Leslie Contreras Schwartz*

He has gone out into the open field,  
wildflowers climbing up his bare legs  
and mosquitoes landing, one by one,  
on every inch of his pale skin.  
With his hands stretched out  
as if to welcome them, say *take, this is my body*,  
he counts the swarm as they nuzzle  
against the shoots of his hair,  
as if outlying a maze.  
He counts patiently, looking to his watch  
to note the time, feeling the stings  
swell to an orgasmic itch all over  
his whole body. *Why do you do it?*,  
the reporter ask him and how could  
he tell her the feeling he got  
as they fed on his body,  
the light from the freeway large and then dim,  
again and again, and how he felt  
each prick, once and then a dozen times,  
how he felt their need and how it  
is made him hungrier, their  
vulnerability and strength a nectar  
from which he drank as he imagined  
his sick wife climbing into bed that afternoon,  
shadows walking slowly across her face.





SEATED IN HIS LIVING ROOM FULL OF PAPIER MACHÉ DRAGONS AN ATHEIST FRIEND EXPLAINS  
THAT ANGELS ARE EASIER TO LOVE THAN HUMAN BEINGS

*by Devon Miller-Duggan*

I wish I'd remembered then about the time  
years before, when I had been walking for days  
up and down several of the seven hills,  
and had been looking up at something or other beautiful  
forever, and all of it  
more beautiful than in any book you've ever seen,

and I'd finally gotten to the villa where the Berninis are,  
and was standing in the gorgeous hall  
beneath another Roman ceiling, and a woman, another American,  
exclaimed, "It's even better than the Sistine!"

This one was afloat with baby angels  
precisely the pink of a king's mistress's plush ass,  
and clouds puffed up the heaven where  
all the cherubic blessed were asked to do was watch us  
fend off dragons in the dark inside our unpink brains.





## So a man's

*by Jenn Blair*

head snaps sometimes  
when you hang him.  
Okay. It's that cruel  
dandelion game we never  
retired repeating that one  
afternoon we went  
all over the yard, laughing  
again and again, oblivious  
to the cold and the cars  
passing by. So sometimes  
the guillotine blade could  
have used one last good  
sharpening—raspy ineffectual  
letter opener mercifully  
prolonging the bad news  
of the winter electric bill.





## Cold Front in Miami

*by Barbra Nightingale*

It didn't snow like back in '77  
But it rained iguanas,  
Dropping like icicles from trees,  
their catatonic bodies too cold to grip,  
falling from mango, ficus, cabbage palm,  
even the hibiscus turned inward and brown,  
bromeliads dried up on the spot, wind  
sucked them dry, even the fish turned belly up  
and vultures circled the bridges, perching  
with the pelicans, who warily moved over.  
The longest cold front in memory,  
a world gone crazy with Floridians  
bundled in scarves, coats, mittens,  
extra blankets piled on the bed, reading  
of earthquakes, landslides, blizzards.  
Everyone still waiting for a sign.





## Decaf

*by Suzanne Nielsen*

We met for the first time inside  
the coffee shop across the street from  
the Baptist Church now reformed.  
I knew it was the thing to do,  
meet like that under the auspice  
of waiting on Ascension day.









## Your Call Is Important To Us

by Ellen Ann Fentress

*Secular humanist:* The name even hisses like a sneaky organism, slipping out to strike at the south. Lots of conscientious people around here are on the lookout for this threat, as urgent as the one for the equally loathsome species of summertime, the cottonmouth. Statistically, both threats are overrated. Just as most snakes are non-poisonous, most humans around here are determinedly non-secular.

This is a place, after all, where swimmers at the downtown YMCA share the pool with the occasional church-baptism service baptism candidates in the emptied swim lanes, the rest of the congregation looking on and lifting hymns up on the concrete. The Y is casual enough about the proceedings that the staff simply tapes up a flyer on baptism day, asking swimmers to contain their back strokes and flutter kicks to one lane during the rites.

More proof of the sweep of theology is in the local Yellow Pages. The faithful are busy making a buck along with making a statement with their business's name of choice. Flip the Jackson, Mississippi directory and find outfits brimming with their beliefs—Promised Land Realty, Believers' Bakery and the Christian tree surgeon.

Then there's PTL Plumbing, which recently took on the case of a couple who had just moved into the Jackson area. The couple's hot water heater kept going out. Someone told them PTL—short for Praise the Lord, of course—was the company to call, fast and capable.

The PTL plumber arrived and, as per that reputation for skill, spotted the trouble instantly when he saw the closet door to the water heater. "The flame's going out because there's not enough air getting in there," he explained. "I need to make the vent bigger."

The couple nodded, and the PTL plumber went to the truck for his saw.

"I'm through," they heard him call a while later.

The couple's eyes opened wide.

A cross loomed in the hallway. The PTL plumber cut his vent in the shape of a cross. Not only was it carved in their closet door, but it majestically glowed from the water-heater's flame. Thanks to PTL's not insubstantial expertise and special touch, the couple's hallway walls shined, undulating and orange in the roiling reflection of the technician's handiwork.

The couple stammered, as overwhelmed as Moses must have been, facing that burning bush. They took the vent design as an insult, a reaction which no doubt indicated that plumbing is a spirit-starved business wherever the couple came from. I suspect the pair was just as accustomed to house buying, cake baking and tree surgery being thin, theologically neutral activities as well.

Recently in France, the government reaffirmed the national policy of forbidding students at school from wearing religious items—no visible Christian crosses, no Muslim head scarves. Separating religion from public life works in France, but tamping spiritual wonder in Deep South business will never happen, not pre-9/11 nor post. I think it's a cosmic tonic, living with all these gestures of spirit—whether the spirit is mine or the bakery's. Like a cable pirate, I take advantage of what's in the air, only in this case it's not Rachel Maddow, but mystery. What moves a guy's soul can't help but move his saw, and I like the infusion I think I get as a customer/bystander to all these glimpses of the other side.





## BACKYARD MESSAGES

*by Janie Dempsey Watts*

At first the woman sweeping the porch did not see anything in the tree high above the back yard, but when she stopped her sweeping to look up at the morning sun spilling through the tree top she saw a thick upright form that was not part of the dark, gray-brown branches. She ran inside to the laundry room to retrieve her glasses from her purse, came back out and studied the thing sitting on the black elm tree limb. It was about a foot and a half tall and had gray tufts of feathers on either side of its head that looked like ears, or horns.

"El tecolote," Dora whispered to herself and clutched her hand over the crucifix that hung over her generous bosom. She could not believe her good fortune but she did not have time to dwell on it. There were clothes to wash, floors to sweep, beds to make. After she had finished sweeping the porch, she looked up again to see el tecolote staring at her with its yellow-orange eyes. She went inside the ranch house to do her work but ran outside often to see if he was still there. Every time she looked up, he would swivel his head around and stare at her with those startlingly bold and wide eyes. By noon, when her employer finally came out to the patio and joined Dora for lunch, he was gone.

The two women sat down at the wrought iron table on the cleanly swept patio to eat the Salvadoran rice Dora had cooked. Except for their broad, mid-life waistlines, the two women did not look alike. Fair and freckled, Ellen shielded herself from the sun with a wide-rimmed hat; Dora welcomed the heat of the noon sun against her glowing face and kept her dark, thick hair tied back with a turquoise clasp. They dug into the hot, fragrant rice--a mixture of oil, water, long-grain rice and chopped vegetables crisped brown in some places, "brown-down" Dora called it--and did not talk at first as they sated their hunger. At the table on this early September day they were simply two friends sharing a meal and taking in the view of the lush yard ringed with camellias and bordered on both sides by high trees that gave the yard a sense of privacy.

A crow cawed and flew over. They both looked at the dark intruder, and Dora spoke.

"I saw el tecolote there this morning," she said. "Owl."

"Where?" asked Ellen. Dora pointed to the neighbors' tree whose branches extended into Ellen's yard.

"There. On branch over this yard. You yard."

"In the daytime, you saw an owl?" asked Ellen. She had thought owls were night birds. Dora nodded.

"Is good luck," she said. "For person who see it. Not everybody see it."

"Oh, then it's luck for you and not me?" Ellen teased. Dora smiled and then quickly clarified.

"I see tecolote, but he look at you house. Maybe you have luck and me too," she said diplomatically. They both laughed.

"I could use some luck," said Ellen. She mentally catalogued her recent string of bad luck. Sales had dropped off and money was tight. One of her Manchester terriers had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure. His pills and the vet bills were phenomenal. Although Dora only came one day a week, she had thought of letting her go, but did not want to. Dora needed the income as much as Ellen needed the companionship. Ellen's misfortune had all seemed to start the previous fall when she had returned from a business trip and found a sick, stray Siamese cat in her back yard. A bad sign, Dora had told her, and when Ellen wound up paying \$ 150 to have the cat treated, only to have it run away a day later, she agreed. The cat's appearance seemed to have triggered a year of bad luck. Perhaps the sighting of the tecolote would counter it....

Dora thought of her past year. The granddaughter she'd cared for the past three years had been reclaimed by her birth mother, just released from prison. So now her home was empty of her angelic eight-year-old granddaughter Anna. Yet at home she still had her own daughter, 20, who had found a good-paying job where her bi-lingual skills were appreciated. And Dora was grateful to have steady work from a roster of clients, who like Ellen, seemed too busy, or did not want to, clean their own houses. Good luck could bring her money enough to move from her one-bedroom apartment near the freeway where she lived with her daughter





and another mother and daughter. Perhaps her coming good fortune brought by el tecolote would enable her to buy a house with a garden where something always bloomed, a yard like this one Ellen did not seem to have much time to enjoy....

That night when Ellen went to let the dogs out into her back yard, she thought of the owl that Dora had seen. Would the creature dive bomb into her yard and eat one of her tiny dogs? She listened for the owl's hooting but all she heard was the gurgling of her neighbor's feng shui fountain above the muted sound of the surf echoing up the canyon. Later, after she had collected the dogs and tucked them into their dog beds, she went to her bedroom on the other side of the house. She lay in her bed by the open window under the big sycamore and tried to fall asleep while she thought of the owl, and luck, and fortune, and misfortune, and superstition. She remembered lying by this same window—was it last night? She had heard a hooting noise from across the opposite canyon, or so she had assumed. Sound traveled in the canyons—barking dogs, yelping coyotes, music from the bands playing at the nearby country club and occasionally a random gunshot in the night. But when she had heard the hooting owl, probably the same one Dora had spied in the black elm tree, the sound had emanated not from the canyon but from right in her own back yard. Dora had noticed but she had not. Perhaps we are the last to see our own potential good fortune, Ellen thought as she drifted off.

Dora did not ponder her possible good luck but rather acted upon it, stopping on the way home to buy nine lotto scratchers at the liquor store when she transferred buses. She tucked the tickets in her purse and waited till after she had cooked supper to see if the luck the owl had brought her had come to pass. Later, lying in her bed listening to her daughter's soft snoring and the roar of the passing cars on the freeway, she thought about the money she had won with the scratchers and reassured herself that with luck, one had to be patient.

The following week, Dora and Ellen were on the back patio again enjoying Salvadorian rice and looking up at the bare branches of the black elm. No owl was there.

"Tell me more about the owl," Ellen said.

"The one I see, was tecolote. In Salvadore, my grandmamma tell me it was lucky." Dora explained there was also a bad owl, le chuza, which was gray or white and smaller. Seeing le chuza would bring death to the one who saw it. Dora reassured Ellen the owl that had made its recent appearance was the good one.

"When I tell the people in Spanish, they say, 'oh my God, you saw where?' I tell them here."

"Did you have any luck?" Ellen asked. Dora nodded.

"Yes, I won six dollars at scratchers."

"Good," Ellen said. "I'm glad you got the luck."

"Me too."

"How many tickets did you buy?" Ellen asked.

"Nine," Dora answered, and smiled. Ellen looked puzzled for a moment.

"So you spent nine dollars and won six?" Ellen asked.

"Yes," Dora nodded. And they both laughed.





## Throb

*by Shannon Zimmerman*

Raylene's mom called them sun worshippers. She didn't move her hands when she spoke, like she usually did, but stayed perfectly still in the chair, her chin pointed skyward, eyes closed behind her sunglasses. Raylene knew her mother was referring to the hundreds of people scattered all along the shoreline as far as she could see, almost all of them collapsed face down onto their beach towels by this time of the afternoon.

Beads of baby oil glistened on her mother's legs and arms. Raylene could smell it just by thinking about the clear plastic bottle; even that was enough to give her a disoriented feeling, like she had just come off the tilt-a-whirl. In the morning, she'd had to pull the straps of her mother's bikini top down and rub the oil into her back and shoulders, picking out the pieces of hair that got stuck in the mess. "Watch it," her mother warned.

Raylene hated the way it felt, the oil dripping down her arms, slipping beneath her fingernails, making her hands so sticky that she couldn't touch her face or eat any of the snacks they brought until she could find a bathroom with soap and water to wash them in. They had moved here from Lake George, New York, where she couldn't ever remember feeling sticky and sweaty and gritty the way she did when she came home from the beach. The air, the snow, the water in the lake, everything in the Adirondacks felt crisp and clean. She'd tried before here at the beach to imagine that the sand were snow and the Atlantic were the lake, but it never worked. It never made her feel the way she had before they moved, happy.

A boy bobbed in the ocean. He was too far away for Raylene to see his face, but she hoped it was her brother, Henry, whom she was supposed to be keeping an eye on. "Where do they all come from? The sun worshippers?"

"Canada. New York, mostly, same as us. You can only put up with those winters so long before you go crazy."

Raylene didn't repress the urge to correct her mother. "I'm not like you, or Henry, or these vacationers. Whoever heard of Christmas on a beach, anyway?"

Her mother turned onto her stomach. "Go play with your brother."

When they returned home later that afternoon, Raylene went to change in the master bathroom she and her mother shared after the divorce. There she found an old tube of her mother's lipstick in the trash. She plucked the tube from the pile of spent tissues and wrappers and looked at the name on the bottom. Throb. A violent shade of purple that her mother wore on a daily basis. Raylene had always wondered what it would look like on her, so she opened the cap. The stick was rubbed down to almost nothing, just a steep-sloped, greasy-looking nub. Still, she could use it a few times if she was careful. With the lipstick on, her eyes looked more green, her skin more creamy than pasty, her hair more lustrous.

"What are you wearing?" Her mother had been paying more attention to Raylene's routines lately, smelling her breath after she brushed her teeth, looking inside her underwear before she folded them.

Raylene asked if she meant her tank top.

"I mean on your face. Are you wearing my lipstick?" She set down the cooler she'd been carrying in, and the remnants of the morning's ice and soda sloshed and banged inside.

"You threw it out."

Raylene's mother always put on lipstick before she got out of the car, even if it was only to go into the post office or the grocery store. Even if she had no other makeup on or hadn't combed her hair, she would always take the lipstick from the console, twist the rearview mirror so she could look at herself, and apply it in three quick strokes. It was only fair that Raylene should get to wear it once in a while.

"I'm talking about what you're doing," her mother said. "Are you looking for attention?"

Raylene felt guilty somehow, although she didn't know why she should. She lowered her eyes. "No."

"Then don't wear lipstick. Twelve-year-olds don't need to be made up."





Raylene stalked out of the room, stung by her mother's disgust. She felt as though she might suffocate before she could return to the beach tonight, where she and Henry would be dropped off at her father's rundown studio apartment for the weekend.

At the Old King Cole Motel, where her father lived near the boardwalk, she could walk around unsupervised. She'd done it many times before, getting milk for morning cereal from the grocery store, once even buying a pack of Winstons for her father from a vending machine in one of the bars. The way Raylene saw it, there was her mother's beach, the strip of sand covered in sunbathers during the day, and there was her father's beach, the beach at night, where the ocean disappeared and became a gaping black chasm between sand and sky, where she could hear whispered negotiations from dimly lit side streets, where the smell of fish carcasses from restaurant Dumpsters drew a parade of scavengers, where there weren't any rules.

Instead of feeling excited by the whole night beach scene, though, she felt threatened, distracted, irritated by what she saw: streetlamps swarming with tropical moths and palmetto bugs, casting their frenzied shadows on women in bikini tops and denim jean shorts trying to show off their tans; tattooed men with sun-bleached chest hair pulling up to the bars on their motorcycles; people sitting on benches, speaking in unknown languages; and raspy singing and whiny guitar seeping out of the bars.

Her new surroundings were so different from Lake George that they threatened to scrub away her old life, her days spent in Florida eroding her northern memories like waves on the shore. She needed to somehow ignore the incessant suck of sand and shell—the ocean's hiss, as she liked to think of it—and remember the stinging cold and crisp taste of the black lake water.

Raylene knew, of course, that the ocean was far vaster than the lake, and in her mother's mind, superior. Her mother had argued the point on one of their first visits to the beach after moving to Florida. "Can you see anything there on the other side? Or there?" her mother asked, pointing, antagonistic. Raylene looked, hoping she would see a perimeter, a bank, a clump of trees, anything besides the torn white cloud and rippling chemical-blue waves.

"You can't imagine its size," her mother said, and she'd been right—you could die trying to swim to the other side. But in Raylene's own mind, the ocean could not compare to the lake's depth, its stillness.

Fantasizing about Lake George was a relief, but with each passing day, the more difficult and less satisfying it became. If only she could somehow return. She wouldn't have her old life back exactly, she knew. Someone else—a widow, her mom had said—moved into their old house as soon as they'd left. But she could go back to her old school, her old friends, get a canoe, maybe live with a family friend as a daughter.

A few months before, Raylene had attempted to run away. She'd been caught wheeling her bicycle out of the garage. Her mother was accusatory. "You're going to follow your father's footsteps, is that it? Are the two of you trying to punish me?"

Raylene spent the rest of the night apologizing, rubbing her mother's back as she lay next to her in their shared bed, listening to her cry. "I didn't even know the way. I couldn't figure it out. I would've only made it around the block and back." It was true. Raylene had consulted a road atlas, but she couldn't untangle the highways in her mind and had given up. She'd left that night as planned anyway, in the hope that something would happen.

Maybe she could be rescued. Maybe someone who'd always wanted a daughter, who needed a daughter to be their friend, to take shopping, to go to the movies with, to not feel all alone. Maybe that person was out there, right now, looking for someone just like her.

When they pulled into the motel's parking lot later that afternoon, Raylene could see her father, shirtless, a beer bottle in hand, sitting in a cracked plastic deck chair with his back toward the street. He looked darker since Raylene had seen him last, or maybe she thought this every time she saw her father, because in her mind he was still twenty pounds heavier and wore sweaters to ward off the long New England winters. "Well, kids," Raylene's mother said, "Here we are. Looks like your father's already celebrating your return." Henry jumped out of the car and ran to the spot where their father sat, but Raylene was old enough to recognize the venom in her voice. When she got out of the car, her mother opened her own door and called out over the roof, "Still looking for that last check."

Raylene's father turned, finally noticing that his family had arrived, and tipped his beer in her direction. "Must've gotten lost





in the mail.” He raised his eyebrows and offered a half-hearted smirk. He then turned his attention to Henry, who had by this time reached his father and was attempting to wrestle him out of his chair.

“Actions speak louder than words, Doug,” Raylene’s mother said as she slid back into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut. Raylene had just started to walk away when her mother rolled down her window and called her back. She warned her that she had better be prepared to give her a full report the next day. “He won’t do it here,” her mother said, nodding toward Henry, “God forbid your father would have to clean it up.” Henry had begun wetting the bed again. Raylene helped out by changing Henry’s sheets while their mother got him showered. “Nope,” she continued, “that kind of thing is reserved just for me.” She was right. Henry didn’t wet the bed on the nights they spent with their father. Of course, that could be because they all had to sleep in the bed that pulled down from the wall, and maybe he tried harder to be considerate. “And aren’t you forgetting something?” her mother said, tapping a finger to her cheek.

Raylene set down her duffel bag and straightened her shorts before leaning in to kiss her mother goodbye.

Raylene made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner, and she and Henry ate theirs while their father continued with his beer and turned on the TV. He didn’t object when Raylene asked if she and Henry could go swimming, instead mumbling something about the playoffs, so they got changed into their bathing suits and went out to the pool. After all the sunbathers, lying on the lounge chairs like filets, smoking, and drinking from plastic cups, had drifted off, she and Henry continued playing fish out of water and taking turns trying to knock each other off a raft someone had left floating in the pool. She only got out once the sun sank low, stalling on the horizon, a bright orange smudge hanging in the haze.

Henry did not protest when Raylene said it was time to get out; he did not make her chase him around the pool like he sometimes did, trying to catch him in the towel, flung open like a cast net. Instead, he stood there, clenching his jaw to stop it from chattering, his wrinkled fingers clasped beneath his chin. Most of the time people probably didn’t think he was her brother, or that she was her mother’s daughter, for that matter. Her mother and Henry both shared the same stormy green eyes, the same blond hair, though her mother’s hair was Raylene’s own blackberry shade at the roots.

But here in the slanted evening light, with Henry holding still for so long, she could see they had the same thick lashes and that his chin bunched up the way hers did when she tried to keep her mouth shut.

“All right, come on,” Raylene said, consciously softening her tone so she wouldn’t sound bossy.

“Where are we going?” Henry asked, teasing.

Raylene wanted him back in the apartment, wanted the darkness outside to settle, and her father in front of the television, so she could be alone.

“*We* aren’t going anywhere.”

Back in her father’s place, Raylene pulled her tank top and shorts on over her damp bathing suit. A speck of something staggered along on a stream of artificial air before landing on her shoulder. It was nothing, just a piece of paper lifted from the cigarette ash piled high in the heavy ceramic ashtray her father rested on a pillow between himself and Henry, who had settled in next to him to watch whatever game was on. To Raylene, they all looked and sounded alike, but her father and Henry could spend hours just watching players run up and down a court or field after a ball. For once, though, she was glad they were so distracted. Her father tapped a fresh cigarette out of his pack without even looking, and Raylene wondered for a fraction of a second whether he might say no when she asked him if she could go out by herself. She might wonder more, plan her interactions with him more carefully, if her family were still together under one roof. At their home in New York, everyone had their own room. No one sat together in a confined space, in this concentrated way, for twenty-four hours or more, like they were forced to here at the Old King Cole Motel.

What would Raylene know about her father then? She probably wouldn’t know that he’d rather eat peanut butter sandwiches than cook or that he fluttered his eyelids without seeming to realize he was doing it whenever he spoke about his adolescence or got irritated. Back then, he was a permanent fixture, but he lingered always in her periphery, a comforting warmth next to her on the couch, a bulky, friendly shadow in her bedroom doorway at bedtime. She might have had to be more careful then about asking





what she could or couldn't do. But now she knew he would say yes.

"Dad, can I have some money? Just a few bucks for some candy and soda? For everyone?"

"I want chocolate milk," Henry said.

Raylene thought she saw her father's eyelids flutter as he looked away from the television to reach into the pocket of a pair of jeans lying on the floor. He flattened a five-dollar bill and handed it to her.

"Are you sure you want to go by yourself?"

Maybe Raylene had been wrong about him letting her go so easily. He looked at the slated window, at the opaque nothingness staring back because it had gone completely dark outside.

She reminded him that she'd gone alone other times.

"Your mother won't be too happy if she hears about this."

Now she understood. "It's only seven o'clock. Besides, Mom stays out past midnight when I'm babysitting Henry."

"Is that right?" He took a sip of his beer and lit a cigarette, seemingly exhausted by the conversation. "Well, your mother's an adult. She can do as she pleases."

Raylene hesitated just a moment longer, unsure of whether or not she had permission. When Henry added that he also wanted Pixy Stix, she left.

Enough light played across the surface of the pool that Raylene could see her reflection in the chrome handrail to apply the lipstick. As soon as she left the motel and started walking down the boardwalk, she felt different, as if the tide had changed and the air and the crowd and the tumbling waves were pulling her forward, as if she could tuck her feet under and be carried along.

Now, passing beneath the light posts, hearing the buzz of electricity, the panic of moth wings, catching snatches of strangers' conversations in all their various pitches and tones, made her feel the excitement, like she'd felt the time she won a big stuffed dog at the carnival—she felt lucky.

Everyone who passed by noticed Raylene—all of them either returning her smile or nodding hello. She was busy thinking of what she would say to show someone she was worth taking along. She might say she was an orphan, that she could earn her keep, that she didn't belong here. She might have to pretend she was someone's daughter or niece, she might be given a new name, she might never see Henry again.

Her mother would have to start unloading the dishwasher herself. But the bedroom would now be hers; she could clear out the three dresser drawers Raylene used and the closet space, too, where she kept her school clothes. She'd save enough money on food and gas, she could buy that denim jacket she saw at the mall or the Rod Stewart concert tickets for the show in October. Henry wouldn't have to wait until next year to start Little League baseball. Nothing much would change for her father, as far as she could tell. She hoped her portion of the child support went to Henry, and that her dad wouldn't keep it for himself. They might all feel a little bit sad, things might be a little lonelier for a while—she had a side-by-side image in her mind of both her mother and father, each in their homes, eyes glazed over in front of the television, the rest of the rooms dark, Henry hiding underneath the covers with a flashlight.

The gas station was only a few blocks away. She'd go and get the snacks, just in case, but Raylene meant to take advantage of her time alone. She had only to turn down one of the side streets, cross through an alley, and then use the crosswalk to get to the other side of A1A. Then she'd decide whether she wanted to keep walking the boardwalk or maybe even just stay on A1A so all the cars passing could see her.

The alley Raylene walked down emptied into a parking lot behind a Greek restaurant. A car, a shiny black sedan, sat alone in a space under the yellow glare of a sodium lamp, its motor running, exhaust snaking from the tailpipe. Raylene walked by it, and almost kept going. Then she noticed the license plate—New York. She couldn't believe her luck. This was going to be much easier than she had thought. The lot was deserted, so when she stopped, she was able to stand within view of the driver's side window without being too close.

A sapphire blue tint on the glass gave the car an expensive look. With the dome light on inside, Raylene could just make out that the man had dark hair and a collared shirt. The boardwalk was in sight from where she stood, but far enough away that all its





sound was muted, leaving only the engine's reverberation.

This was it. Her chance to escape. Her chance to be taken back to where she belonged. So why hesitate? Why did she feel that tightness in her belly? Raylene did her best to push that feeling away. She took a deep breath and waved at the man behind the window. The man did not wave back, but his window came down a few inches in response. Raylene wasn't sure what to do next. The man was watching her. She had his full attention, yet he did not smile or lift his hand to invite her over. Her muscles tensed in anticipation—it was his move. The car door did not open. It might even be locked. Raylene stepped closer.

Then the man spoke. "Where's Mom and Dad?" His voice was barely audible over the engine.

Raylene became alert, ignoring the other sounds so she could concentrate on what he said. "Not here."

The window rolled down the rest of the way so that she could see his full face, the dark whiskers covering his cheeks, his round nose, his receding hairline. "That must be scary for you, pretty girl like you, walking around all by yourself." His brow creased, the way she imagined her father's might, if he could ever work up enough concern over something.

"I'm not scared." Raylene felt herself straighten, but tried to relax again, remembering that her defiance only seemed to upset adults.

"Wow. You're a brave one." He laughed.

Raylene wasn't sure what he wanted to hear, so she said nothing.

"I like your lipstick."

Raylene felt the waxy shade smeared on her lips with the tip of her tongue, glad for it.

"I'd like to get a better look at you. Could you turn around?"

Raylene knew that he was trying to decide if she might be good enough. She tried imagining she was in a beauty pageant. If she'd only worn a dress, something to twirl in to be more impressive, instead of pulling her shorts and tank-top on over her still-damp bathing suit. That was something she hadn't thought of. Even so, she'd do her best. Raylene grabbed onto the hem of her shorts and spun in the light.

"Slow down. Again." The way the man spoke let her know that he was impressed. After Raylene turned again, he pointed and said, "Is that your bathing suit?"

Raylene looked to where he was pointing, to where her bikini strap showed on her shoulder, and nodded.

"Let's see it."

She hooked a thumb under the strap and pulled it away from her shirt, so he could see.

He shook his head. "No, not like that. I want to see the whole thing."

Her heart clenched in her chest, but she didn't really know why. He wasn't asking for anything unreasonable. She'd just spent the whole day in a bathing suit anyway, so what was the difference now? She lifted her shirt and pulled it over her head, suddenly aware of her bare skin, her flat chest, worried that he may just drive away, leaving her standing there with her shirt off.

"That's really, really nice. That's a good color on you." The man smiled wide, creasing the corners of his eyes, and Raylene was relieved, but still felt the urge to cover herself. She held her shirt in one hand over her stomach.

"Why don't you step a bit closer? That's better. Now I want you to close your eyes for me, okay?"

When Raylene's eyes were closed, he said, "Now hold out your hand."

Raylene felt the palm of her hand get clammy and worried that he would feel it too, but just his fingertips grazed her palm, and then each finger, one by one, enclosed her hand. It felt warm and dry and comforting. But it only lasted a second, and then his grip grew stronger, and then he was pulling her toward the car.

Raylene's eyes flew open.

She looked down into the car. He'd lifted himself off the seat. His pants were undone, the black leather belt lying like a gash across his white, hairy thigh. He arched his back and pulled her hand down into the car through the open window. Raylene saw that the cords in his wrist were strained against the skin. His other hand was pistoning up and down, gripping his *thing*, which was swollen, purpled. His eyes were still locked on hers, and Raylene saw that his pupils were dilated, empty black pits surrounded by pools of blue. Sweat stood out on his forehead, despite the cool air she felt flooding through the vents inside the car. A breeze





lifted the hair off her shoulders, carrying with it that slick smell. Baby oil. It was enough to make her stomach lurch, and she jerked her hand as hard as she could. She felt his grip loosen a bit, and she jerked one more time, and twisted her arm, and she was free.

Raylene didn't even look back, racing across the street to the gas station without waiting for the signal to change, her shirt trailing from one hand like a white flag. Car horns sounded from somewhere behind her. She thought the man in the car might call after her, or follow her into the gas station parking lot, waiting for her until she came back out. He might steal her money or put her in the trunk, shove his tongue down her throat or put his sticky fingers all over her body the way she'd seen in the afternoons when her mom watched her "stories." The thought of it made her head hurt, the pressure building all over her skull, a throb working its way down the nape of her neck. She would scream. There were people all around—the cashier, someone on the payphone outside, two teenagers by the magazines. She wouldn't allow herself to be taken, not like this.

Raylene spent what felt like was a long time staring at the soda fountain in the convenience store. Somehow, the fluorescent light and the low hum of the slushie machine calmed her, at least as much as could be expected. Finally, she convinced herself that the man was not, in fact, waiting right outside to grab her, and she absentmindedly selected and paid for a candy bar and walked out the door.

The black car wasn't there. She wasn't going to be stolen, but she couldn't take down any license plate numbers, either. Maybe she could still tell someone, though. Once she was back at the hotel, when Henry asked what had taken so long, she could say, "Something happened." She couldn't imagine her dad wanting to speak to the police. "Talk to your mother," he would say. He wouldn't want to hear. On Sunday, the next morning, when her mom came to pick her up, she could show her the alley where the black car was parked and tell her what she'd seen; she could ask her mother to pull in to the gas station and talk to the cashier. "This is my daughter," her mother would say. "Did you see what happened to her last night?"

But the cashier wouldn't have seen anything but a nervous-looking girl browsing his aisles. They wouldn't find the man in the black car. By then, he'd be gone. Far away, back in New York, creeping around the shadows, waiting for other girls on their way somewhere.

Back at the motel, Raylene sat down by the pool. She unwrapped the chocolate bar she'd bought herself, but after a few bites, set it down. She could still feel a tingling remnant of the black car's heat on her thigh. If she closed her eyes, she felt fear creep into her body like oil that stained her bones, but there was something else, too. Another feeling pushing forward that was not fear but caused her blood to quicken just the same when she imagined the man in his car, looking at her, those eyes so blue and empty.

No one hung around the pool at night at the motel, but the underwater light was always kept on. It made the pool shine brighter than everything else, almost bright enough, Raylene thought, that you could forget about the shabby plastic furniture, the discolored stucco on the walls, the junker cars in the parking spaces. She got up, went to the steps, kicked her sandals off. The water was cool on her feet. She'd go in up to her legs. Her dad and Henry were probably still on the pull-out bed where she'd left them. Her mom would get mad at her for getting her clothes wet, but she wondered if her dad would even notice. He often fell asleep just after dinner.

Raylene went in deeper than she'd told herself she would. The water lifted her, and as she lay floating in the pool, she closed her eyes and held her breath. She could feel her heartbeat, slow and steady in her chest, but now she did not see the blue-eyed man or anything else, just a faint light from somewhere on the other side of her eyelids.

It was hard to tell how late it was or how long she'd been gone. The beach was surrounded by city, so there were lights all around, dulling the night sky, tingeing it with color. Near the ocean everything was so dark, it'd be easy to get turned around and not be able to find your way back to shore. To think, just the weekend before, she'd considered taking Henry night swimming. She should have known better; Henry was still too young.

When she opened her eyes again, she noticed something floating, shining in the stream of the underwater light, lost near the filters along the wall. She reached for it, but it wasn't quite close enough to grab. She swam to get it, and once she had it in her hand, she knew what it was. She must have dropped it before she left. Raylene took the cap off, afraid the tube might be full of water, the little bit of lipstick that remained broken off or dissolved. But it was intact. She could use it again, if she wanted.





## Dog 'n' Suds

*by Tammy McElroy Wilson*

The Dog 'n' Suds root beer stand was an outpost of teen-aged culture in a world of farmers and dull grownups—hardly a place for a mother and two children to frequent. Yet Mama embraced the open-air restaurant for its cheap food, breezy atmosphere and most importantly, the possibility of hunkering down in a car seat to disappear, if necessary.

She's been that way since Daddy walked out earlier that summer for another woman. There had been a big fight, Mama had thrown face cream jars and hair brushes. Later, Billy had told me that he'd seen Daddy and a brunette huddled in his pickup behind the Sinclair station, smooching like love-struck adolescents. It was hard for my eight-year-old brain to grasp, but even then I knew better than to mention a word of this True Reason to Mama. There was no telling what might happen.

Music blared from car radios as vehicles stirred up chalky dust from the gravel parking lot. A teen-aged boy in a white paper hat slipped a cardboard number 6 on our windshield and took our order: three "stray dogs" (no mustard or catsup to drip on the seats), three mugs of the World's Creamiest Root Beer and two orders of onion rings with extra napkins.

"This place reminds me of Tampa," she said. Tampa, our home until a month before, had been a foreign place to Mama who had never adjusted to its jungle-humid summers, Cuban tempo and clogged highways.

I looked around at the men in feed caps and women in wash dresses sitting in farm trucks. No one could confuse the Dog 'n' Suds with Florida.

Before long, the carhop hooked a tray of food onto the edge of Mama's window.

"Now whose turn is it to say grace?" she asked.

"She's Grace," Billy pointed at me, laughing at my churchy middle name.

"Cute." Mama handed me a paper tray of onion rings, "Billy, you say the blessing this time."

We bowed our heads as he mumbled, "By His hands we are fed, give us Lord our daily bread."

I assumed he meant the hotdog buns.

"Amen," Mama repeated. She handed each of us a heavy root beer mug chilled to perfection. "Brother Dirk says he'll be happy to drive you and Mike to camp this Sunday."

Billy hurried to swallow his first bite. "Honest? I'm going?" He wiggled in his seat as she handed him a list of required camp items.

"Looks like it's your lucky day, Billy Boy. Brother Dirk found you a campership." I sighed. Brother Dirk, the dopey preacher, had taken an interest in Mama since Daddy had left us a few weeks ago. I tried not to think of them as boy- and girlfriend, but here lately, it was getting harder and harder. He was single and Mama was getting freer by the day. After a long hiatus of letting herself go, she'd fixed herself up with a poufy hairdo, bright nail polish and a new pair of cat-eye sunglasses. "If Gale can tear off to Timbuktu, I might as well enjoy life a little," she said.

I'd heard that "Timbuktu" was really Tulsa, but Mama was never in the mood for me to point this out.

"What's a campership?" I asked.

"I means you get to go to church camp for free." He smiled with bread stuck between his teeth.

"Nothing is ever free, Billy. We've got lots of work to do to get you ready," Mama said. She glanced in the rear-view mirror as she spoke.

I wrapped the paper tight around my hotdog as the two of them gloated about Billy's good fortune. It wasn't fair. He was going to get to go to camp and escape our miserable summer while I had to tough it out in run-down rented quarters with Mama who busied herself with television game shows and daily devotions when she wasn't moping about Daddy in Tulsa. The official reason was "oil business," but I knew better than to ask too many questions.

Billy balanced his drink in one hand and sandwich on his lap as he read the list. "Eight pairs of shorts, a dozen t-shirts....





Mama, I don't have all this stuff."

"Like I said, we're going to have to go shopping. When we get home, you round up what you have."

"But they leave this Friday."

"All the more reason to get busy." The sternness in her voice was trying desperately to sound chipper. I sensed that she was going to miss having him around as my counterweight. Without Billy to temper me, Mama wouldn't know what to do with me and my curiosity, my constant wish to push the edges. She might call me "creative" or "spirited," though I represented trouble, a girl too big for her britches.

I clicked my bottom teeth on the edge of the thick glass mug. Billy would get to go off and sing hootenanny songs and do fun stuff. I took another sip of my drink. "Here, Mama," I said. But when I handed the mug back over the seat, cold syrupy liquid sloshed all over my legs, my shorts and the car seat. I jumped from shock.

"Dammit. Look what you made me do," she said.

I could feel the stares of people parked on either side of us as she flung a cascade of napkins toward me.

"I should've known better than to let you kids eat in the car. Billy, get out and help clean up that mess. I've got this tray on my window."

The spill was soaking into the upholstery. Mama flashed the headlights for the carhop. As we fussed over the mess, it would have been easy to have missed the truck rattling up to the opposite curb. As the motor cut off Billy happened to look up. "Hey, isn't that Daddy?"

I saw where he was pointing. Across the way was a sandy-haired man laughing beside a brunette in green pickup truck.

"Is he back from Oklahoma?" Billy said.

"He sure is. And he's got her with him," Mama said bitterly.

I didn't have to ask what she meant. Billy's story came rushing back like a song in minor key. Mama jerked her door, clattering the food tray to the gravel. She grabbed one of the spilled mugs, and she marched toward the truck. "Liar!"

"Oh gosh, she's going to kill them," Billy said.

Mama raged toward the pickup, her fists clenched as she flung the heavy mug. The mug splintered the windshield, bounced off the hood and landed near the front tire of a red convertible. She screamed bastard as if it was the worst possible word in the whole English language. Someone honked their horn. More shouts.

A fat, bald-headed man in a stained apron came running from behind the ordering counter. "Hold on there!" He grabbed her arm and struggled to control her lunging body. Teen-agers and men hopped out of vehicles for a closer look. The restaurant man pointed at Daddy's truck, then back at our car.

Daddy stepped up to the man, pulled a few bills from his wallet and gave them to the fat man who shook his fist solidly at Mama. "Don't you ever come back here, you understand, lady?"

Daddy stood in disbelief, his arms loose at each side, obviously dying to talk to us, afraid of rattling her further. She spit at him, staggered back to our car. After a moment or two, he stepped back to his truck, said something to the dark-haired woman in the passenger's seat.

Mama made a fist. "Go ahead, coward. Run."

In her hurry to bail out of the car, she had spilled cups of ketchup that clumped like dried blood on the gravel. One of the carhops stepped up with a broom and dust pan. She stepped over the young man and collapsed into the driver's seat. "Please don't anybody talk to me."

She tossed some coins at the car hop and spun out of the parking lot. She'd shown Daddy up but had embarrassed us all, cursing and acting out. I imagined our story rippling across party lines over and backyard fences, spreading like weeds through fertile soil that made Wakefield the gossip town it was. My head felt swimmy. She was shifting so fast, I was sure she would either strip the gears or get stopped by the police, but I couldn't dare look up. If I did, a hundred pairs of eyes would be staring back.





We passed the Speedy Press with its sign over the door. At night, the word “press” shimmered zigzag lines every few seconds. I wanted to stop and see Aunt Connie and Uncle Wayne who ran the place. You dropped off wadded-up dirty clothes and got them back pressed and clean as new. Stains disappeared like magic. They could help us forget what had happened, but I knew better than to mention them. Mama wasn’t in any mood to stop.

Billy had been right after all. Daddy did have a black-haired woman around, and the way Mama had sprung into action, I couldn’t help but think she’d known all about it along. Daddy hadn’t been in Tulsa any more than a goose, but I didn’t know whether he’d told her a lie or she’d made it up herself. And I thought of the dark-haired woman, how she had stolen my father. All I wanted was for this crazy time to hurry up and finish so we could be normal again.





## Head to Toe

*by Nancy H. Williard*

Now, Louise, just set your fingertips in the bowl and I'll tell you all about it! Adventure just finds me, sometimes it looks like little old ladies.

If you started at their feet, you would think they were exactly the same, just two old ladies wearing those old fashioned white wedgies. Lord, you'd think one or the other would wear a closed toe at least. They sat next to me at the beach where I was recovering from my divorce. I took the turquoise Jansen bathing suit and my nails were vermillion with a silicone base and a polyurethane finish.

The cute one said, "Harriet, I will never understand why you don't let me get your hair done." Well, that caught my attention, being in the profession. Old Harriet grunts and pulls down her hat.

So the nice hair one begins fuss. I get up and stroll over and offer my card. I always have one. So I say, "Ladies, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. I would like to offer my services." I write my room number on the back and head for the pool. Now the next day I'm having a soft shell crab sandwich at the Crab Pit in Destin and behind me I hear May with the nice hair still after Harriet's head.

"Harriet, you have to try life," she says, "You need to celebrate. You can't just go around like everything is normal!"

"Why not?" Harriet sounds blue. "I came here with you like normal."

"Yes and you're almost as grumpy as normal!" May spits this out like she'd like to say more but then she tries again all gentle. "Harriet, you've spent the last twenty years taking care of me and my ailments. With what the doctor said you should be doing the cha-cha at the Purple Pelican tonight."

"May," Says Harriet with all this Christian tolerance, "I took care of you because someone had to protect you from the nitwits at the agency!" After a little quiet, May starts up again so I go to the bar and have a Polynesian Special with the umbrella. I love exotic drinks! Don't you?

Well, Destin is tiny so, sure enough, they do call. May wants it to be a surprise, hair, nails and all. No problem! I never travel without my box. Oh, Honey, they were in the good condo building!

Just as I'm knocking on the door, one of them screams. The door opens and they are crying on each other. "I will see you through this, sister," May is saying. Harriet looks at me confused and May hands me a tip and the door closes. Weird, that's what I say.

I saw them later on the beach but we didn't speak.

So there! You asked me where I was last Wednesday. I was back in Destin, doing Harriet from head to toe, may she rest in peace. What? Oh! Not quite vermillion on the toes, more like cardinal.





## In the Labyrinth of the Smallest Bone

*by Angie Macri*

The children in rows waiting outside  
standard brick schools for their parents  
know how long it takes a voice to reach  
the ear in terms of canals and nerves.

My son tells me he can't hear God, and also  
that the moon likes a dark room, and that  
he might like to ask questions about God  
in the middle of the night, and can he wake me.

So he joins me in the labyrinth  
of the smallest bone pushing on a window,  
the hollows of dawn, of query. The man's  
in the moon tonight, adults used to say.  
I never saw him there but would agree.

When I grew up, I saw him then,  
a common man, and learned his mood,  
the rule, his expression that said nothing of all  
he had seen. Are there ghosts? my son asks.  
Only in dark castles far away from us.

Our membranes tune in the stretch  
of moonstrung blue, before the paper runs  
but after the trains by the river, when the crickets  
and ditch frogs are also murmuring.





## Cumberland Island

*by Elizabeth J. Coleman*

Live oaks wear Spanish moss  
the way flamenco dancers  
add scarves or earrings.

Remember how we danced where  
waves come in, threaded shells  
along hoop earrings, ran across dunes,

then dove in—seaweed soft as moss—  
swimming with the grace of dancers  
in a sea of blue-green velvet? Now

I walk along the shore, by earringed oaks  
of many arms; Bodhisattva dancers sway  
towards decaying mansions by the sea.

Canopy of primeval green beckons me in.  
I grab a bike in the old barn, ride past magnolia  
leaves, across roads and sand, hair, necklace,

earrings fly to the sea. Fiddler crabs, contra dancers,  
sidle up, sideways; oyster catchers and terns wade  
in anticipation. Wild horses repose, hooves caressing

sand. Conch wrings an oboe's song as, one last time,  
I divine the sea.





## Hatteras Bride, Knitting

*by Lynne Barrett*

To make her work warm and lasting,  
she loops rough wool  
around wood needles,  
building columns of patterns.

For good fortune,  
she adds Inverness diamonds.  
Basketweave, honeycomb, claw,  
ladder, plait, blackberry, bobble,

the double zigzags  
reflecting the course of married life:  
her choices for his sweater.

Legend says a drowned man is known  
by his sweater, her choices

reflecting the course of married life,  
the double zigzags,  
ladder, plait, blackberry, bobble,  
basketweave, honeycomb, claw.

She adds Inverness diamonds  
for good fortune,  
building columns of patterns.

Around wood needles,  
she loops rough wool  
to make her work warm, and lasting.





## Unravel

*by Destiny Birdsong*

You are my mother's color. I like that.  
When you sit on the couch and hold the remote control,  
Your arms look as thick as braids of challah bread.  
The wrist bones are as delicate as a girl's.

Whenever I look at our hands, holding,  
The fingers are always tight against each other.  
Yours tap codes: you/i/you/i/you.  
Our palms touch. Most times they are damp.

I have seen things end. You may want something.  
I will be cold; your fingers pull away.  
Our hands release, palms go from touching  
To nothing. I am preparing for this.

You are not. You turn your face toward me, sleeping.  
We take in the breath from each other's nostrils.  
Your mouth is beautiful and unconcerned.  
You are a dream I will not disturb for now.

There is a notebook I like to write in;  
The pages are held together by a binding of string  
But I am always ripping them out; ripping, forgetting  
That when I take one, I only loosen another.





## ON THE GIFT OF AN ANTIQUE BLACK FAN

*by Devon Miller-Duggan*

Silk organdy—almost fragile now-- and small black sequins,  
black ribs, frayed edges. Some other woman owned it,  
dangled it from her small white wrist,  
snapped it open, scooped air against her face and neck,  
across the shoulders her dress bared,  
across where her white breasts swelled  
and subsided over the boned line  
crossing the upper edges of her nipples.  
Linen encasing the corset bones, no matter how fine,  
rubs slightly, for hours, against her tightened skin,  
skin against ribs. There will have been rose warm lines  
where the corset came away, unlaced, unclasped, fallen away  
onto the puffed and rumpled billows of skirts  
untied from her bound waist. She will have  
stepped over swells of silks and bones,  
away from the weight and swathing,  
toward an open window,  
toward the night air she wanted on her skin, inside  
her loosening chest. Leaving the gown, she will have  
taken up the fan, again let it fall open.  
She will have thought it matched the sky outside—  
gauzy silk sparking against the transparent black sky sparkling.  
She will have stirred the air. The fan will have pulled  
against the soft night. The moon will have been caught  
in folds, fold after fold, glimmer after glimmer, air against  
awakening skin, sequins flashing like fish in a net,  
stars caught in webs of black trees against black sky,  
pearls scattering in black lace, the air chill as mirrors,  
and alive. There will have been other hands  
pulling pins from her hair, loosening,  
letting it slide over her shoulders, other hands  
smoothing the moons of her breasts, silvering her throat.  
Stars will have, will have, will have  
shivered down her legs.

Mine now.





## Housekeeping

*There is certain holiness in repetition.—L. Monique*

*by Amy Watkins*

My mother makes the water scald.  
I cool it down, but wash

the dishes as she taught—  
add hot water till it scalds,

wash glasses first then plates and bowls,  
last the pots and countertops.

My mother makes the water scald.  
I cool it down a bit and wash.





## Alabama Creation

*by Joyce Kelley*

In the beginning, there was a small brick house, and it was good.

And God said, Let there be light green tendrils from the earth, unfurling and burgeoning into soft  
carpets, and sweet heart-shaped sorrel with small butter-colored blooms.

Let there be multitudes of henbit with green doily leaves and fuzzy knobbed polka-dots  
yielding yawning purple dragon-mouths.

Let the earth bring forth grass in all colors and lengths, both broad leaves and thin.

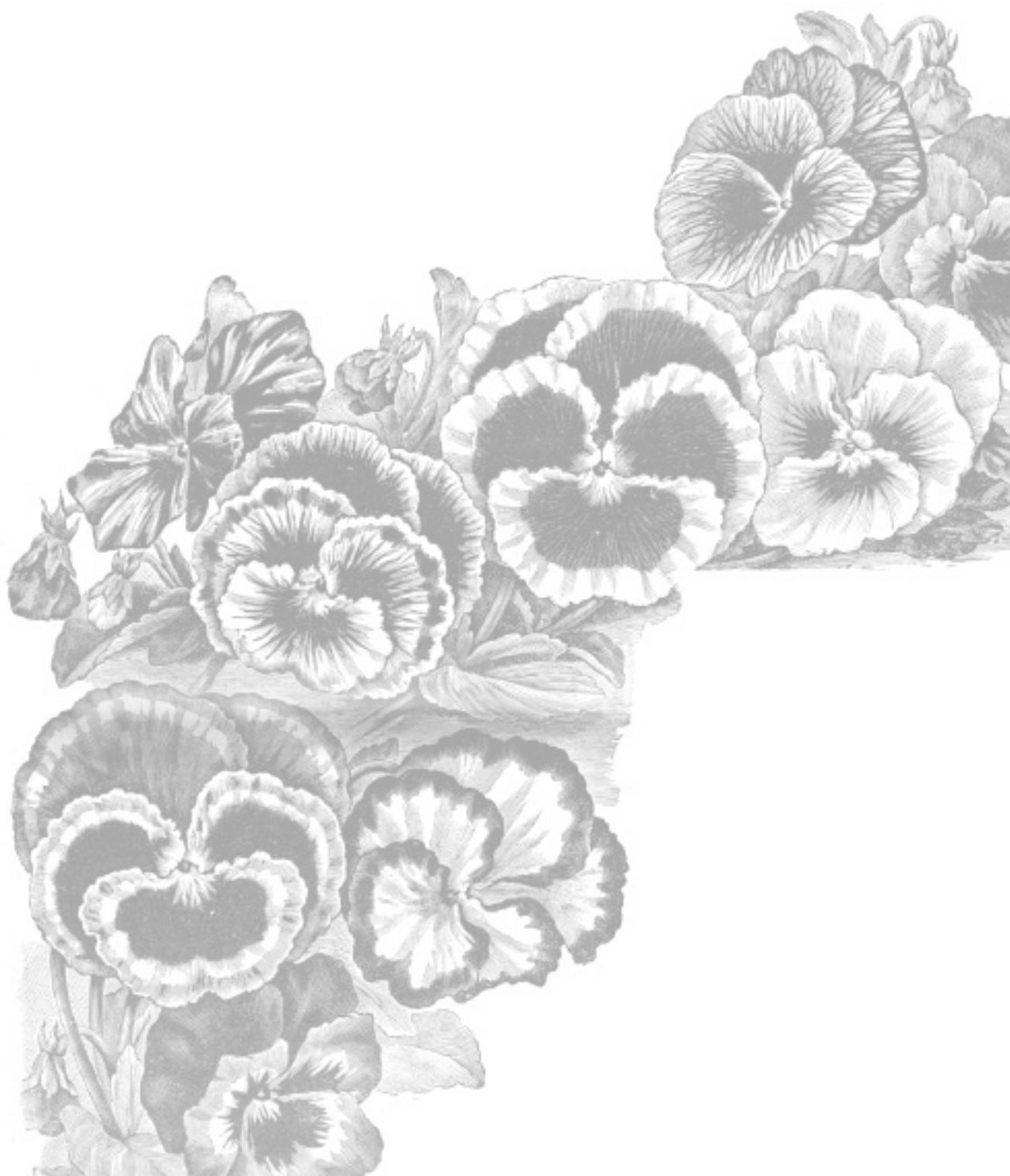
Let there be long-stemmed aster, curling open to welcome guests with white daisy  
bouquets, and handfuls of bright dandelions.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth spiders of all sizes.

And God said, Let there be lizards, and let them have dominion over the spiders.

And on the seventh day, the neighbors left a handwritten note saying, "Please cut your grass."









## RIOT OF WEEDS

*by Deborah L. Reed*

This week it was 3:07. Exactly. Last week it had been 4:13, which had given her over an hour of extra sleep. But this week the magic number seemed to be 3:07. At precisely seven minutes after three for the last six nights, Jennifer had started awake, eyes wide open, with the knowledge that she was totally rested, that there would be no more sleep until early afternoon, when, despite her vow not to, she would drift off to sleep while watching her afternoon talk shows. There was nothing to do this time of day. Early morning TV was a wasteland of infomercials, inane sitcoms, and newscasts that merely rehashed the same situations she had heard the night before. Reading, once a source of pleasure, had lately become a chore as her limited income failed to keep up with her failing eyesight. New glasses were a luxury, heart medicine was not. So Jennifer simply lay in her bed, arms across her chest, legs crossed at the ankles, until boredom and a full bladder forced her from it.

The clock on the coffee pot read 3:56 in red blocky numbers, bright in the gloom of her large kitchen. Almost four, and the paper boy (well, man, the guy was at least fifty) would arrive around five thirty. With only three papers to deliver after her house, he was often willing to stop and chat for a while. Perhaps today would be one of those days, eating up a few minutes of the long stretch before six, at which time she could catch the first of the early morning news.

Jennifer performed her morning ablutions—bathroom, quick shower, dressing—while the coffee perked. She then filled her favorite cup—WORLD'S GREATEST GRANDMA—and retired to the front porch. The mug was warm in her arthritic hands and she lifted it to her face to allow the steam to caress her cheeks, then settled herself on the rickety porch swing.

Rising early does have its advantages, she thought to herself, the day is so...fresh. The lights of the city below her twinkled lazily in the early morning haze, the world was silent, the hour too early for even the most dedicated commuter. Even the birds were still.

Jennifer slowly rocked, occasionally giving a small thrust with her foot to keep the rhythm going, sipping her coffee between thrusts. There was a time when the first of the day's cigarettes would have provided additional pleasure to this morning routine, but those days were gone forever since the small heart attack she'd had three years ago.

Jennifer's thoughts wandered as she rocked, remembering days long past, when her big rambling house on the outskirts of town was full to bursting with children, grandchildren, friends and relatives. She was just putting down her foot for another thrust when she saw three horizontal bars suspended in midair in the weak fog.

Jennifer stopped in midswing. What on earth? The bars were white, about a foot long, hanging a few inches from the ground, attached to nothing. She cautiously leaned forward, squinting her eyes in the early morning gloom. For the life of her she could not come up with an explanation for them. The world seemed to slow for a moment as the realization came to her. The stripes belonged to three baby skunks, side by side in the hazy mist.

Jennifer gave a soft gasp and all three turned their faces toward her, their eyes shining in the weak moonlight. Six eyes, three stripes, that's all she could see. She found the sight a thing of rare beauty, one worth waking up early to see, although it did occur to her that she was in a precarious position. At what age did skunks acquire the ability to spray? Would the mother appear and feel threatened by her presence?

The skunks, however, seemed unconcerned. Simultaneously, like fish in a school, they turned their heads and trotted away. Three white stripes glided down the street, turned the corner and disappeared. Jennifer was left staring at the empty yard, still in a state of awe.

Her coffee had cooled, and as she rose to prepare another cup, it occurred to her that perhaps she should contact the authorities. The skunks, although undeniably cute, could be rabid. The mother skunk, and surely there was one, given the size of her visitors,





could possibly be dangerous. Jennifer smiled to herself as she added a heaping spoonful of sugar to her coffee. Officer Mueller would come if she called, he always did. She crossed the room to pick up the phone.

"Police Department. How can I assist you?"

"Yes, this is Mrs. Thompson of 321 Bubbling Creek."

"Yes, Mrs. Thompson," Jennifer chose to ignore the slight sigh in the dispatcher's voice.

"I was wondering if Officer Mueller was available to come talk to me about some skunks in my yard."

"Skunks."

"Yes, skunks."

"You have skunks in your yard."

"Uh, yes," Jennifer replied, ignoring that fact that the skunks were long gone by now.

"Skunks fall under the jurisdiction of Animal Control," the dispatcher intoned pompously.

"Please," Jennifer implored. "Could you just ask him?"

"I can see if he's available, but I can't promise anything. Would you like the number for Animal Control, Mrs. Thompson?" The sigh was more obvious this time.

"Just tell Officer Mueller I need him." Jennifer hung up the phone with a small stab of satisfaction. The battle for Officer Mueller's time was an ongoing one between her and the dispatcher. The man, she knew, could not simply ignore her requests for help, however frivolous they may seem, and Jennifer knew that each time he hoped that the policeman would ignore them. But Mueller never did; on the contrary, he would often stay to chat with her, leaving only when a radio call demanded his immediate attention.

She was preparing another cup of coffee and a tray of tiny, sugared doughnuts when she heard the crunch of the patrol car in her gravel driveway.

"Mrs. Thompson, you didn't have to do this," Mueller took the tray and the coffee cups from her hands and placed them on the small table near the swing.

"Nonsense, I know you cops have to have your doughnut fix. Sit. Sit."

"So what's this about a skunk, or did I hear wrong?" Mueller popped a doughnut in his mouth, licking the sugar from his lips appreciatively.

"Not skunk, skunks."

"There were two of them?"

"Not two, three. Three little babies." Jennifer paused, searching for a way to explain the hanging white stripes, the glittering eyes, then shrugged. The experience was unexplainable, destined to be hers alone.

"Looks like they're gone now."

"Yeah, but I was a little worried about somebody else encountering them, like a child or something, was worried they might be rabid. Maybe you should radio Animal Control."

Mueller gave a little snort. "Ha! Like they'd do anything. There's no...safe...way to catch a skunk, Mrs. Thompson."

Jennifer grinned. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

There was a moment of companionable silence while Mueller finished off the doughnuts and Jennifer kept the swing going with her foot.

"So how's it going, ma'am?" Mueller broke the silence.

"Middling, I'd say," Jennifer answered.

"And your kids, how're they doing?"

Another silence.

"Can't say as I know."

Mueller cast his eyes downward, fighting off a small prick of anger. Six sons, fifteen grandchildren, three great-grandchildren. Twenty-four relatives, and she gets maybe three letters a year and a couple of phone calls on Mother's Day.





"I expect to hear from Jeremy today," Jennifer spoke up as if she had read his mind.

"Really."

"Yeah, I can pretty well time his letters and I figure today's the day. In fact I'm sure of it."

"Well, I certainly hope you're right."

"He's a doctor, you know."

"Yes'm, you've told me."

"Busy saving lives, can't just stop and write a letter. Got people depending on him."

"I know you're proud of him."

"Sure am," Jennifer set her foot down and the swing picked up momentum. "Proud of all my kids, and the grandkids, too. The great-grandbabies, of course, are too young to have careers. Littlest one's just a toddler... Sure would like to see him."

There was another moment of silence. Mueller listened to the muted static of his radio with one part of his mind while the other part seethed with indignation on behalf of the sweet little lady beside him. Was there one person in the world who cared about her? A visit, a phone call, even a short note, would mean so much to her, yet not one of her relatives seemed to realize this. Her house was falling down around her, the yard a riot of weeds, two of her sons were doctors and neither could seem to find the time or money to help her. He stood to leave.

"Gotta go ma'am. But I'll keep an eye out for those baby skunks."

Jennifer, too, rose to her feet. "Oh, do you have to go now? I've got more doughnuts, or I could fix you a quick breakfast. Got those Eggo waffles. Hate to admit it, but they're almost as good as mine."

Mueller patted his gun belt. "Duty calls. But I'll stop by tomorrow about this time to check on the skunk situation."

"You do that," Jennifer replied. "Might need you." Jennifer stood on the porch, the swing rocking behind her, and watched the lights of the patrol car until they were out of sight.

She only had a few minutes to wait before Gus arrived, newspaper in hand.

"Better watch out for skunks," Jennifer said as she descended the porch steps to take the paper from him.

"What?"

"There's skunks on the loose tonight. Three of them. Better watch it or you might get sprayed."

Gus removed a tattered cap from his head, holding it with two fingers as he scratched his bald pate. "Skunks, huh?"

"Got time to set for a minute?"

Gus took the porch steps in two long strides and perched on the porch railing. "Got a little time, I guess. Tell me about the skunks."

"I was sitting here, drinking my coffee, when I saw these stripes. Didn't realize what they were at first, but it was three of the cutest little skunks you ever saw."

"Cute skunks, huh?" Gus said with a grin.

"Well, they were. Didn't bother me or nothing. Just walked off down the street like they owned it."

"Well, I'll sure keep an eye out for them. Don't want to go home to the missus smelling like skunk."

"I'm going to hear from Jeremy today." Jennifer changed the subject.

"Your oldest, right?"

"Yeah, one of the doctors. Just have a feeling I'm going to get a letter today. Maybe even a picture of my latest great-grandbaby." Jennifer stared into space as if she should already see the snapshot. "Gotta get me a frame for it."





Gus shifted a little on the railing. "Mrs. Thompson, don't get your hopes up. You know how busy doctors are..."

"Yeah, but today's the day. Got me a feeling."

"Mrs. Thompson," Gus began, but left the sentence hanging. Maybe her feeling was right. Maybe she would get a letter today. Best not to say anything. He'd drop by tomorrow, try to cheer her up if the letter did not come.

Jennifer did not seem to hear him. She was in the porch swing now, rocking absently, eyes on the emerging sunrise. Thinking about a letter that wasn't coming, Gus thought sadly.

"What time does the mailman come?" he asked.

"Bout ten, most days, only got a few more hours to wait."

"Well, speaking of time, I better get going." Gus extricated himself from the railing. "Myrna gets anxious if I'm late getting home."

"Try to stop by tomorrow, then. I'll be out here. Can show you the picture."

"Sure, Mrs. Thompson, I'll do that."

Jennifer gathered the two mugs and the tray, juggling them with one hand as she struggled to open the screen door with the other. The house was slightly dim, the early morning light too weak to penetrate the heavy curtains on the living room windows.

Jennifer sighed as she crossed the room to set the cups and tray on the end table near the worn sofa. She had four hours to wait for the mailman, four hours that seemed to stretch endlessly before her.

She settled herself on the couch in a half-reclining position, her head resting on the large pillow she always kept in the corner. Bet that baby's getting big, she muttered to herself. Can't wait to see the latest picture of him.

She dozed off about nine thirty, was in a deep sleep when Franklin arrived, so deep that she didn't hear his knock, did not hear the slight squeak of the screen door as the mailman opened it and stepped inside.

"Mrs. Thompson?" he said softly. Jennifer stirred slightly but did not wake. Poor old thing, he thought to himself, all by herself in this rundown house. There was only one piece of mail today, and he sure hated to wake her for it. But it was a certified letter from the City, mostly likely concerning the weeds in her yard, and she had to sign for it. Certified letters, like telegrams in earlier days, usually meant bad news.

He stood for a moment, watching the old woman sleep, then stretched out his hand.





## MY SISTER, A GIRL

by Peg Daniels

"Race you!" I say. Today I'm going to win, I can feel it.

Alice and I, dressed in our team swimsuits and "Eat My Bubbles" T-shirts, dash out of our house. We jump on our three-speeds and pedal toward the Sandpiper Swim Club, the shivery early-June morning air waking me all the way up. But Al is already ahead by the time we're at the next door neighbor's driveway. By the time Al gets to the oak at the end of the block, I'm two houses behind. I round the corner onto Sandpiper Lane and try to put on speed, but I'm trailing by nearly a quarter block when she gets to the bike racks.

"So, hotshot, where were you, again?" she says.

*Enjoy it while you can*, I think. *Boys get stronger than girls*. I wouldn't dare say those words aloud. I'm not quite nine and Al is twelve and no one else is around, so those words would get me tackled and sat on.

Within ten minutes a ton of other kids have biked or walked their way to the small brick clubhouse. Al and I are still shy, though, and haven't made friends with them. We moved here to Bolingbrook, Illinois, a couple weeks ago when school let out, but before this, we lived out in the country in La Porte, Indiana. In La Porte, we sometimes played football and basketball with neighbor boys a year or two older than Al. But Al and I had the best times when no one else had asked us to play. We'd cook up our own fun, running around with our slingshots and cowboy pistols. Al has been my best friend since the day I was born. At least, that's the way I think of it, and I think Al does too.

Coach arrives in his Beetle. He unlocks the clubhouse door, and Al goes left to the girls' locker room and I go right, to the boys'. One time last year at our old pool, I looked up from where I lay on my beach towel to catch Al coming out the boys'. "I was just testing," she said, running her hands through her buzz cut. When I asked, "Testing what?," she laughed--the kind of laugh that means you don't really think it's funny--and said she sometimes she thinks she's a boy in girl's skin. She made me promise not to tell anyone, on pain of death. I told her it was okay, that I pretty much think of her as a boy. She smiled, and later that day she taught me how to throw a slider.

I line up in my lane and put on my goggles. Al is four lanes over, near the head of the fast lane. Al tells me I'll be a really good swimmer, because, for my size, I have a big rib cage and big hands and feet, like paddles. Al says she has small hands and feet and narrow shoulders. She worries about this. She wants to be an Olympic swimmer. She also wants to be a scientist and is serious about school. One night late last summer, I told her I'd like to be an archeologist--we were spending the family vacation looking for fossils in the river beds in Clarksville--but maybe I couldn't be, because I didn't want to work as hard at studying as she does. She said I'm a boy, I don't have to work as hard. She said this like she was mad at me. But then she smiled and punched my arm and said being an archeologist would be good, that you can correctly tell if a skeleton is male or female in no more than ninety per cent of the cases. She turned her face to the moon and said she was going to be an astronomer.

After swim practice there's "Free time," and we jump off the low and high boards and horse around. Al and I have made a game of treading water in the deep end and ducking under when a diver hits the water; we watch the bubbles and the diver come to the surface. She and I are like two smart fish at the side of a tank, and the other fish don't know we're spying on them.

An older boy does a one-and-a-half off the low, but he didn't have his ties tight and his suit slips and we see his crack. Al and I laugh underwater. Al swims toward the deep end ladder, me following, and a girl hanging onto the ladder is laughing too. The girl puts her head to Al's and asks Al if she saw the guy. The girl says to Al that she's Jenny and she's thirteen. She asks if Al wants to come to her house.





I splash them. Al splashes back. Al says to Jenny, "That's my brother." She says it like she only puts up with me, but she throws me a smile over her shoulder. Jenny asks how old I am, and I say nine--even though it's going to be another three months. Jenny says she has a brother Jack who's ten. She says I can come to her house.

Al and I bike home and change into shorts. Al yells at Mom that we're going to friends' for breakfast. Mom says uh-huh, but I don't think she really heard, because she's watching TV while she cleans the house. That's her job, cleaning house and cooking meals and taking Al and me places. Al says that nowhere on her own birth certificate did she sign a contract to do housework and raise kids and she isn't going to. She says that at least the women on the soaps Mom watches are nurses, even if all they want is to marry a doctor--or maybe a patient who's been in a coma for months. Al says that if she has to get married, she'll marry a guy who's going to be in a coma forever.

Jenny's mom takes us to Dunkin' Donuts, and we kids eat a boxful. Jenny asks if we want to go to Roller-Rama, and we do. Jenny's mom gives us money to rent skates and drops us off. Al and Jenny go into the girls', for a long time. When they come out, Jenny is wearing red lipstick and blue eyeshadow. Al has faint traces of red on her lips.

Al and Jack and I have great fun on the rink, but Jenny sits on the grandstand in her shift dress and flutters her lashes at the older boys. One notices and comes sit with her. Al and Jack and I roll our eyes at each other, and Al scrubs her lips hard with her fingers.

Jenny's mom takes us home an hour or so later, and all Jenny can talk about during the drive is the boy she sat with. Al smiles--but it's one of those smiles you do for company; she's crossing Jenny off her list as a possible friend.

Al and I lunch on the back porch, though Al only eats half a baloney sandwich--says she's got a stomachache. Too many doughnuts, if you ask me. Al points down the block, to a backyard game of football. Al says we should ask if we can play, that maybe we'll find friends. The new boys shift from foot to foot and look at each other when Al asks if we can join, but then the biggest boy, a fourteen-year-old named Tom, says okay. Al and I get to be on the same side.

The game is going great. Al is proving she's no slouch--though our team gets mad when she laterals it to me a couple of times--I'm the smallest and slowest on our side. A while later, Al gets tackled. Like usual when someone gets tackled, we all pile on. But when Al gets to her feet, her face is tight and frowny, and I get a bad feeling in my chest. Tom talks low to some of the other boys, and they look at Al and snicker. Al runs toward home.

Tom put his hand up Al's shirt, I know it. I punch him in the stomach with everything I've got. Then I tear after Al. At home, I tell Al I won't ever play with those boys again. I tell her we'll find other friends, or just be friends ourselves. I ask if she wants to go to the pool.

She's still looking sad-like, but she's got chlorine for blood, so she can't say no. Going into the clubhouse ahead of us are our next-door neighbors, Mrs. Jambor and little Stevie. Little Stevie tugs at his mom's beach robe and points at Al and asks, "Can I play with him?"

Mrs. Jambor flashes us a smile, and I know she's thinking it's cute that her four-year-old doesn't know his he's and she's. But Stevie's mix-up is Al's doing. The last two Fridays, Al babysat Stevie, and I tagged along. Stevie's a funny little kid, and we all had a good time--though I wouldn't admit to anyone that I liked playing with a preschooler. But because of that, Stevie's gotten real attached to us, especially to Al. When Stevie first called Al a "he," she didn't correct him. Al's eyes had flown to mine, and I didn't correct him either.

We show the lifeguard in the pool office the silver tags pinned to our towels. Mrs. Jambor stays in front of the office talking to another lady, and Al goes left, and I go right.

"Al," Stevie calls, "you're supposed to go that way." He's pointing toward the boys'.

Al stops dead. Her eyes flick to mine, but I don't know how to protect her secret. She smiles at Stevie and says, "No, I go this way."





She hurries away, and Stevie looks at me with his mouth hanging open, but I hurry away too. Stevie says nothing more about it, but Al wears her T-shirt the rest of the afternoon, even while in the pool. I know that's so Stevie won't see her suit has a top.

In the late afternoon Al and I are sunning ourselves on the deck next to the Jambors. I'm dozing, my ears tuning in and out to a Marco Polo game, when Al stands up and says she'll get us pops. I open my eyes, and they fall to a splotch of red on her towel. For a moment, I think it's lipstick.

"Al," I say, "you cut yourself." Al starts checking, and I see blood smeared between her thighs. I shoot my eyes away.

I know what the blood means. Al saw a movie in school last spring and, with her lip curled up as if this was the final straw, she told me that because girls can have babies, when they get old enough their bodies go through a monthly cycle like the moon going through its phases, and at the end they have to bleed.

Al snatches up her towel and wraps it around her waist and trots away. The lifeguard calls, "No running," but Al speeds up.

I fast-walk to outside the girls'. "Al?"

Stevie comes to stand beside me. "Is he hurt bad?"

"Al's a girl, honey," Mrs. Jambor says from behind us.

I want to punch her in the stomach, make her to take her words back. I want to turn everything back to when I was Stevie's age and Al and I were running through Indiana cornfields.

I hustle through the boys'. Al is on her bike, streaking down the street. I pedal after her, but I can't catch up. I burst into the house. Mom is standing outside the bathroom door telling Al not to be silly, that nothing's really changed.

Al flings open the door, red-eyed, angry-faced. "Everything's changed, my life isn't mine any longer." Al pushes past Mom into her bedroom and slams her door.

I want to follow her. I want to say, "Just stay you." I want to say, "It's only a little blood." I want to say, "Don't leave me."

Mom heads toward the kitchen and tells me to go to my room, that everything's okay. I turn toward my bedroom, turn back. I knock on Al's door.

"Al, come play with me. Race you!"

I hold my breath. Hold it, hold it.

I have to take a gulp. I want to cry, but then I remember I'm too old. I go outside and pick up a softball lying in the yard, toss it in my hand. I hurl it at the slice of moon hanging in the sky.









## The Invisibles

by Jo Wharton Heath

Henrietta nibbled on a radish with one hand, and with her other hand, scooped up three chunks of fudge in a big paper napkin and slipped the package into her pants pocket.

Her boss had made her attend this party.

A man, from accounting maybe, walked toward the table from the living room. "Where's the bathroom?" he asked.

"I took the chocolate because I'm diabetic, and I never know when I'll need a sugar boost," she said, turning red. "But, of course, I really should throw them out. The doctor told me to lose weight –"

"Chocolate? Where's the bathroom?" he repeated.

Henrietta pointed upstairs. She'd been ready with the sugar boost excuse, but why had she added all that stupid stuff? When the man turned his back to her, she whisked the contents of her pocket into the center compartment of her purse.

She helped herself to a stick of celery and took a loud crunchy bite. Then, she ambled into the kitchen where some women in party clothes were talking while they dried beer mugs and reloaded snack trays. They didn't see her as she rinsed the chocolate off her hands at the sink and threw the rest of the celery stalk into the wastebasket.

She made herself return to the party to stay at least until 8:30.

Keeping as far away from the food table as possible, she crossed the dining room to stand in the wide doorway. She surveyed the noisy living room without anyone noticing her. She rejected the idea of walking up to anybody; it was predestined that she would bore them and they her. And she was no prize in the looks department or . . . in any department, really.

In the corner stood a separate man observing everyone, as though he watched a boring movie about people at a party. He wore a lime-green polyester suit whose third jacket button was lodged in the second buttonhole. Bald on top with undisciplined brown hair above his ears, he had a belly that forced his waistband to swoop down in front.

Henrietta crossed the room with the freedom of a ghost and stood not far from the man to face the others. She wished she still had the celery. It was awkward to stand alone without something to do. Nothing much was happening, though the Bennetts seemed on the verge of an argument.

Just when she'd almost forgotten about the man in the green suit, he spoke to her, making her jump.

"I see you have a problem with a big stomach too," he said.

"Yes, yes I do," she said. "No, I don't. I'm diabetic, and I think that makes it hard to diet." She stopped. She didn't need to make excuses with this man. "Yes, I have a problem with a big stomach." Then she laughed.

She hadn't expected to laugh.

He blushed. "I work in a cubicle and don't get to meet people very often," he said.

She understood. She worked in data processing where nine desks faced the same way and the other eight women talked to each other, but almost never to her. Not because they didn't like her, but because they didn't know her.

"No one ever notices me," she said.

He nodded.

She was uncertain how to react to the first honest conversation she'd had in a long time. Maybe ever.

"Would you like to leave?" he asked.

Henrietta wondered if he meant leave the party with him, or did he mean leave the party and leave him too. The answer was the same either way.

"Yes," she said and walked to the coat closet for her scarf and heavy black coat.

He didn't help her with her coat, but stood with her while he searched for his, a clear plastic raincoat that was too small. He wouldn't be able to button the front.





They left.

"Won't you be cold without a coat?" she asked, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth.

"No," he said, and paused. "I'm sorry. My name is Stanley Overstreet."

"And I'm Henrietta Williams." They shook hands.

"What makes you happy?" Stanley asked.

His question surprised her. "I'm not used to answering questions like that." She glanced at him. "Shouldn't we talk about easier things first?"

"If you want to. I don't get to talk to people very much, especially women, and I know you might go away quickly. So I started with what I wanted to know."

She didn't know what to make of this man. But she found herself wanting to tell him what made her happy.

"Lots of things. . . Eating chocolate, and better, eating chocolate and drinking hot coffee at the same time, and . . . resting at night, and . . . my hobby. I make doll clothes during the year and give them to the men at the fire station at Christmas for Toys for Tots . . . Would you like some fudge?"

He nodded. Henrietta opened her purse, unfolded the napkin, and held the chocolate out to him.

"Take two," she said. He did, and she took the third piece for herself.

"What makes you happy?" she asked with a full mouth.

"My dog. If it weren't for Darcy I wouldn't have anyone to talk to. I tell Darcy everything that happens to me. . . And, I like that you gave me some candy."

"You're welcome," she said with a smile.

Stanley stopped abruptly. "Here's where I live. If you want, I'll walk you home."

Henrietta studied the door at the top of a short run of concrete steps, a plain door without a number. How odd. He must not get much company.

"Maybe I could meet Darcy first," she said. Henrietta knew that a nice woman doesn't go into a strange man's apartment, but Stanley would be safe.

"No, Darcy needs a bath. Tomorrow is Sunday. You can meet him then when I take him out for his walk . . . if you want to." He rubbed his left arm with his right hand, perhaps because he was cold. "Would you like for me to walk you home?"

"Yes, please."

They began to walk in silence, and she wondered what he was thinking.

Two blocks further, they neared her apartment building. When they reached the thick glass door that opened to the lobby, she stopped to face him.

"If you haven't changed your mind tomorrow, you can come pick me up here. Buzz apartment 201."

"Okay," he said.

For a moment, she watched him walk away. He went neither fast nor slow and didn't look back. At one point, he took a small skip and continued with a normal gait. Henrietta smiled as she turned to the glass door. She hoped he would come the next day, but she wouldn't be surprised if he didn't.





## 1990's Fat Girl

*by Jessie Carty*

The worst year was the one  
of stretch pants and oversized  
T-shirts. The year her favorite  
Shirt was from a concert. She had  
Bon Jovi sprawled across  
her copious chest, the B  
and the I merging into her armpits.  
The words bowed like a rainbow  
over the rise of her boobs, which  
was only slightly behind the size  
of her stomach which morphed  
Jon's face and the waves  
Of his bad boy long hair.  
Down below, her strange short,  
Spindly legs were wrapped  
in clingy black pants  
that were anchored to her instep  
with a little strap. She was dressed  
like everyone else,  
but then again she wasn't.





## Flagging the Rabbit

*by Jennifer Hollie Bowles*

The lonely man is a dare, a devil  
that prays to dead Autumn leaves.

He'll bake her in his eyes, waft the morphine  
of her smile, walk through thicket and bleed  
through time, touch her like a satellite,  
then blame her for being wet.

His look is blue and honed. He gashes  
that girl all in her soul, begs her to wait  
because later is a maybe he could hold.

She'll curse him out to feel sound, waver  
but not refuse, siphon his jacaranda crime.

Every ocean tides, and every girl is Alice.  
She'll take him up and down her primrose spine,  
until the lonely man jumps down the hole.





## THE SPINSTER

by Mary Belk

As soon as the dinner dishes had been dried and put away, Jessica Barton went out onto the front porch of her sister Elly's house, a big white house on the corner, with trees all around. She wished she hadn't eaten so much. A big meal in the middle of the day always made her sleepy. As she rocked in the high-backed rocking chair, Jessica's glasses hung from a chain around her neck. She was small and delicate, and at sixty-eight, her smooth skin still fit snugly to her bones. With the sunlight filtering through the chinaberry tree her fluffy hair looked like white cotton candy.

In the distance she spied the mailman, carrying his pouch, climbing the steep hill. Joe Hardy was a weathered, middle-aged man, bent from years of lugging a loaded mailbag.

He waved when he saw Jessica. "Afternoon, Miss Barton," Joe called out. "Here's your paper."

Jessica took the folded newspaper and opened it on her lap.

"I can't figure why you still get the Atlanta Constitution." He ran his fingers over the stubble of whiskers on his jaw. "How come you don't just read the Daily Dispatch?"

"Daily Disgrace," she thought, but she didn't say it.

Jessica heard Elly bustling around inside. She still thought of it as Elly's house although it had been her home since she'd retired and moved to north Alabama.

"I miss the excitement of the city," she told Joe, "This paper keeps me in tune with what's going on there."

Joe shook his head. "Can't see why you'd want to read yesterday's news." And he trudged off around the bend in the road.

Jessica longed for the mental stimulation of the classroom where she'd taught for forty-something years. She already felt her mind becoming rusty from lack of use. There's certainly no one in this backwoods town that I have anything in common with, she thought.

"Jess," Elly called from inside. "I'm going to town. Why don't you come with me?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not today." The worn porch-boards squeaked as she continued to rock. "I think I'll paint." Jessica heard the screen door close and she looked up at Elly whose long braids were coiled around the top of her head. Elly's flowered dress clung tightly to her body. She was short like her sister, but Elly was plump, and although she was three years younger than Jessica, she looked older.

"I put the leftover food in the oven. We'll have it for supper." Elly's voice sounded cheerful. "It's such a nice day, I think I'll walk." She started off down the hill in the direction of town. "Be back directly," she said, turning to wave good-bye to Jessica. "We'll play a game of Rook."

Jessica wiggled her fingers at her sister. Every afternoon they played Rook. She didn't think she could bear to play that silly game another time. It was the simple-minded kind of pastime that amused the bumpkins in this town.

As Jessica rocked, she became drowsy. Elly and I have led such different lives, she thought. Elly had devoted her life to her husband and children. Jessica was sure Elly had always felt sorry for her, the old maid sister, but she had never felt she'd missed anything by not having a family. Her teaching had been extremely fulfilling, and she'd had her free time to go to the theater, concerts, and museums. She had loved coming home and climbing the stairs to her small, tidy apartment, so unlike Elly's big disorderly house.

Suddenly, Jessica was startled by someone whistling. She glanced around trying to locate the sound and saw a young man walking briskly up over the hill. Jessica stopped rocking at the sight of the stranger.

"Hi," he said as he strolled into the yard and up to the porch. "I'm Charlie Matthews." He was tall and lean and dark, with large, bony hands.

"Hello." Jessica nodded her head.

"I was wondering if you might have some work I could do in exchange for a bite to eat. I'm awful hungry."





"I don't know of any work that needs to be done," Jessica said. "This is my sister's house," she added.

"Tell you what," Charlie said. "Let me cut the grass. If I do a good job, you can give me a sandwich."

"We have a boy who mows the grass." Jessica's jaw was tight.

Charlie glanced toward the living room window, his gaze scanning the room. "Did you paint that picture in there?" he asked.

Jessica's irritation faded. "Yes." She nodded eagerly. "At least I'm working on it."

"That's really good," he said.

"I've always had a flair for painting." There was a certain smugness her tone. "It's a gift."

"I wish I could see it up close." Charlie's voice was husky.

"Well, I suppose you can come in." She fancied herself a good judge of character and this young man looked safe to her. "But this isn't my best work." She led him into the big living room.

He let his dark eyes linger on the canvas. "I think I've discovered a new talent."

"Another Grandma Moses?"

Charlie laughed. He had a mellow, contagious laugh. "You're not that old," he said glancing around the room. "Can I see the others?"

"I suppose so." Jessica's mouth turned up at the corners. "I'll go get them."

She hurried to her bedroom in the back of the house. It was a small, rectangular room lined with rows of books. She passed her mahogany desk, the only piece of furniture she had brought with her from Atlanta. On the wall above her bureau were two dusty oil paintings.

She brushed them off with her hand.

When she returned to the living room, Charlie was standing next to the fireplace. He took the paintings from her and set them on the scarlet sofa.

"You're right," he said enthusiastically. "These are great."

Jessica's chest heaved with excitement. "It's so good to have someone I can really talk to. There's no one around here who knows anything about art. My neighbors think culture means going down town to a movie on Saturday night—and an all-night gospel sing satisfies them for months."

"Maybe you should study up on art and give lessons," Charlie said.

"Yes, perhaps you're right." She sighed deeply. "Go out and clip the hedges," she said suddenly, "and I'll fix you something to eat. There are some long-handled snips in the shed out back."

Jessica hummed as she took the leftover food from the oven. There was fried chicken, field peas, okra, collards and corn bread, with fresh peach cobbler for dessert. Everything was still warm, so she set the table, sliced a ripe red tomato and filled an over-sized glass with ice and tea. She went to the door and yelled through the screen, "When you finish, your dinner's on the table."

It didn't take Charlie long to trim the hedges, pick up the clipping, and put them by the road. He walked into the house without knocking and followed his nose to the kitchen. He washed his hands at the sink and sat down at the square white table next to the old potbellied stove.

"I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen," Jessica said, as if he were a guest. "The dining room is so formal."

Charlie piled his plate full of the warm food and began eating ravenously. He didn't talk for a while, but ate with such gusto that Jessica could almost taste the food. There was a luster about him. His hair and skin sparkled, and he looked robust and healthy.

When she served the cobbler, he said, "I'm gonna have to do some more work to pay for this meal."

"Don't worry about that." Jessica untied her apron. "You were hungry, and I've certainly enjoyed the company. Anyway, Elly cooks every meal for a family of seven."

Charlie laughed his contagious laugh again, and Jessica smiled with him. "Can you stay awhile and visit?"





"Wish I could," he said getting up from the table. "But I've got to be going on down the road." He turned and walked quickly through the dining room and down the hall to the front door, with Jessica close behind him.

"If you're ever through here again," she hollered, "feel free to drop by."

Jessica stood waving after him, but he didn't look back. She was sorry that Charlie had gone, but she felt strong and happy inside. She yawned a big yawn as if she were just waking up. "I think I will go to town," she said aloud. "I'll go to the library and check out some books on art."

Jessica had changed her dress and was combing her hair when she heard a sharp knocking on the screen door. When she reached the front room, she was surprised to see Bud Reynolds, the sheriff, standing on the porch looking impatient.

"Why, Bud..."

"You awright?" Bud interrupted.

"I'm fine," she said, "just fine."

"Just thought I'd check. I heard you were here by yourself." He paused and looked around. "Miss Tilly Sanders down at Winfrey was robbed yesterday by some young fella—said he was looking for work. He got her to let him in the house, then he pushed her in the closet and locked her in. Took all her money." Bud had been talking so fast he hadn't heard Jessica gasp as he told about the robbery. "He must have been some kind of a smooth talker to get past Miss Tilly like that. She was madder than a wet cat, too. Pitched a hissy fit." He grinned but quickly became serious again. "Buck Marshall thought he saw somebody fitting the boy's description down by the creek. You haven't seen him around here, have you?"

"No, I haven't seen anyone." She looked behind her. "Just a minute. Before you go, let me check and see if the kitchen screen is locked."

Jessica went back into the house, but instead of going to the kitchen, she crossed to the living room. She stopped and braced herself on the sofa, then almost ran to the fireplace. There on the mantel was the brown pocketbook that Elly had given her for Christmas. She had put it there when she came in from the bank yesterday, after cashing her retirement check. Jessica held her breath as she took the purse from the mantel and opened it. She knew at once that the money was gone.

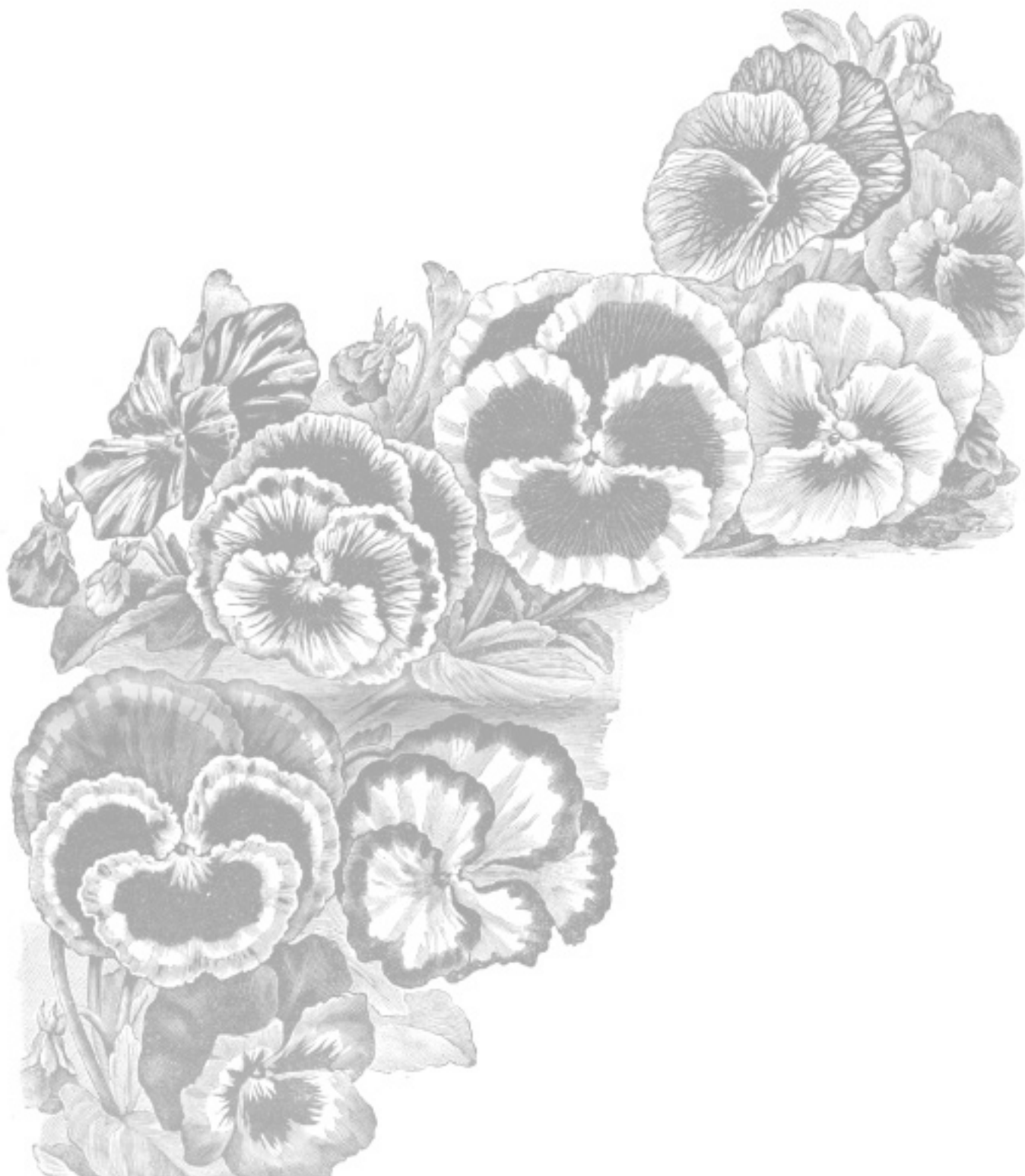
He'd been in a hurry and had taken the billfold. Jessica replaced the pocketbook and returned to the front door. Bud was sitting on the porch railing, his hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Everything is in order," Jessica said. "Thank you for stopping by."

Jessica knew that Bud was waiting for her to invite him in for pie and coffee, but after a long pause he turned, shuffled across the porch and descended the steps. "Bye, Miss Barton. Tell Miss Elly I'll prob'ly be by to see her one day soon." He climbed into his patrol car and sped off, swerving where the road curved.

Jessica let the screen door slam when she went into the empty house. In her room, she changed back into her housedress. As she passed her dresser, she glanced into the mirror and saw that her eyes and nose were splotched with red. She stood a moment, then walked slowly into the bathroom, washed her face and put on enough powder to hide any trace of tears. Satisfied with her camouflage, Jessica found the card table and Rook cards, and took them onto the front porch. She set up the table under the chinaberry tree, shuffled the cards, and sat down to wait for Elly.









## A Girl Named Agnes

*by Stacy Barton*

I gathered from what Charlie said beside the soda fountain, that Agnes was not very pretty. She wasn't particularly smart either, he said. In fact, he told me that even her mother, Irma Crow said there wasn't really any redeeming quality to the girl at all.

Isle of Hope was the smallish town outside Savannah in which I sat with Charlie, the soda jerk. It was the best place to seek out customers. During the week, my wife stayed home with our girls while I traveled across the state selling life insurance. It was in the soda shop, then, over a root beer float, that I tried to find out from Charlie about who might agree to whole life and who might take a bit of inexpensive term.

Charlie ended up telling me about Agnes without really meaning to. He explained how Mr. Crow had run off long before little Agnes was born. This was why, he said, that Agnes turned out so unlikely – on account of her want of a father's affection. A tightness in my chest reminded me how often I was gone from my girls.

It just so happened that as Charlie finished up telling me about Agnes and Irma Crow, that they came in and sat down right next to me. Now it is a bit unnerving to have been talking about someone only moments before their arrival, and odder still to be able to recognize them, even though they are total strangers. But from the way the soda jerk described them there was no mistake. I raised my brow as the bell on the door clanged and he nodded.

In they came, Agnes following, round-shouldered and sullen behind her mother. Mrs. Crow stepped up to the counter prim and stern and pointy. They took their seats on a pair of stools and Mrs. Crow ordered for them both.

"Two vanilla shakes, no whipped cream and an extra cherry...on each."

Now I had fully expected Agnes to be a small child, or school-aged at best, but the Agnes that sat down next to me was surely a young woman of 16 years or so. Just as my amazement subsided, she caught my eye. I smiled. She looked down.

"You look pretty today, Miss," I said, rather louder than I had intended.

The whole soda shop looked at me.

Mrs. Crow, glared at me over the girl, "You're not from around here are you?"

"Well, no Ma'am."

"Best to keep to yourself then," Mrs. Crow said, dismissing me. She looked away and sat up taller, growing even more angular as she did. The girl named Agnes kept looking at me and so I smiled at her all over again. Her eyes brightened and in that one moment, something like a breath passed between us. I exhaled. She inhaled and spoke. "I want a chocolate one this time."

Charlie stopped dipping. Mrs. Crow stared straight ahead, ignoring the girl completely. I watched in amazement.

"Two vanilla, Charlie," Mrs. Crow repeated.

Agnes looked down, tucked her stringy hair behind her ears and stared at some unseen spot on the floor. I thought of my girls back home, and the smiles a milkshake would bring and I promised myself to take them first thing, as soon as I got back.

"Yes, Ma'am, I suppose I should mind my own business," I said trying to smooth things and get my way all at once. "But I can't help but notice that your girl here just changed her mind about the flavor. And Charlie there, why he's pretty good at all the shakes, can't see as it is much of a bother." I smiled my best close-the-deal smile and waited like you do to win a negotiation.

Mrs. Crow stared at me and harrumphed. I stayed quiet. Then she turned to Charlie and shrugged her shoulders.





Charlie reached into the chocolate tub.

"And no cherry," Agnes blurted out after he had dipped in his arm. Mrs. Crow looked at her sharply. For a moment Agnes seemed to crumble, but then she looked over at me and I nodded. "I hate cherries," she said. Then she dropped her head and giggled.

No one in the shop moved. For a moment, I think, they all held their breath, and then Mrs. Crow spoke.

"Well," she managed, glaring first at me. "Well," she said next, to Agnes. "I declare."

She seemed to run out of words after that and simply turned and stared into the stenciled mirror behind Charlie.

Agnes dropped her head. Charlie mixed the shakes in silence and served them up properly: one vanilla with two cherries for Irma and one chocolate with none. I looked over at Agnes. Her head was still down, but the edges of her mouth were making a smile.





## Signals

*by Julie Scharf*

He's leaning towards me and I'm staring at the waitress, anxious for another drink. After more small talk and "accidental" brushes against my leg with his hand, I'm desperate to get another drink in me. This is the first date we've been on. The waitress finally notices my gaze, and we are off to another round of Corona with lime. I drink mine quick as to have him order another. He seems to be enjoying watching me drink; you're quite thirsty, he says. It's been exactly five hours and so many minutes since leaving my apartment, leaving behind my sweat pants and comfortable "Cork" tee-shirt with Sammy Sosa on the front, Cork on the back. It's an extra large and it fits me just fine. I've worn it plenty of Saturday nights.

Not like getting dressed up on a Saturday night isn't special enough; I'd rather be sitting home in a tee-shirt or pajamas, sweat pants and slippers, watching reruns of House or my X-Men trilogy, or even some of my vintage 80's collection.

He lights a cigarette and apologizes for the smoke. I'm trying to quit, he says. Grabbing me around the waist, he moves in for a kiss. I grab his hand.

"Let's dance," I turn my mouth to speak loudly in his ear over the loud, throbbing music, and stand up to take him with me to the dance floor. I'm feeling a bit woozy, perhaps because of the atmosphere.

We are half drunk, moving to the music. He's dressed very professional for this date: dark blue trousers, black silk shirt, matching belt and dress shoes. He's moving on the dance floor like he hasn't danced in public for a long time. I ignore him, letting the buzz of the night and the drinks I've already had carry me into my own haze. I'm pretending to enjoy dancing near him, but to be honest, he's the worst dancer I've been with for a while—not that I've been dancing for a while, but in comparison.

There's an empty table over there, he says. Want to sit down? And I wonder how long it will take to get served if we do. Let's get another drink before we go over there, he says, signaling to the waitress to come back over to take another order. I'm sitting, casually fixing my dress at the bottom, trying to find the color of his eyes in this dim light—he's not looking at me. He's looking at the waitress, looking at her, and looking desperate, ordering the drinks. I got you your usual, he says, leaning into my ear. My usual. This is our first date. I wonder if he's done this before, perhaps a hundred times. Is it a routine for him, to take women out and time which way to go and then next? The waitress comes back with our drinks and he's ready to take it to the next level. Let's take this to a more private place, he says, taking my hand. I can barely hear him even though he keeps leaning into my ear. Want to grab our drinks? He says, and I grab the drinks as he is taking me to the corner, a darker part of the club. We sit down at the two-seater table, and he's leaning into my ear again. We are practically underneath the speaker. You are so beautiful in this dim light, he says. I have to go, I tell him. After a few promises I'll call him later I'm out the door and in my car, on my way back to my place.

I'm back home, checking in the dryer. My sweatpants are dry, still a little warm—my tee shirt, clean and dry. I take off my nylons, throw them in the corner. My outfit, in the washing machine. Wash the smell of alcohol and smoke away. Slip on my tee shirt. My sweatpants are soft, warm. I lay down. My bed feels like a welcome home—warm, alone. I won't miss the falling asleep together part.

In the morning, I wake up, check my email. He's there saying he's falling in love with me, let's see each other again, how about next Friday? I click respond: I'll check my calendar, thank you for a great evening, from, J. I close my email and turn my attention back to online dating: Match. Match dot com, and see who has emailed me next. Five new emails: I liked your picture, interested in meeting for drinks? You have a beautiful smile, your eyes are so blue, I like hiking, dancing, and four-wheeling, check out my photos, do you have children? When do you come online? Are you seeing anyone currently? Do you like movies, and the ever-knowing line, so, what do you like to do for fun?

Click off the website, take a shower, and get dressed in a tee-shirt and jeans. I wouldn't dare go out on a date dressed like





this, but who's looking at me now? Comb my hair in a ponytail. Throw on some makeup, messy, quick. Then, I take myself to the grocery store for snack food: pop, potato chips, ham, cheese, bread. Gorge time. I'm in and out of the store in a flash, back home, making a sandwich, potato chips sitting against the bread, the taste of that wonderful, greasy salt staining the edge of the crust just enough that, when I get to the middle of the sandwich, I can taste it. I make my food, sit back down at my computer, and open my singles profile again. Two more emails. I look back at the previous five, choosing one I think may be promising. I adjust my jeans; they are snug. I hit reply. Let's see each other Saturday. My Friday is full.

Saturday afternoon and I'm sitting at a pub, the Ale House, across from a dentist. An endodontist. Fifteen years older than me. He's talking about taking me on a trip to Hawaii, that he was nice enough to trade his root canal services for a week-long trip and a time share. I sit, hands folded on the table, and listen. Why don't you come with me? He says. It will be an adventure. It's coming up in a few weeks.

By the way, what is your last name? I ask.

The food arrives: sweet potato chips and a chicken wrap. He's ordered the soup: pea. I hate pea soup, and think of that while he sips his meal. A man who loves pea soup—I can't stomach the thought. That green slime, dripping from his spoon, finding a way to his mouth; he smiles, swallows, and wipes his face with every spoonful. He continues to talk about his dentistry, his life, his large six-bedroom home, and his pet toy poodles: two of them. I hate poodles. I hate small dogs. They aren't even real dogs. And why do people paint them? I ask him, do you have your poodles colored for the holidays? He finds this amusing but does not deny that he has had them colored before. Red and green, pink and orange, red, white, and blue. I feel a piece of the wrap in my throat. I take a drink of Diet Coke to wash it down. I swallow, take a bite of the chips. The chips are good, the wrap, okay. Dry.

He signals to the waiter he's ready to pay by using a hand gesture similar to a snap in the air: half snap, half wave. Half polite, half obnoxious. Perhaps he does this all the time. Suddenly, without warning, he sits back, comfortably, and folds his hands on the table, similar to how I'd had mine earlier, listening to him. You seem uncomfortable, he says. Uncomfortable? I say. I don't understand what he means. Does he mean first date uncomfortable, or that my clothing is too tight uncomfortable, or that there's a piece of chicken stuck in my teeth and here, I'm a dentist, let me find some dental floss for you in my front shirt pocket to remove that obstacle type of uncomfortable?

"The way your eyes are moving. Your hand gestures. Your lack of answering certain questions and asking other questions. Your legs, crossed," he says, his tone now serious, staring, anxiously waiting for me to respond. What do I say?

"I don't understand what you mean," I respond.

"I can see you have some self-esteem issues. You have a hard time opening up. Making the first move."

Is this because of the offer to Hawaii?

"I offered you a trip out of nowhere, and you had nothing to say. Look, I don't have time for this, or for someone who has no idea if she feels good enough about herself to take a trip with me. If you wanted to go, you would have said yes right away, but I can see you're very uncomfortable right now and so I think this would be a good place to say, good afternoon."

Good afternoon, then. I compose myself and say thank you for the meal. I even let him walk me to my car. I pulled out of the parking lot and began to cry, to lose composure. "What a fucking jerk," I say out loud, gripping the steering wheel, crying even more. I hate crying. I hate crying at anything: funerals, sad movies, death of animals, hormones. This isn't the reason I'm out trying to date. Not for this. I feel horrible, as though he'd taken me out just to find a way to insult me. Our age difference was a signal enough that this likely wouldn't go past the second date. The trip to Hawaii, obviously a trip he'd bought with another lover and right before their trip, dumped. No other reason for someone to offer a trip to a stranger. I turn the wheel at the next corner intentionally, down an unfamiliar street. I think about going home and making another sandwich. I'll find my way home from here. Reaching for the glove compartment, I find an old McDonald's napkin and wipe my face with it, blow my nose, crumple it in the cup holder.





I pull in the driveway, get out of my car, head upstairs to my apartment. Seems like I'm famished when I just ate lunch. I take out the bread, the potato chips. Where did I put the Miracle Whip? It should be in the fridge. I find the miracle whip on the top shelf behind the milk, make another sandwich, chips on the side.

Sit at my computer, check my email. No emails. I take the first bite of my sandwich: love the way the top piece of bread sticks to the roof of my mouth. I check a few other websites: Facebook, Weather dot com, Dalai Lama. I find a quote: "Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them humanity cannot survive." Taking my pen, I write this down in my journal next to my computer. Another bite. I get to the part of the sandwich where I can taste of salt from the chips. I love that taste.

My phone rings. It's the guy from the night before, the guy who has the sick son. He's telling me about his plane, and would I like to take a ride with him tomorrow afternoon? Wiping the taste of bread and salt from my lips with a paper towel, I tell him I'm busy, sorry, perhaps some other time. We hang up, and I go to my closet to find something. Sweats: no. jeans: no. Long skirt, jacket: yes. I place it on my treadmill, go to my living room, sit down, turn on the television. Sitting down, I pull up the footstool and listen to a commercial about another episode of *The Bachelor*. It's season five.

My phone rings again. I stand up from where I'm at, mute the television, remote still in hand. It's endodontist Hawaii man. His voice is in the receiver asking me if I had a nice lunch, and why I was so rude when I left? After spending money on such a nice meal. What was I thinking leaving so abruptly after our lunch? Why didn't I offer to see him again? I hold my breath, waiting for him to finish what he is saying, my ear half away from the receiver. I think of hanging up. My plate where the sandwich was is sitting on the counter, waiting to be washed. I stare at it, thinking about how many more sandwiches I can get out of the package I bought. How many slices will make so many amounts of sandwiches, and will I have enough chips to go with it and pop to wash it down? His voice is silent now.

"Listen, you stupid, selfish jerk," I begin. "Don't call me again." I hang up.

I sit back down and turn back the volume. I'm barely listening to the second commercial. It's about a Swiffer Sweeper and her jilted mop. "Baby come back," the song sings. I'm confused. Why would someone want their old mop back? It's making fun of dating, I think to myself. I wonder if I'm the mop, or the Swiffer, or the guy shooting the commercial. Or, the girl sitting on her lazy chair, dreaming about when she'll enjoy another sandwich with chips. Or that guy on the phone who just called. Perhaps I'm all of them, or none.

Turn my attention to Match dot com again. Do a search in my area. A familiar face pops up, and he's wearing a doctor suit. He's a Landscape Architect. We went on a date last year, I wasn't ready to fall in love—knew I could. My curiosity overcomes me and I write. What's with the doctor suit? I say, and by the way, hope you are well. He responds through email instead of Match. Three hours later. Good to hear from you, he says. The doctor suit is for Halloween, the kids and I dressed up and took pictures. How have you been, and why haven't you found mister right yet? I remember he has two kids: five and ten. Never met them, but have seen pictures. I click respond. I've been well, I tell him. Finished dating a few losers, but other than that, swell. I think I'll dress up as the Invisible Woman for Halloween, thanks for explaining the doctor outfit. Click send. He must pick up on my humor, as another hour passes and he's written me again. You'd make a great Invisible Woman, he writes. Hey I was wondering, there's this great new dish at the Olive Garden I've been wanting to try, want to come with me this Friday night? No strings attached, he says. I write him back. Sounds like fun. Let's meet at 7, and do you need directions to my place? He writes back shortly after: No, I remember from last year when I picked you up for our date.

It's five on Friday and I still can't figure out what I want to wear. Should I dress casual, fancy, seductive? Decide on a white shirt with black pants, and a black shoulder wrap. Fix my hair, curl it, put on lots of eye makeup. Perfume. Time passes quickly. It's 7 and he's on time. He's dressed in jeans and a polo. Casual, simple. You look nice, he says. You dressed up. Do you think I'm overdressed? No, he says, you look great. Are you ready to go? We walk down to his car.

We arrive at the Olive Garden. The tables are packed so we belly up to the bar for a few minutes to wait for a table to open. There is only one seat open, he offers it to me and stands next to me. He's leaning on the counter, smiling. Your birthday is com-





ing up soon, he says. How do you remember that? I ask him, and he takes out his phone. It's in my calendar, he says. Odd how it was October of last year we met and now it is October of this year, one year later. I wonder why my birthday in November would still be in his calendar after all this time. Wouldn't you have deleted that by now? I ask him. Must have made an impression on me back then, he says, and smiles. Our table is ready.

We both order a pasta dish I can't quite remember the name of it. It tastes good. We laugh quite often; he has an off-beat sense of humor. I can relate to that. I can see the color of his eyes. Blue, deep, ocean blue. Even in this atmosphere. He's funny. I share with him my bad dating experiences, he shares his. We keep it at one drink. He's not asking me what happened a year ago, why I didn't give him a chance. He's not asking any of that. We laugh and share dating stories and I share with him how I've been working on my masters degree. You've been very busy, he says. We finish the meal and leave the restaurant. Thanks for coming out with me, he says. He drops me off, offers to walk me to my door, offers a hug. Good night, he says.

I come in to my apartment. No messages on my voice mail. I'm thankful for that. Still thoughtful of the evening. Turn on the television, change into my sweats and tee shirt. I'm not hungry. An hour later, turn on my computer, check my email. He's there, asking, want to see a movie next week? I respond: sounds like fun.









## Untitled

*by Angela Turner*

Caught in the Rain  
Wet, for all the wrong reasons





## Those Shoes are to Die for

*by Brandi Davis*

Arriving late to a mandatory event,  
It's quite sporadic before  
    presenting the main entrance.

Query...  
    pulling up lace thigh highs,  
admiring the texture,  
        Destiny  
    and but of course the moisture.

Indeed I felt bubbles in my stomach  
from the rush, the beauty rush,  
    Bubbly and the busy I-10 65

Accelerating these leopard pumps  
plaid skinned Jimmy Choo's  
    Definitely not a cheap ride!

Dashing hastily switching gears  
    and chasing lanes,  
        checking my rearview  
            Applying Mac Mulberry Red  
I remember... a blackberry ring

then there was silence

I regained consciousness  
    once or maybe twice  
    But not enough.  
If I dared to be late, early  
    or without a touch of class  
However jeopardizing this life

Style

I can only imagine...  
    the thoughts, the mourns, the remorse  
        All in Fashion!  
Still in memorandum 1972-1999  
Did it matter at all?  
        latest trends,  
chasing dreams the fastest  
    should of  
        could of  
    oh yea, I would have had  
But now it's too late





So I guess it's too bad

Arriving early to a mandatory event  
it's quite sporadic before presenting  
the main entrance.

Although I was running late, some how  
I arrived early.





**Untitled** *by Kyes Stevens*



Schoolhouse, Rural Alabama, 2007





**Untitled** *by Kyes Stevens*



Schoolhouse, Rural Alabama, 2007





## Dockweb

*by Whitney Vincent*



Photo taken in Dadeville, Alabama, 2010.





## Wherever the Tracks May Take You

*by Whitney Vincent*



A depth of field photograph taken outside Nashville, Tennessee in fall of 2009.





## Talladega Pumps *by Amanda Lynch Morris*



Captured in Talladega, Alabama in summer 2009.





**Summer Barrels** *by Whitney Vincent*



Photo taken in Dadeville, Alabama, 2010.





**Flower Blur** *by A.R. Parlament*



This photo was taken at the photographer's family home in Deatsville Alabama 2010.









## Small Doses

*by Ann Sexton*

To Dr. Amy Villere's knowledge she had not killed anyone in the hospital. But she was about to drive down to New Orleans and kill her mother.

"I told you, Mother, I'm fine," Amy insisted yet again. "I'm at the hospital now, and I still don't understand exactly why you keep asking if I'm okay. Did I mention that I was at work?" Amy wished she had never made this phone call. The first three times the number with the Louisiana area code appeared in her beeper, she ignored it. The fourth time, however, she gave in. After all, Amy reasoned, what if there was a family emergency?

There wasn't.

"I don't believe you, Amelie. I have been so worried about you since you called off your engagement and started this horrible job." Her mother's lightly accented voice sounded strained and worried above the familiar background noise of the busy restaurant kitchen. "I don't think everything is okay with you."

"It is. Mom, is there a point to this?"

"Where have you been? Why don't you answer your phone? I've called your apartment every afternoon for the past week. Was your phone service shut off again?"

Amy thumped her head back on the cinderblock wall again. "No, it wasn't, and could you maybe stop bringing that up? For the last time, I've been at the hospital, working. Like I am now. And I really shouldn't take personal calls...in fact, how did you even know how to page me here, anyway?"

"Your sister told me. Remember when you told her to just call the main hospital line and ask them to page Dr. Villere? That's what I did."

Amy made a mental note to find out which one of her three sisters passed on that little tidbit of information then choke the shit out of her the next time she saw her. "Mother, I've got to get up to the wards, I don't want to be late for my new rotation, and I'm standing in the lobby of the county hospital on a courtesy phone, so if this can wait?"

"I have no idea what you just said. You might as well be speaking Greek. I'll hang up if you promise to call me tonight. We need to talk about your sister's wedding plans."

"I can't do that, I'm on call. I can't leave the hospital until tomorrow evening."

"Amy, I don't know what 'on call' means, it seems you're always telling me that..."

"Only every fourth night for the past three months." She hoped she sounded more patient than she felt.

"My point exactly. While you've decided to bury yourself in your work and completely ignore your family..."

"Mom. I haven't 'decided' anything. I'm a medicine intern, and it's the way the job is..." Amy beat her head back against the wall a few times. "It's not like I enjoy it."

Her mother continued on smoothly as if Amy hadn't said anything, "Your new niece is due in a few weeks, you've never even asked about how your brother is doing in college. The restaurant's expanding, and you can't continue to avoid the topic of your sister's wedding..." her voice droned on and on, and Amy gave up and closed her eyes.

Even on a good day the last thing she wanted to talk about was weddings or babies, but the last few days had been rough and lonely, and she dreaded the next twenty hours. Although she knew she could hang up, there was a small part of her that wanted to rest for a few minutes and take comfort in her mother's familiar, albeit irritating, nagging.





A loud, slurred scream rose over the normal buzz of the crowded lobby and snapped her back to her surroundings. "Let go of me! I ain't going back! I'm going home, Goddamn cops!"

Startled, Amy dropped the phone receiver and turned sharply toward the raised voice. It came from an elderly woman, weighing all of eighty pounds, with a shock of hair so white it was almost blue. Two uniformed police officers were dragging the woman through the lobby of Holman-Greene County Hospital. Her tiny wrists were encircled in handcuffs, but still she pulled and jerked with all her might. Right in front of Amy's eyes, she turned and sunk her jaws into the arm of one of the policemen. And held on like Amy imagined a Rottweiler might.

"God, she bit me again." The larger of the two cops shifted his grip on the woman, and in doing so, freed one of her arms. She promptly elbowed the other cop in the crotch.

Before Amy could move, the cops exchanged a look of irritation and easily lifted their prisoner off the floor by her arms, her feet now frantically kicking only air. "I told you to let me go! I ain't going back!" The woman turned and screamed at Amy, "What are you looking at doctor bitch?" and spit as the cops carried her down the hall towards the exit. "Where the hell are my teeth?"

"Amelie? Amy!"

Amy hastily fumbled to pick the receiver back up to her ear. "Yeah, yeah, sorry, Mom, I'm still here."

The old woman's shout of "I'll cut you Pigs!" reverberated loudly through the lobby, followed by a lower, "I told you, lady, we're not giving you back your dentures until you calm down!"

"What was that? Where are you?" Amy's mother really did sound concerned now.

"It's just the county hospital. That kind of thing happens all the time. It's kind of like jail." It occurred to Amy that anyone who hadn't spent any time here would be a little surprised by the surroundings, but it hadn't taken her long to become numb to it. "Speaking of which, I need to go. My new team is waiting on me."

"Oh. Are there any single..."

"I'm hanging up now, Mom."

"Wait, wait, I'm sorry. Amelie, I just hope you did the right thing...are you absolutely sure you made the right decision about Gavin?"

Amy couldn't remember the last time she'd been sure about anything, important or trivial, but she sure as hell wasn't going to discuss it right now. "Yes."

"Will you have to work with him?"

"No," she lied. "Good-bye."

"All right, fine, I can take a hint. Hang in there, Amy. We miss you."

Amy softened with her mother's words. "Thanks."

"And I still expect you to call me as soon as possible about those wedding plans."

She had to sneak it in, Amy thought. "I hate weddings. There, we talked about it, bye." She hung up, imagining the scowl on her mother's face. Fearing another call, she reached down and flipped her beeper to silent mode as she made her way through the throng of people in the lobby towards the elevators.

Amy didn't feel particularly good about the six-week rotation she was about to start. In fact, the last time she'd felt good about anything involving her internship was the first time she put on her long white coat printed with 'Dr. Amelie Villere, MD' and admired the way it looked in the mirror. That was three months ago, and now she knew enough to be scared of what she didn't know. The Holman-Greene medicine ward was a notoriously busy and stressful rotation. What was bound to make things even more difficult was something she hadn't mentioned to her mother—Amy had heard that her former fiancé, Gavin Dupont, was currently the upper level surgical resident here. Amy was in internal medicine, not surgery; so they wouldn't work on the same team, but she knew there was no way to avoid seeing him as they were assigned to the same hospital.

Her anxiety had been building all morning, and being behind schedule was only making it worse. So was the fact that she didn't know what was waiting on her upstairs, and she didn't know when or where she'd run into





Gavin. She was trying very hard not to worry, but it wasn't easy. All she wanted to do was get through this first night. The first night was the hardest.

The crowd wasn't helping, and she was getting jumpy standing around waiting on the one functioning elevator. Amy was seriously considering running up ten flights of stairs when the elevator doors finally slid open. Relieved, she let the swarm of people propel her into the hot space.

"Hello again, Doc!"

Amy slid a sideways glance towards the raspy voice. A thin man in a stained hospital gown beamed as he stared at her.

"Don't you remember me?" he asked.

He did seem vaguely familiar, but she'd taken care of hundreds of patients since she'd started her internship. Amy flicked her eyes to the panel above the door. They were only on the second floor. "You know, I can't say that I do, I'm sorry."

"I was one of your first patients, you know—that first month all you new doctors was here...July?" he prompted, "You done blasted me in the face with that fire extinguisher?"

Amy choked out a laugh and turned to grin at him. "Yeah! If you had said that part first I would have known who you were immediately."

"Thought that might trigger your recollection," his words ended on a phlegmy cough. "You never did say you was sorry about that before you left."

"That's because I never was," her grin widened. "I really didn't recognize you, though. You seem different." She searched her brain for his name, but she wasn't sure she ever knew it, or really wanted to know now.

"I lost my hair."

"Ah." Now Amy could picture his long straight grey hair falling to his waist and the handlebar moustache he'd sported when she'd taken care of him.

"It done fell out," he continued indignantly. "The docs told me I had some contagious fungus thing on my scalp or something. You gonna be my doctor again?"

Amy took several big steps backwards at the words "contagious fungus thing," but the wall of the elevator prevented her from gaining much distance. She shrugged quickly and replied, "Maybe. This is my first day back here, so I don't know who my new patients are yet."

"Where you been?"

"I've been up at University Hospital for the last six weeks. We switch around."

"Yeah, one of my doctors left today, said he was an intern and had to go somewhere else. I met one of my other doctors yesterday, the boss I guess, some tall guy with a tattoo. Hey, you know who he is? The same one who come into my room after you done sprayed me with that shit, uh, I mean, stuff...pardon my language, ma'am."

Amy knew exactly who he was referring to—there was only one guy in the medicine department who fit that description. "Benjamin Maxwell is the upper level resident?" That was interesting, Ben was working here again. She didn't know him very well, but she'd run into him a few, well, memorable, times. Always after she'd done something stupid.

"Yeah, that's his name, Dr. Maxwell. I don't know what upper level resident means. So you think there's a good chance you gonna be my doctor or what?"

"Yeah, there is." The doors opened, and Amy stepped out onto the dimly lit corridor of the medicine floor. "I guess I'll find out in a minute. This is my stop."

"Hey, me, too." IV pole in tow, he trailed behind her before turning toward the patient rooms. "Welcome back, Doc." With a backwards wave, he slowly disappeared around the corner.

"Thanks," Amy said dryly. She adjusted her worn backpack that carried her toothbrush and change of clothes and walked through the wide corridors of the medical wards. The sounds of TVs, alarms, and laughter echoed off the green tiled walls. Outside the main conference room, the rotation schedule and





team assignments were posted on the wall, encased in glass to avoid defacement—such as the personal insults and slurs the residents had been known to add next to each other's names. Amy leaned in and squinted. There was her name—listed under medicine team C. Interns Amy Villere and Zachary Hayes. Medical students Maya Davis and Linley Sheridan—and supervising resident Benjamin Maxwell.

The problem was the surgical schedule. She cut her eyes over and found Dr. Gavin Dupont's name listed as the senior surgical resident for the next six weeks. Fantastic. She hitched her bag higher on her shoulder. Something else for her to deal with.

The conference room door banged open and her teammate and fellow intern, Zachary Hayes, barged out into the hallway, holding two printed patient lists. He stopped when he caught sight of her.

"Hey, hey, Villere. Good timing, I was just about to page you. We've got to get down to the emergency department, like right now. Maxwell needs us down there. It's already started."

"Are you kidding?" She looked at her watch. "But it's so early." Zachary didn't answer, already walking back down the hallway towards the elevators. Catching the closing conference room door with her foot, Amy nudged it back open enough to toss her bag inside.

"Here's your list of assigned patients." Zachary took one of the neatly folded sheets and passed it to her when she caught back up with him. Printed on the paper were the names, diagnoses and room numbers of the patients already in the hospital that she would now assume the care of. "I brought it for you."

"Thanks." No you didn't, she thought. She knew Zachary. He took her list not to give it to her, but to compare patients to make sure his were less complicated than Amy's. Amy had no doubt he would have switched the patients given the need or the chance. She scanned the names, wishing she could remember the name of the guy in the elevator.

"Ben Maxwell said our medical students should be here later, they're in some orientation or something. So what service did you switch from this morning?"

"Cardiology, at University Hospital. You?"

Zachary hit the button to call the elevator. "Veterans Hospital. I hate switch day."

"Me too, I feel like I can't get all my work finished up for the intern taking over, and it wears me out," she grimaced as she spoke, "which is never good when I'm on call that same night. So you haven't answered my question, what's so urgent in the ER?" The elevator was now empty, but it didn't smell any better than it had ten minutes ago.

"We have four patients already. Sounds like he's getting slammed. Everybody must need to be admitted."

"Was he mad?"

"Nah, Maxwell's never mad. He said he tried to page you a few times."

"Really? But he hasn't, I didn't even know who my resident was going to be...in fact, no one's paged me but my mother," Amy automatically looked down at her beeper. The readout was blank. "Uh, whoops. It appears I somehow turned it off instead of to silent mode. Hope you're right about him not getting mad."

"That's one way to avoid all the nursing calls we're gonna get tonight. Maybe I should try it." Zachary straightened his tie and smoothed the lapels of his white coat. Unlike Amy's, which was covered in ink stains and wrinkles, his was freshly laundered and starched.

"I didn't turn it off on purpose, Zachary. Besides, the nurses would just call you on the overhead intercom. You can't hide, you know."

He sighed. "I wish I could."

The rest of the ride was silent, and Amy caught herself studying her reflection in the doors of the elevator. Even with the metal distorting the image it was clear that she looked too tired and much too thin. Her large, almond shaped eyes were prone to dark circles, but lately they were shaded more often than not, and her olive skin appeared dull from too much time under fluorescent lights. It had been so long since her last haircut that her once fairly short dark auburn hair was almost to her shoulders. Amy was not a particularly vain person—well, except for her slightly crooked nose that she'd broken in a fight. She hated it. But now she didn't have the energy to care or do anything about her appearance. Priorities changed in internship. All she cared about these days was sleep.





## Breakdowns

*by Kel Marthe*

"Sex, drugs, rock n roll, and food." It was our saying. We wrote it on our bleached-out, torn up jeans, on our Keds, in our slam books. The addition of food was Chris's thing. She was (the) creative (one).

I have the same birthday as Buffy Summers, the vampire slayer. I figured this out after doing some major analysis of (her) birthday episodes. The first clue came when her snarky remark to the questions, "What are you?" was "Capricorn on the cusp of Aquarius." I didn't know the exact date, but I had a feeling.

Things my mother cannot do (part 1)

1. Change a light bulb
2. Pump gas
3. Act rationally

"Will you pack my clothes?" my mother wanted to know.

Fuck. "I thought Heather was going to pack for you yesterday."

"Well, she didn't."

"I don't know, Mom. I'm on my way from work to school right now and won't be home until after 7:30. The kids have to be in bed by 8:30, and we have to eat dinner."

"I forgot you had school tonight." Of course she did.

"Can I ask you something? If you know how to fold clothes and put them in a drawer—which you do—how can you not know how to pack?"

"Forget it, Kelly. I'll do it myself."

"Seriously, Mom. Do you think I took some packing class that you don't know about? If I can do it, you can do it."

"I said I'll do it myself."

We were twelve when we discovered Bill and the music that would make us. We loved Poison, Bon Jovi, White Snake, Keel, Cinderella, Dokken,...but there was one band to rule them (us) all: Motley Crue.

The music made us

feel

hard.

It was summer in Florida.

Bored,

hot,

sticky,

rebellious,

we wanted

rock n roll.

Being a vampire slayer must be terribly stressful.

My high school romance was insane. My boyfriend, Louie, was insane. I was insane. Everything was insanely extreme. In high school, there are no in between.





We watched the Motley Crue Uncensored video over and over, read Circus and Hit Parade, put pictures of band members posing, playing, shirtless, sweating sex all over our walls.

Things my mother cannot do (part 2)

1. Drive on the expressway
2. Follow directions
3. Exhibit strength

When I was four, I fell through my friend's door. I screamed exactly the way one would expect a child to scream with a bloody arm full of glass; my friend's mom rushed to get a towel to stop the bleeding; my sister, Heather, and my friend, Danielle, gaped at the blood and glass and the screaming me in shock. My mother ran away.

For sex and sex, Vince Neil, lead singer of Motley Crue, told the world he'd sell his soul. Per Vince, he tried like hell but was out of control.

Louie used to sneak me into the house through his bedroom window. One time, in the middle of the night, his mother came into his room, sat on the bed, stroked his hair and called him Luby while I lay, curled into a ball, under his six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound body, terrified that I'd be caught, naked, in his bed.

Chris never let me forget that when I first saw him, I thought Bill was a girl—tight pink jeans on a boy? Hello! Not only was he not a girl, he was one of the fine guys who lived in the row of town houses perpendicular to mine. Chris, Hope, Heather, and I used to sit on the couch and watch them through the cracked blinds and giggle, afraid to go outside. What do you want? We were twelve.

When I was sixteen, my father came home early and found Louie and me in the most compromising of positions (if you know what I mean...and I think you do). He was understandably upset. Later that night, while Chris and I sat with him at the table, he thundered, "There you were, on your hands and knees, like animals!" Chris and I couldn't look at each other because we knew we would laugh. Laughing is no good when you're being reprimanded by your father for having sex with yet another boy under his roof.

Keel's Ron Keel had a hard time loving till he went down on Cherry Lane.

Buffy had to kill Angel, her one true love, to save the world. She told him to close his eyes, she kissed him, and then she stabbed him in the stomach with a sword, sending him to Hell.

My mother has had sex with two people. She was married to them both.

We talked to Bill the day we saw him on the road. He told us his name, that he was seventeen, and that he lived with his best friend, Kurt. He became our friend. We started hanging out at his house watching taped recordings of Dial Mtv, lying around in his waterbed, talking. He liked Chris.





Things my mother cannot do (part 3)

1. Wrap presents
2. Work her remote control
3. Display appropriate behavior

"Keep eating, Kelly," my mother would laugh, pointing out people who were fat. My mother thinks she's funny. "I can't help it if people don't get my sense of humor," she says. A boy named Jason who I think is dead now used to call me Orca as I walked home from school. My mother is not funny.

Bill kissed Chris. Bill kissed Hope. Bill kissed me. Bill was a really good kisser.

Buffy's mother, Joyce, doesn't understand. She doesn't want to understand, not any more than Buffy wants to be a vampire slayer. Upon Buffy's confrontational confession that the two years' of fights, weird occurrences, and bloody clothing that Joyce has chosen to ignore signify more than childhood rebellion, Joyce orders Buffy to stop slaying. Despite the loneliness, danger, and abnormality she begrudgingly endures, she is the chosen one, and for the chosen one, there is no choice.

Bill fucked Chris in the middle of the night in the back seat of some typical eighties sleaze ball car, like a Camaro or Trans-Am, over Labor Day weekend while I practiced cheerleading moves next to the car. We finally felt like the girls from the songs.

One day I spent two hours in Louie's closet in a state of complete undress when his father came home unexpectedly. I am now a little on the claustrophobic side.

After meeting a girl at a quarter to ten, a girl wrapped her love around Tom Keifer of Cinderella all night long, and in the morning, they were still going strong.

Things my mother cannot do (part 4)

1. Buckle her own seatbelt
2. Open an e-mail attachment
3. Forget

January 29th—the last night of my first life.

I walked into my house to find my parents sitting at the dining room table with a watered down bottle of Jack Daniels between them. I knew it was watered down because I had added the water myself that afternoon. My mother told me the story of the girl who had just turned thirteen. The girl was a whore. She had had sex with not one boy, but two, in her parents' bed earlier that day after drinking her father's Jack Daniels. My mother knew the story of this girl, this whore, because she had eavesdropped on the phone while one of the boys told Heather the story. My mother listened with sick fascination as the boy described the things the whore had done, and then she was on the floor on her hands and knees, sick, empty belly filled with disbelief and disgust.

Bill must have soaked himself in Drakkar. I cannot smell Drakkar without thinking of him even though I have not smelled him in almost twenty-five years.





Buffy died at the end of season five. Her friends resurrected her in season six. She was never the same. The show was never the same. Buffy's light disappeared—darkness everywhere.

Poison's Brett Michaels invited a girl to jump in the back seat 'cause there was something back there he wanted to show her.

The first time I was in the mental hospital, I was thirteen-going-on-fourteen. A bottle of pills (penicillin, silly me—my pee stunk for a week) and a mother's disbelief were involved. A rape occurred, too, but somehow, that doesn't seem so important.

Buffy always had some type of emergency.  
No downtime in Sunnydale.

The second time (and last, thank you very much) I was in the mental hospital, I was sixteen. Louie-related drama sent me over the edge. No pills were involved, but a slight breakdown did occur.

Things my mother cannot do (part 5)

1. Turn on the stove in her house
2. Make coffee
3. (Insert positive verb here)

Bad time in May of oh-nine:

Husband left me for my inability to remain in a committed relationship and then subsequently fell in love with a twenty-one year old girl? Check.

Teenage lover unable to commit to a relationship and have to be home to mommy and daddy by eleven o'clock? Check.

Trying to manage as a single mother of two boys who go to different schools that start at two different times that both happen to be after I have to be at work and getting no help from estranged husband who hates me as a result of my teenage lover who won't commit? Check.

Reprimanded at work several times for behavior and appearance not exactly becoming to a teacher? Check.

Precariously close to stay number three at the mental hospital? Check.

Told by my mother that she can't believe at thirty-four years old I'm still getting into trouble with my shenanigans and that she should just have nothing to do with me anymore because she can't take it, she can't take it? Check.

By the time Buffy was seventeen, the demons were everywhere.





## Narcissism Dressed

*by Cindy Small*

Nicotine and Estee' Lauder permeated the air of my mother's dressing room. Besides clothing and jewelry, the other things in life that my mother valued most were Viennese pastries, colonic cleansers and Vienna sausages. The day always began for her at 3:00 a.m., so I sat in her empty dressing room in the afternoons taking inventory of her clandestine life. Decaying, brittle boxes attempting to organize her crap, Lil remained the most unorganized person ever. Her bedroom represented macabre humor and looked like something out of a Swedish erotica den or possibly the room of a tortured alcoholic homosexual who experienced a bad psychedelic trip. The sky was the limit for clutter in this space. Mink stoles of every color puddled on the floor, old family photos here and there, hair brushes and marabou feathers. No gingham or knitting needles to be found in this room. No. Way.

When my Viennese mother, with her thick accent, could not find anything on her dresser, she yelled "Fog You" instead of "Fuck You." In fact, anytime she said "fog you" to a stranger, and that was often, they had no idea what she meant. The words did sound sweeter and more civilized.

As a child, I was totally fascinated by her dressing room. No extraordinary animal in the zoo was as exotic as my mother. Her fountain of youth evolved from large wide jars of Nivea cream. At times, I saw her lick it to get high and smelled it on her breath. I loved the odd-shaped photos of her tucked inside every corner of the dressing room mirror. Mostly, the photos were of her many girlfriends. My mother, though, married to my father for 50 years, was a lesbian. Could it become any weirder than this? Of course. And it did.

Lil's many personalities oozed in her dressing room pad. There was childhood, adulthood, insane-hood and fantasy woman. It was wildly gratifying for her as she sat in the overstuffed zebra-covered dressing room chair, obsessed with the face in the mirror. Her biggest pleasure was spraying her red hair with gold automotive spray paint. The smell made her high as she created ways to reduce a double chin. She practiced intriguing expressions, coquettish looks and coy smiles. Her favorite hardware item for producing such demure facial features was duct tape. Tight and sturdy, she would tape her saggy jowls toward the back of the head just about the jawbone line. The tape was pulled up and behind the ear while a young, happy, Hollywood-glam face appeared. Magic!

We lived in New Orleans my entire life and mother felt Mardi Gras beads gave her room an exotic mystery. The best part, they were so cheap. Lil hung the beads in every nook and cranny inside the room. Amazing wet dreams could be had in this room, I thought. The setting was outrageously cabaret with gold lame' pillows piled high on top of her bed. Wrinkled mounds of clothing draped every inch of the bed, not a hanger in sight. Stacked wig boxes, mismatched fishnet hose and girlie porn magazines made this room a drag queen's theatrical heaven. In one corner stood an aluminum cone-shaped hair dryer with a red velvet chair tucked underneath. The room screamed, "Get the fog out of here, I'm pampering myself." I felt like a movie star in her glamorous cavern instead of the daughter of a queer mother on speed. This was my mother's wall- to-wall pad. It could have been an opium den, a "women-only S&M Hideaway," instead it was her beauty station and her escape from reality.

On the dressing room table were empty, rusted Aqua Net hairspray bottles, bottles of hydrogen peroxide and we won't even go into the many tubes of Monistat cream. The good news was that I was able to score on her Vagisil products as a teenager, although they had been expired. The art of self-beautification peaked inside this bizarre room. Feeling like a Viennese princess, she told me her fantasies about slaves combing her hair, brushing her teeth, applying makeup and misting her body with perfumes. Oatmeal soap kept mother's face soft as a baby's ass and cold creams remained at the top of the hierarchy. Her hair was her



plumage and a warm bottle of Brilliantine remained permanently in arm's reach. My mother had a well-worn path to and from the beauty salon, but there were those in-between moments when her appearance resulted in abrupt mood swings. She had emergency visits to the salon for permanent waves. They made her feel well-dressed and she demanded that the salon operators "cook" her hair quickly and then sculpt the coiffure. The latest medical facts that metallic salts from hair dyes result in kidney damage and death mattered not to my mother. Lead, copper, mercury? Who cares if it is one of the most dangerous poisons; Lil felt dyes were dynamite!

My mother loved girdles and corsets, a flat belly and a bulbous ass. God forbid some unknown deposits of fat could cause certain body parts to protrude and become unattractive. She would wait until her final make-up touches were completed from the neck up and then it became time to snap the girdle. That was my job and I hated it. As I snapped each eyelet from the bottom to the top, her breasts grew more pendulous. At the last snap, my face turned beet red with exhaustion. "We must uplift and separate," mother demanded. A mixture of whale bones and rubber shaped mother into an anatomical wonder.

Lil's philosophy on beauty was that as humans, Mother Nature cheated us and it was our womanly duty to free ourselves of imperfections. A less than perfect appearance could torment a person and surely ruin any fun. Her otherwise irritable disposition or "bitchiness" disappeared after walking away from the dressing table. In a hypnotized look, she walked out the door saying, "Always be well bred, like a blue blood. Your whole life will be affected if you are not gorgeous each day."

Mother felt there was certainly no crime in being natural, but there is also nothing wrong with high drama. As the teenage child of a narcissistic mother, I was forced to spend hours having her show me how to become a smash hit. Dress code: sequins, all the way. Time spent at the beauty station was too tricky for me to ever pull off, but no one could top Lil. Not only did she always appear fabulous, but her assignment in entertaining for each guest: arrive beautiful, throw caution to the wind knowing your two prized possessions are a can of gold spray paint and a glue gun. Inhaling deeply on her Viceroy, she exhaled a cloud of smoke saying, "More is never enough."

In her late-life years, mother's health began deteriorating and she complained it was just plain difficult finding a sequined colostomy bag. She and her best friend and lover, Edna, both had their colons removed at the same time, same date and at the same hospital. Forty years of cream-filled éclairs, copious amounts of alcohol and painkillers had an effect on a human's plumbing. But she believed that glamour was first, regardless of life's obstacles, including her final diagnosis of colon cancer.

Edna, mother's best friend and lover, passed before her and my mother insisted on a funeral where indulgence was required. After all, both women had been co-captains in a Mardi Gras carnival organization and mother insisted on Edna looking better in death than in life. Being a devout Catholic, Edna gave all her money to St. Jude throughout her life and my mother gave nothing to nobody. Edna had a history of entertaining priests in her home and they lived vicariously through Edna's sequined gowns. As a child, I remember walking into her home for dinner one evening while Father Franco wore a long strand of pink marabou around his neck. He and Father Simion were rehearsing the tango dancing cheek-to-cheek. The monastery was conveniently located a block away while Edna's home was the gay hideaway for neighborhood priests.

While planning Edna's funeral, mother became very concerned that visitors paying last respects to Edna at the Holy Name of Jesus Christ Church might be "fashionably challenged." God knows that would never be allowed. Printed invitations with Edna's vital statistics, biography and what to wear at the funeral and grave site were sent to each guest. That way, no mistakes could possibly be made. This just wasn't any type of fashion-based funeral; this was Edna's farewell. Mother opted to forego any tradition at Edna's funeral. This House of God morphed into a fabulous soiree with Edna appearing as the deceased queen. Mother made certain of that.





The architecture of the church was dazzling in uptown New Orleans. Holy Name of Jesus Christ Church was built in the Italianate style with bricks and limestone. Inside were high alters and magnificent marble crucifixes. Numerous pews on each side, mother draped lavender gauze between each pew. Between the gauze were satin pink bows left over from my grandmother's pornographic lingerie shop along with tiny red bud roses. Edna would have had it no other way. Very tastefully, my mother set up a full-booze bar discreetly in a corner niche of the church while exotic incense whiffed throughout the air. Pallbearers were all employees of my grandmother's pornographic lingerie store. They were porters, delivery people, maintenance men and window washers. All wore white tuxedos with purple cummerbunds and top hats. They loved Edna and they loved to party.

Directly in front center of the church, Edna lay in state. Her emerald-green sequined ball gown overflowed outside the casket, lightly dusting the floor. She wore a giant headpiece from a prior Mardi Gras ball and my mother ordered an extra-long casket accordingly. High above, on the Church balcony stood Edna's husband, Conrad, a local opera singer. He bellowed a Viennese love song while the church choir sang and played superbly. This type of choreography could only occur in New Orleans. My mother mixed grief and celebration, making this funeral one profound party. It was my mother's responsibility to keep Edna's memory alive.

Heat was sweltering inside the church. Once the priest finished, church doors flung open and the boys in lavender cummerbunds heaved the body outside to a horse and buggy carriage all decorated in pink roses and bows. A swatch of the sequined ball gown peeked outside the casket fluttering in the magnolia-scented summer air. It was hoisted in position while crowds and a jazz band led the way toward the grave site. Every priest from the Seminary was present, minus their marabou wraps. My mother stood like a rooster behind the priests making certain this soiree was played out perfectly. Prayers completed, mother placed a sequined scepter on top of the casket while pallbearers lifted the casket into the ground. "Oy, My God," mother yelled. "The fogging casket doesn't fit in the hole!" In retrospect, how could it fit, for God's sake!?! The casket was extremely long and custom made for the headpiece and ball gown. Not usual funeral attire.

Mother snapped her fingers towards the grave diggers. "Hey you, get this shit hole dug immediately. Edna has to be in the ground now. Vhat the hell's the matter with you peoples?" The diggers madly began shoveling dirt to widen the hole. I wished at that exact moment in time that I could pour a martini for Edna while she waited to relocate into her new home. She would have smiled at me with those huge red lips and winked, "Yes, sweetie, take your time. And heavy on the Vermouth."









## The Bagging

by Tara Mae Schultz

Bag over hand,  
I walk to where she  
with shameful eyes,  
points snout to ground,  
traces eights  
as she scents the air.  
In the courtyard garden  
where we always go,  
she knows this ritual.  
She will watch me advance,  
pick up and wrap the remains  
of what once nourished her body:  
warm as a cock,  
colored with marigold  
and crab grasses.  
As I straighten,  
she turns to nuzzle  
two stone angels,  
nosing that place  
between their legs,  
smooth as their bellies.

*I rub Barbie's nipple-less breasts  
across Ken's muscle-etched chest.  
This is my idea of love-making,  
not yet understanding:  
that place between his legs  
lacks a lone finger.*

I hold the bag away from me  
as if it was full of fresh rabbit  
and its blood might drip  
on my new boots.  
She follows me  
to the dumpster,  
sniffing the sidewalk.

*Mother must not find this:  
Blood as light  
as wiped handprints—  
a sign of an unplumbed  
chasm  
breaking  
once known.*





## Moving

*by Dawn Leas*

She leaves behind her home state  
with the lurch of a clutch.

The unfamiliar feel of a shift  
knob  
beneath  
her palm,  
she urges the two-door VW up an elevated  
ramp that dives

steeply  
onto a highway across

the Mason-Dixon line  
delivering her family

into bayous improvising with syncopated jambalaya.





to submit:  
[www.southernwomensreview.com](http://www.southernwomensreview.com)  
[southernwomensreview@gmail.com](mailto:southernwomensreview@gmail.com)

attention alicia k. clavell  
1125 22nd street south, suite 5  
birmingham, alabama 35205

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