


1993

## Astarte 3 (Complete Issue)

Astarte Staff

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Staff: Astarte 3 (Complete Issue)



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Volume Number 3      Fall/Winter 1993



## Greetings

*The goddess Astarte was worshipped for at least a millennium before Christ. She was named and revered in different ways among the cultures of the ancient Middle and Near East; the early Hebrews called her Ashtoreth. At first she was worshipped primarily as a goddess of abundance and fertility, but as her cult spread, her aspects multiplied, and she became a goddess of maturity, of love, and of war. She was identified with Aphrodite, Ishtar, and Venus by their own followers.*

*In the twentieth century, the search for the goddess is on again. Women have asserted themselves in many ways, and have discovered the plurality of their own being. They struggle to recognize and assimilate these aspects, spiritual and sexual, nurturing and destructive, intuitive and rational, and they struggle to gain the means and confidence to balance these aspects in their daily lives. In this spirit of adventure and crisis, Astarte was conceived and dedicated to a goddess who was among the most ancient, many-faceted, and universal in history.*

*The magazine's goal is to hear and represent the voices of both men and women describing these struggles and discoveries. It seeks to represent the visual and verbal arts as well as the humanities, including such disciplines as history and philosophy. Its focus is local, reflecting the founders' desire to represent the voices to be heard in their own place and time.*

*Another of Astarte's goals is to sponsor readings, performances, and similar events in the hope of nurturing a spirit of community among local artists, writers, and scholars. The magazine hopes this will provide a forum for sharing between painters and poets, historians and sculptors, professionals and students.*

### *Friends*

*Dorah Rosen  
Robert Collins  
Ted Haddin  
Jim Mersmann  
Craig Hultgren  
Karen Graffeo  
Gene Crutcher*

*The editors gratefully recognize Jim Mersmann of the UAB Department of English as a Special Friend to Astarte and thank him for the role he has played in making the magazine possible.*

*Astarte would also like to thank the Birmingham Art Association  
for its support of the magazine.*

*Additional thanks to TransAmerica Press.*

*And as always, many thanks to our Friends.*



# Table of Contents



Pagan

Jinny Pearce

2	Two Fragments	Dorah Rosen
	Untitled	John Hood
3	Untitled	Kathy Leffel
	Engagement	Kimberly Winger
4	In My End is My...	Tamera Wyman
5	Henry's Alice	Tracie Noles-Ross
6	The Moon	Paula Stallings
7	Black-Eyed Susan	Carol Case
	Lamar	Arlene Hampton
8	Donna	Beth Bradley
9	Prayer for Deliverance	Brian Hall
10	Now I Know	Glenn Engstrand
11	<i>Gestaltung</i>	LaDonna Smith
	Untitled	Carla DeLane Wood
	Untitled	Kathy Leffel
12	Solitary Women	Danaher Sikes
13	Happy Birthday	Kim Thomas
19	Imaginary Landscape	LaDonna Smith
20	Priorites	Arlene Hampton
	My Sister the Moon	Beth Bradley
	Extended Warranty	Carol Case
21	Only Clouds Will Wash...	Glenn Engstrand
	Untitled	Kathy Leffel
22	Having Caught the Bus	Craig Hultgren
23	The Mask	Paula Stallings
24	Baby Boomer	Carla DeLane Wood
25	Untitled	John Hood

## Editors

*Leisha Jones*  
*Angela Lazarus*

## Cover Art

Collaboration  
*Danaher Sikes*



## Two Fragments, Only Partially Related

The question should not be, "Is God dead?" but "Is God happy?"

The question behind "Is God dead?" is "Is faith in God dead?"

To believe in God according to almost any conception is to believe in a God which still exists though it may have left us alone. In that case, it's certainly not of much concern to us unless we want to resurrect its interest. But if God exists and has abandoned us, any ideas on how to attract its attention must be speculative. We might not know how to do it; the consequences might be terrible, or perhaps unnoticeable.

\*\* \* \* \* \*

I was raised in a cemetery. But I never saw any ghosts. People who believe in ghosts probably wouldn't believe in a lot of the things that happen in graveyards. The moans I heard were definitely from the living. I was taught about the fleeting nature of passion before I was old enough to be caught in its grip. I saw how quickly people who had been clinging to each other, oblivious to all else, would silently get dressed before walking away in opposite directions. Or, often, one of them remains behind, more lonely than before, then slowly threads a path between the headstones to the empty street.

I understand that people die. I believe in love too, though I haven't experienced that either.

*Dorah L. Rosen*



Untitled

*John Hood*



the two mums floating without stems  
entice him they wave their questions  
what are we where do we come from  
and two more in a cup on the table  
ah someone's been romancing her that  
must be it I think I'll go to happy hour  
and blow my brains out with the joyous  
umph of this discovery shake that tree  
take a few down with me

yes what was is a chair a key a note unseen  
baskets of my insides taken out for a washing  
glad to be of service hell let me give you  
everything I could ever possibly think of  
watch you twist with it till there are  
no longer two just one just one just one one one

*Kathy Leffel*

### Engagement

We teeter on ladder rungs  
that lead from the top floor  
onto the roof, but we are steady  
in climbing.  
I pretend to be afraid,  
making you show the way  
through night holes in the ceiling.  
Breaking through to starfire,  
you take my ringed hand and press  
moist lips to the spiderweb  
veins on my wrist.

Scrunching across tar-stones,  
I make my own way  
to the edge and peer  
down to the cars creeping across asphalt.  
The black parking lot stretches  
smooth to meet the July sky.  
I could find myself in that horizon,  
pulling out long, spine-thin,  
rolling between sky and ground.

When I step back, making  
room to take off,  
I see you crouched beside the air duct  
pouring another glass of wine.

*Kimberly Winger*



**In My End is My Beginning**

Keep us O God from pettiness

A note came while we supped.  
Mother had prayed it would not be me.

Let us be large in thought  
in word  
in deed

It was a two-and-a-half day's ride to Fotheringay.  
Lumber jostled in the back.

Let us be done with faultfinding  
and leave off self-seeking

We were received coldly at the gate;  
ate our meat and bread in silence;  
hammered until the wee hours of the morning.

May we put away all pretense  
and meet each other face to face  
without self-pity and without prejudice

At eight o'clock she descended the long staircase,  
and entered the crowded hall with her women.

May we never be hasty in judgment  
and always generous

A fire blazed at one end of the room.  
I stood draped in black at the other.

Let us take time for all things

Ne cry vous j'ay preye pour vous,  
I heard her say to the maids  
who took her velvet robe and Agnus Dei.

Make us to grow calm  
serene  
gentle

She stood like a flame in her crimson kirtle and petticoat,  
and glared joyously at the Deacon.

Teach us to put into action our better impulses  
straightforward and unafraid



Kissing her ivory crucifix,  
I begged her forgiveness.  
She knelt and embraced the block  
with both arms.

Grant that we may realize it is the little things  
that create differences  
that in the big things of life  
we are at one

I shook and my axe fell awry.  
A hollow groan escaped her mouth.  
Again, it fell;  
again.

And may we strive to touch  
and to know the great common  
human heart  
of us all  
and

It rolled like a ball across the stage.  
I took it to the window on a platter  
and they roared, God save the Queen!  
Her lips twitched at me  
more than a quarter of an hour.

O Lord God

I raised her trunk.  
A little terrier crept out  
from beneath her bloody skirts  
and lay between her head and shoulders,  
whimpering.

Let us forget not to be kind.

*Tamera Wyman*



Henry's Alice

*Tracie Noles-Ross*





The Moon

*Paula Stallings*



## Black-Eyed Susan

She should have gotten the hint  
when instead of a ring he sent bachelor buttons.  
There were flowers after every fight,  
and each romantic evening,  
so she came to associate flowers with kisses and curses.  
Every infidelity was wrapped in green tissue paper,  
and delivered to her door,  
so it only seemed appropriate  
that women and flowers should bear the same names.  
For every rose she wondered  
if there were another Rose somewhere.  
Every Lily or Iris that she met,  
was an automatic rival.  
When Heather showed up in her garden  
with violent violet eyes,  
she wasn't surprised  
to find her skirt brushed with dandelions  
that the breeze had not dispersed.  
She sent the forget-me-nots FTD  
and charged them to his own account,  
along with all the gardening tools she bought.

*Carol Case*

## Lamar

You leap from your truck, hatless  
to the summer sun and  
prying eyes,  
shirt undone, half-off  
as you hurry toward me  
to love me into sundown.

When I am very old, and  
only this one  
magnificent memory  
remains  
to taunt  
my withered brain,  
will I babble, seeming  
witless  
to the caretakers of my  
brittle bones?

*Arlene Hampton*



## Donna

She had finished her shift.  
Now thinking of afternoon sleep,  
she rubbed vanilla on her arms and palms  
to cover the smell of fish.  
She wanted to paint her nipples  
with the sweet brown liquid  
and watch them rise through the white cotton  
of her blouse.  
Instead, she swept fish scales  
and fingered her locket when the cook whispered,  
as he always did, that he could show her a good time.

Her husband, the Sam of Sam's Seafood,  
had been sawing pine this morning for a new booth  
when she had screamed for him to open the bathroom door,  
hopelessly stuck from inside.  
What if he hadn't heard her over the din of his saw?  
Would she finally lie down against the cool tile,  
hands slippery with sweat?

When he broke the door down  
she had laughed and laughed and for a moment  
forgotten that he disgusted her  
with his dirty nails and fish breath.  
She had remembered something soft about his ears.  
But that had passed.

Yesterday she bought new hair rollers at Walgreen's.  
Tonight she'll sit in Poor Red's bar,  
freshly powdered, with a smile that will buy  
two bourbons with a twist  
and enough quarters in her jeans  
for a whole night at the jukebox.

*Beth Bradley*



*Gestaltung*

*Somewhere under the rainbow  
in an hour passing a sudden opening  
the sun is shining brightly*



Prayer for Deliverance

*Brian Hall*

*Astarte 9*



### Now I Know

It was the pistachio in the hallway mirror that clued me in to your secret. As I descended the stairway, the pistachio whispered its cryptic comments which bloomed into the divine revelation now playing in most Buddhist heads across the land. The sandpiper's accounts of it had all been audited by your anal cyclops and full immunity had been granted to the parts of the anatomy that end in the letter s. You started it by spooning a cup of black mud from the bottom of the kitchen garbage can to the top of the refrigerator without ever looking back, not even once. At that time an empty plastic cup started pouring its own contents onto the living room rug whenever the conversation turned to the favorite music of transsexuals. Well you know what I say to that: self-determinism. Non-intervention has always been my policy. It's how I get my way. Up on the mantle, the deer play word games whose central focus is saving the ocean but how I will ever build you a lobster pit (especially now) is beyond me. Another thing that is beyond me is how the media succeed in portraying multinational corporations as helpless pawns in the game called global economics. The clock, next to the pistachio, has decided that the time we spend together is irreverent and has now switched over to being a thermometer. Never mind, I say, that's just the booze talking. But what argument could be complete without a visit to the bathroom? The toilet has only met the pistachio in passing but the impression is clear. Anatomical differences in styles of conversation (i.e. report talk vs. rapport talk) mirror perfectly the limits of acceptability in different styles of color blending. Without this simple hope, art would just be another type of insulation and intimacy would be useful only as a means of escape.

*Glenn Engstrand*



## *Gestaltung*

Somewhere under the rainbow  
in an hour passing a violent opening  
attack and sudden texture turn  
melismatic lines into dreams  
visions not of mind but of the metabody  
sustained and winding rhythms  
move pen to place to pleasure  
creating from within pictures  
of how loving and imaginative  
forces intermingle.

A genie leads the ship through the storms  
as vegebodies levitate  
lines breathing and opening bright light  
breathing and closing into darkness  
making love on the white  
in its perfect outworking  
lines of memory  
sensory texture  
music out of hand.

*LaDonna Smith*

Memories distant,  
burn bright as poppies  
bleeding in late fields  
crimson  
amber  
light  
dying

impossible

as the rain I try to catch  
with my sad fingers:

they flicker, blaze, die  
inaccurate and frail.

*I cannot hold the thought of you.  
I cannot hold the thought of you.*

*Carla DeLane Wood*

women work out of all their ends and appendages  
hormones wake up, reach out, go to sleep, flutter  
and at the damndest times dreams seek out strangers  
in their congested beds and struggle for breath in the tethered air,  
my head's a hotel filled with restive encounters and gasping  
fantastic reality, I stumble through the day reminding myself  
which is waking world and not in these feathery searches  
God knows where I'm traveling, being guided by night.

*Kathy Leffel*





Solitary Women

*Danafer Sikes*



## Happy Birthday

The waiter took a deep breath and smoothed his apron before hoisting the salad-laden tray to his shoulder and gingerly making his way between the closely spaced tables. The lunchtime business at Alexander's Tearoom never failed to increase dramatically during the first weeks of spring when the wild-flowers and cherry trees outside the lace-curtained windows tentatively offered up their first blooms for inspection. At the first sign of green returning to their manicured lawns, the widows of Effingham spilled lazy cats from their laps, put aside their reading glasses and magazines, and began their daily ritual of lunch and gossip at Alexander's.

The late Frances Alexander had been the owner of the stately Victorian house at the corner of Neil and Third, and she had designed the gardens that surrounded three-quarters of the house. She came to Effingham in 1918 as a young bride and had browbeat the owner of the local landscaping company until he was able to reproduce the combination of flowers and trees that she remembered from her childhood in England.

Sixty-odd years later, Frances was on her knees in the garden pulling weeds when she suffered a massive stroke that left her sprawling in a lot of purple heather awaiting her Maker.

Upon her death, the house became the property of her cousin, an investment banker from New York, who decided immediately that for him the house possessed more profit potential than sentimental value. He commissioned a small army of carpenters and interior designers, and within a year Francis' comfortable home had been transformed into "Alexander's Tearoom and Shoppes."

The tearoom took up most of the downstairs dining and living rooms and a section of the front parlor. The kitchen was tucked away at the back of the house. Small, square tables covered with pink and white striped cloths, and white chairs with matching pink and white cushions were crowded together in the dining area. The best tables were the ones closest to the floor-length windows overlooking the gardens.

Upstairs the bedrooms had been refurbished and rented out as individual shops. A beauty salon, an antique shop, and a lingerie boutique were to the left of the stairs, while a shop that specialized in gifts for babies and mothers-to-be filled the right side of the second floor. The tempting aroma of the tearoom's famous apple muffins would often drift upstairs, combining with the scent of the potpourri baskets set out by the cleaning lady to give the shops a homey feel conducive to browsing.

Across town Mary Sebastian stood balanced on a needlepoint stool in her bedroom waving her broom at a green and brown praying mantis that had taken refuge on the chintz valance above the window. He had entered the room through a hole in the screen and was reluctant to abandon his perch for the uncertainty of the broom straws. He sat contentedly, turning his head from side to side, refusing Mary's entreaties to "shoo" out the open window.

Perspiring from her efforts, Mary stepped down from the stool and propped the broom against the wall.

"Very well, Mr. Mantis," she said. "You seem to have the advantage this round."

She slid her foot into one of the yellow leather pumps she had kicked off before climbing onto the stool and momentarily held its mate in her hand, debating whether to heave the shoe toward the repulsive creature and risk staining the soft leather with green bug remains. Deciding against the gamble, she slipped on her other shoe and stepped into the adjoining bathroom.

Mary dusted her slip-clad body with lilac scented bath powder and rubbed a drop of Evening in Paris behind each ear before pulling her dress over her head. Looking into the bathroom mirror she smoothed her gray curls and applied peach lipstick. When she was satisfied with her make-up she walked back to the bedroom to retrieve her pearl earrings from the dresser and check the amount of cash in her purse. She chose a light cotton sweater from the walk-in closet and placed it with her purse on the bed. Mary gave the mantis a dirty look as she passed and made her way to the kitchen for a cup of tea to calm her nerves as she waited



for her niece.

Marty checked her watch as she steered the mini-van toward the Effingham exit ramp. She could hear Aunt Mary's voice ringing in her ears, "Punctuality, Martha dear, always remember the importance of punctuality." Marty wondered for the umpteenth time why Aunt Mary insisted on calling her by her given name instead of the nickname she preferred.

The tripod in the back of the van fell on top her camera case as she turned off the freeway and she said a silent prayer, hoping the protective case around the lens had done its job. She would hate to have to file an insurance claim on equipment that wasn't even paid for, and she certainly couldn't afford to replace the lens. She drove the last two miles to Mary's house carefully, reducing her speed around corners and glancing at her equipment through the rear view mirror.

At the sound of the van entering the driveway, Mary set down her teacup and walked to the kitchen window. Louis, her decrepit dachshund, raised his cataract covered eyes from the Milk-Bone he was gumming and listened to the hum of the engine. Mary noticed that the hands on the clock above the stove pointed to exactly eleven-thirty as she turned to open the back door. "That's my Martha," she thought, "always so wonderfully prompt."

She walked out to the screened back porch as Marty climbed down from the driver's seat.

"Aunt Mary, you look wonderful," Marty said as she rushed up the porch steps to embrace her. "I sure hope I look as good as you on my seventy-second birthday. Are you ready to go? Our lunch reservations are for noon and I'm starving."

"Martha dear, slow down, turn around and let me have a look at you. What a lovely blouse, that mint color suits you beautifully, but you're thin as a rail. Have you been eating properly?"

"Aunt Mary, you're the one who told me being skinny is a trait of Sebastian women," Marty said. "And I get plenty of exercise lugging my camera stuff from job to job, sometimes it seems like it weighs a ton."

"Well let's step inside and I will get my things so we can go, I'm beginning to feel a bit peckish myself," Mary said.

Arm in arm they moved through the doorway into the kitchen.

"Oh, there's Louie," Marty said, kneeling down on the tile floor. "Here Louie, here boy."

With great effort Louis stretched his stiff legs, rose from his rug, and started toward the friendly voice. He hoped the motion of his front legs would remind his back legs what to do.

"How old is he now?" Marty asked.

"Let's see, Louis was twelve in March, that would make him eighty-four in human years, but the vet says he's in exceptional condition for his age. Of course those cataracts have made him blind as a bat so he stays in the kitchen on his rug, or beside me on the couch when I look at the television. He's still good company though."

She picked up the used cup and saucer from the table, rinsed them in the sink, and placed them upside down on the plastic dish rack to dry.

"Now, Martha dear, if you will be so kind as to water Louis in the back yard, I will get my sweater and purse and we can be on our way."

"Sure," Marty answered. "She found the cracked, red leather leash that was hanging inside the pantry door and attached it to Louis' collar."

"Come on, Louie," she said. They moved slowly out the door while Mary walked to the bedroom to collect her belongings.

The warm spring sun ignited a spark of energy in Louis as he and Marty walked in the yard. He wagged his tail and sniffed every blade of grass like it was the first he'd seen.

"Come on, Louie," Marty said, "be a good boy, hurry up and pee-pee so I can go eat."

A spot of blue in the green grass caught Mary's eye and she bent down to investigate. It was half a bird's egg that had fallen from a nest. She picked it up and turned it over in her hand. The inside of the shell as clean and white with no evidence of its recent purpose. She held the shell in her palm and reached toward



the dog.

"Look, Louie, it's a pretty blue egg from a baby bird."

Louis sniffed at her hand a couple of time, then turned his attention back to finding the perfect blade of grass.

"Poor Louie, I guess through those eyes everything you see is hazy blue."

Marty started to toss the shell back to the ground, then hesitated. She reached in the pocket of her slacks and found an empty film cannister, deposited the eggshell inside, and stuck the cannister back in her pocket.

Mary looked out the door and called, "Martha, is he about finished?"

"Yes, Aunt Mary, we're coming."

Mary watched from the porch as Marty tugged on Louis' leash, hauled him up the steps, and scooted him inside the kitchen. She locked the door and they walked to the driveway and climbed into the van.

The parking lot behind Alexander's was almost full when Marty pulled into one of the remaining spaces. As they unbuckled their seatbelts Mary asked, "Do you want me to send a busboy out to help you with your equipment, dear?"

"No thanks," Marty answered. "I'll come out and get it after we've finished eating. I told Mrs. March we were having lunch first and to plan on taking the photograph after that. Besides, the sunlight will be better this afternoon, not so harsh."

The maitre d' greeted them at the door, confirmed their reservations, and led them to Mary's favorite table overlooking the rose bushes. He shook open the waiting napkin before placing one in Mary's lap. He repeated the procedure for Marty, then handed them each a menu and said, "Now ladies, I will summon your waiter. I shall be at your call should you require my further assistance. My warmest regards on the occasion of your birthday, Mrs. Sebastian."

"Thank you so much for remembering, Gerard," Mary said.

He bowed slightly toward her and hurried back to his post near the front door.

"My, my, Aunt Mary, what a fuss. Is there something you would like to tell me about you and this Gerard?" Marty asked.

"Don't be silly, child. I have known Gerard since he began working here twenty years ago as a part-time waiter. A more dignified gentleman could not exist. He's from France, you know. Now, what shall we have? The tomato basil soup is always delicious, although it is a bit warm for soup. It would appear there are some new items on the menu."

"Pick whatever you want, it's my treat for your birthday and the sky's the limit." Marty looked over the menu and asked, "Have you ever tried the broccoli quiche? I think that's what I'll have, with a side order of fries."

"Martha, I don't believe Alexander's serves fries, but they could probably bring you a nice plate of spring potatoes. The creamed chicken sounds good, but I must remember my cholesterol. I believe I will have the seafoam salad with a piece of grilled tuna."

"And champagne, let's have some champagne with our lunch Aunt Mary. Come on, it's your party, we have to celebrate and live it up."

"Oh, I couldn't, what if my neighbors saw me? It would be all over town. Although I must admit, it sounds rather enticing. Martha, you always bring out the devil in me."

"Okay, I'll order a glass and you can help me drink it," Marty said. "Neighbors be damned."

"Well, maybe just a small sip," Mary agreed.

The waiter arrived, set down their water glasses and a bread basket, took their orders and turned to an adjacent table.

"Hmmm, nice buns," Marty whispered.

Mary lifted the linen napkin covering the bread basket.

"Dear, these are apple muffins, not buns," she said.

Smiling, Marty shook her head and motioned toward the waiter. Mary attempted a stern look and them succumbed to a fit of giggling.



"Oh, my, how times change," she said. "Young women today have such freedom to speak their minds. But now that you mention it, that waiter has always reminded me a bit of your Uncle Nigel when he was young." Bright pink spots appeared on Mary's wrinkled cheeks. "Nigel had that same habit of standing with his weight on one foot so his 'buns,' as you call them, tilted to one side. Did you know that he and I share the same birthday? We so enjoyed planning our day and surprising each other with little gifts. I really miss that man. Goodness, I'm becoming maudlin. Where is that champagne?"

A loud voice rang out from the doorway causing the diners to look up. a tiny woman beneath an immense straw hat with silk peonies on the brim waltzed through the entrance, followed by eight women similarly attired in varying degrees of floral riot. Pearl March and her entourage brushed past Gerard and strode across the room to Mary's table.

"Why as I live and breathe, Mary Sabastian, don't you just look too precious!" Pearl exclaimed. "And this must be your niece, Martha, the world famous photographer. We are so pleased that you agreed to take the Effingham Garden Club's annual photo, aren't we ladies?"

The members standing behind Pearl tittered and nodded in unison.

"You can call me Marty, Mrs. March, and I'm hardly what you could call famous," Marty answered. "I was just lucky when I won that photo contest in Home and Garden."

"Don't be so modest about your accomplishments, child," Pearl crowed. "Speak up and let people know who you are. Now Mary, can we expect to see you at the next club meeting? I'm presenting a lecture on the habits of the rose aphid that I'm sure you would find fascinating. You will plan to attend, won't you?"

"Thank you, Pearl, but I don't believe I will. At my age I spend more time with my houseplants than with the rosebushes. I certainly appreciate the invitation, though," Mary said.

"Darling, you know you have an open invitation to rejoin any time you feel up to it." Pearl whipped off her hat and patted her blue bouffant. "Okay, girls, let's eat. Martha you just call us when you're ready to start. I'll try to remember to drop you a copy of my lecture in the mail, Mary." Pearl turned toward the doorway and called out, "Gerard, oh Gerard, I'm ready to be seated." She waved her hand, and in a parade of silk and chiffon, led her followers to their waiting table.

"The habits of aphids, can you imagine?" Mary hissed. "Pearl March and her robots get under my skin worse than any insect ever could. I haven't been to a club meeting in over two years, since Pearl began her fascinating lectures, and it's not just because of my age. Maybe I should ask her to utilize her expertise to exterminate that praying mantis in my bedroom. Be careful, Martha, Pearl is so bossy she will try to take your camera away and show you how to take the photograph."

"Don't worry, Aunt Mary, I've handled troublesome clients before," Marty said. "I just tell them to sit still and be quiet or the picture will blur. Thanks again for getting me the job."

"Wait until you've finished to thank me, it may be the most difficult money you ever earn. If you can make Pearl March hush-up for more than two minutes, I will be impressed. Oh, here's our lunch."

The waiter set their plates in front of them, asked if there was anything else they needed, and hurried off to take the Garden Club's orders.

Mary took a few bites, discreetly sipped from Marty's wine glass, then asked, "What are your plans for the summer, dear? Are you looking for something permanent, or will you continue your freelance work?"

"I was offered a position with the paper last week," Marty responded. "They need a staff photographer and they've used my work in the past, but I just can't bring myself to accept their offer."

"Why not?" Mary asked. "Is it the money?"

"No, their salary offer was more than I expected, and God knows the security of a weekly paycheck would be nice for a change. But somehow the idea of covering local events, week after week, year after year, makes my skin crawl. And then there's Greg."

"Yes, your young man. How does he feel about your work?"

Marty looked down at her plate and began rolling a miniature potato back and forth with her fork. "Oh, he's all for me taking the job at the paper. He literally has a plan written out for the next five years of our lives; in three years we get married, year four we buy a house, year five I get pregnant, and so on. He says if I get a regular job we could save enough money to shave a year or two off the plan and be ahead of schedule."

"Martha," Mary exclaimed, "you can't be serious. It's wonderful to have goals, but marriage and family are not projects to be completed on time and under budget. You remember my cousin Bellamy, don't



you?"

"Vaguely," Marty said. "Wasn't she the one who worked at the depot all those years?"

"Exactly. Her entire career was spent scheduling trains, their departures, their arrivals, cargo deliveries. Pretty soon she had her whole life organized just like the train schedules and found any change of her plans unbearable." Mary swallowed another sip of champagne before continuing her tale. "Well, she cooked Thanksgiving dinner one year, and Nigel and I were an hour late because the car had a flat tire. Belle was so upset that she refused to speak to us and simply ruined the rest of the day. That happened thirty years ago and to this day she's never forgiven me. She made herself and anyone who couldn't abide by her schedule miserable."

"I know, that's what I keep telling Greg. I just can't make him understand that the feeling I get when I know I've captured a perfect moment on film makes all the risks of the job worthwhile. And I'm not embarrassed to admit that I'm good at what I do, and I love the idea of having my work recognized. But I do want to get married and start a family someday. I'm just not sure I'm ready to settle down yet. What do you think?"

Mary was silent for a long moment before she answered, "I think you must learn to trust your instincts. The prize you won from Home and Garden, your work that appeared in that nature magazine, even this Garden Club job today, are all opportunities that are opening doors you might regret not walking through, or at least peeking inside."

"Aunt Mary, sometimes I think you can read my mind," Marty said, leaning across the table to kiss her powdered cheek. "That's why I always come to you for advice. You make things so clear."

Mary sighed and shook her head. "I just want you to be happy, Martha, and to get the most out of life. And I'm always here if you get in a bind and need some money, you know that."

"Thanks again," Marty said. "Now enough about me. Today is your day! Let's order some dessert."

In honor of Mary's birthday, Gerard took command of the dessert cart from the regular waiter and insisted on serving the women himself. He lit a tiny pink candle, stuck it in a petit-four, and presented it to Mary with her coffee. With the other customers looking on, he serenaded her with a French version of the birthday song while she blew out the candle and ate her cake.

After the festivities, Mary said, "What a wonderful lunch. I can't remember when I've had such fun, and everything was simply delicious. And who would have guessed that Gerard has such a splendid voice?"

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it," Marty said as she glanced across the room. "Now, it looks like the robots are getting restless at Pearl's table, so I better get my camera set up. Do you want to come outside and watch? I can take a chair to the garden for you."

"No thank you, dear. I'm going to finish my coffee, then go upstairs and do a little shopping. You run along, and be careful Pearl doesn't take charge."

Mary watched her niece approach the Garden Club members and heard her say, "Okay ladies, let's get started. With your cooperation we'll make this the best picture in the club's history." Marty looked over her shoulder and winked at Mary. "Mrs. March, I'd appreciate it if you would help me with the seating arrangements when we get outside." Wearing a mischievous smile, Marty herded her flock out the door toward the garden.

Mary sat alone, observing the outdoor activity from her vantage point at the window while she drank her coffee. The room was suddenly very quiet, since many people had finished lunch and were leaving, and Pearl and her group were gone. She watched Marty rushing about, setting up her equipment and directing Pearl and the others. She looked around the room to make sure the few remaining diners were strangers before she rose from her seat and slowly proceeded up the stairway to the shops.

At the top of the stairs Mary turned left and entered the lingerie shop, pausing for a moment to glance behind her. She moved deliberately between the aisles of peignoirs and dressing gowns, stopping now and again to touch a particular fabric that caught her eye.

"Is there something I can help you find?" a young blonde salesgirl asked, emerging from behind the cash register. "A gift for your granddaughter's wedding, or a special person's birthday, perhaps?"

"Thank you, no," Mary answered. "I'm just looking."

"Well, let me know if I can assist you with a size or color. We have some lovely silk pajamas on sale over by the fitting room." The girl returned to her stool and picked up her inventory list.



Mary drew near a circular rack hung with pastel negligees, and she slid the garments apart one by one, searching. In between the tens and the twelves, just where she had hidden them the week before, hung a red satin bra and a pair of matching red panties. Carefully Mary removed the delicate items from their hangers and double-checked the sizes. She turned the tag over, squinting through her bifocals to read the price, before taking the items to the register.

"Oh what an exciting selection," the salesgirl said. "Must be a very grand occasion for someone."

Mary smiled. "Like you said before, a special birthday gift."

"Would you like them wrapped and delivered?"

"White tissue paper will be fine, and I'll deliver the package myself, thank you," Mary said. She opened her purse and counted out the bills and coins one at a time, pulling them from her billfold. Tucking her package under one arm, she grasped the guardrail at the top of the steps and walked downstairs to find her niece.

She waited on a loveseat in the parlor for Marty to collect her, and as they walked out to the parking lot and climbed into the van, a cool spring breeze rustled the young leaves in the trees and Mary's shopping bag.

"Did you find any bargains?" Marty asked. "I bet everything upstairs is really expensive."

Mary stared straight ahead through the windshield. "Just some sachets for my closet and dresser drawers. How did the job go?"

"Fine, except for Mrs. March catching one of her shoes in a sprinkler drain. The heel broke off, so we had to wait while she abused the gardener. But other than that, everything went well."

They both laughed and moments later they pulled into Mary's driveway.

"Thank you, Martha, for a wonderful afternoon. Would you like to come in for some tea? We could pull out those old photo albums you've been wanting to look at," Mary asked.

"I'd love to," Marty said, "but I need to take this film to the lab. I told Mrs. March I would deliver the pictures next week. Come on, I'll walk you in."

Marty accompanied her as far as the porch and then gave Mary a quick hug before starting toward the van; then she looked back.

"I'll call you next week before I bring the pictures and we'll have lunch again."

"That would be lovely, dear, and it will be my treat next time," Mary answered. "Please drive safely on your way home."

Marty hopped into the van and stuck her head out the window and shouted, "Happy birthday, Aunt Mary!"

Mary stood on the porch waving until the van disappeared down the street before she entered the stillness of her house. She put her package on the kitchen table, walked to the stove, and lit the burner under the tea kettle. After opening the box of tea bags, she turned up the cup and saucer that sat drying on the counter and placed a teabag in the cup.

Mary walked to her bedroom and opened the cedar chest that stood at the foot of her bed. Inside, under some faded newspapers and old blankets, were stacks of photo albums—all labelled and dated. She dug around in the chest until she located a faded white album with peeling gold letters on the cover that spelled "Wedding." The kettle began whistling, so she picked up the album and walked back to the kitchen.

Mary prepared her tea and sat down at the table with the book. Opening the crackling pages, she turned them carefully to prevent the sepia-tinted prints from falling out.

She dwelt over her memories for several minutes, then reached over and picked up the shopping bag.

"Happy birthday, Nigel," she said as she opened the tissue paper and withdrew the underclothes. She held the red satin in her lap and thumbed through pictures while she finished her tea.

Rising from the table, she stepped over Louis on his rug and carried the clothes to her bedroom. She folded them with care, opened her dresser drawer, and placed them on top of a familiar stack of delicate apparel. Mary closed the drawer before she picked up the broom leaning against the wall and walked to the window to see if the praying mantis might still be there.

*Kim Thomas*





Imaginary Landscape

*LaDonna Smith*



## Priorities

He rattled the gate-latch, all  
beery and undone, demanding  
that I abandon the roses, grant  
him admittance, amuse him.

Perceiving it easier to lie  
down than to wrangle, I slipped  
the latch, we shammed at tipcat  
down the path to the shuttered  
summerhouse, where we rode  
iambic tremors until he slept;

and I slept, dreaming of roses:  
ten foot hedges of yellow roses, solitary  
stems of lavender roses, tiny pink tea  
roses and wild ones that thrive in  
burnt-over wood lots.

Light flirts through the shutters  
wheedling me awake and back into  
the garden, while my boozy  
poem sleeps; while there is still  
light.

*Arlene Hampton*

## My Sister the Moon

Some nights my sister the moon  
drinks with renegade stars  
and breaks mirrors  
with whiskey bottles.  
She is angry with herself  
for giving away  
so many silver bracelets.  
The stars pretend  
they need sunglasses to look at her,  
but her light is fading  
through a rip in her dress.  
When she gets drunk,  
they steal pieces of it.  
"Don't you know  
the stars take your light?"  
I ask as she steps through dawn's window.  
She only smiles  
and pats a halo  
she keeps hidden on her dark side.

*Beth Bradley*

## Extended Warranty

The salesman said it had inner-spring coils . . .  
but I could smell vanilla candle wax.  
A glossy smile described the veneer . . .  
And shadows of a full moon reflect leaves and branches on the wall.  
Traditional or contemporary decor will do just fine . . .  
And I recline to the sound of crickets from the nearby creek.  
We have a two-year payment plan. I signed. He shook my hand.  
The curtains flirt their way into the room, teased on by a half-warm wind.  
On Wednesday it arrived. It took two men to bring it in.  
And I blushed at ordinary daylight and strangers,  
invading our inner sanctum,  
seeing the naked room,  
And smelling vanilla candle wax.

*Carol Case*



## Only Clouds Will Wash the Blood From My Hands

Clouds are places for air to sit on  
when she is tired and needs a rest

If you are a pacifist and if  
you find someone attractive  
then kill him or her soon  
for there is no quicker  
path to opposition  
than desire

Every night  
eight spiders come  
to my bed and we arrange  
a peace treaty that will release  
the Arachnid nation from our dominion  
forever

For once  
the knives  
have been  
properly  
inserted  
into love

there is no turning back

*Glenn Engstrand*

ah swear he wouldn't expect this of Monet  
or tell the cornfields to turn their windy abyss  
upside down and find summits or heave Trane's  
love supreme into an attitude turner rounder  
did you know that's the depth of what  
I saw in the smudge of you that you  
did that dreaming once  
so I left she came will you really be that gentle  
not to look at what we see  
those still waves those nuzzle lands  
I want to climb into that still otherness again  
riot alone in the stench of beauty  
maybe one has to think that the unreachable is so  
so that we can stretch out across boulders of time and writhe  
lie in the tunnels of trees spin into the stars of air  
inhale the structure of yesness and yell the laughter of night  
then it would be all of it part of that mysterying  
we'd just be standing on the edges at the borders of vision  
laughing at the paths ahead as they twinkle fade burst vanish and become

*Kathy Leffel*



### Having Caught the Bus

At the bus stop on Church Street a bus waits a few extra seconds  
for a man to run and catch a ride.

Already seated, a foreign woman waits . . .

. . . waits like down in South America

where women on the beaches in Rio wear tiny bikinis

when it's hot or they wear nothing

eating red fruit with lips

red lips lipstick redder than the fruit.

They speak Portuguese and make pale men stutter

in circles, stop and miss buses

because that's the way they speak in Brasil

in the hot sun like

gummy water turned into syrup

from grapes not quite yet raisins

and still tanning dark as the mothers were dark,

so everything goes a little bit slower

in a deeper hush of voice when they sing

sing along and wait for the sound of a hot pepper

to come through the sinuses playing a muted viola

alto rich with a red varnish that makes men

blind in the white sand where the lies begin

to round themselves about the sweetness of melons

and how the swimsuit was a little bit late

shaking after-beats to a fevered sunburn

that will become dark Portuguese as everything

tastes like red fruit in language hot

in the tropical husk of an accent

that slows her English to a stain

and she leans over and says to the man as he walks by,

"Because of you (e), I'm go (n) ing to be late."

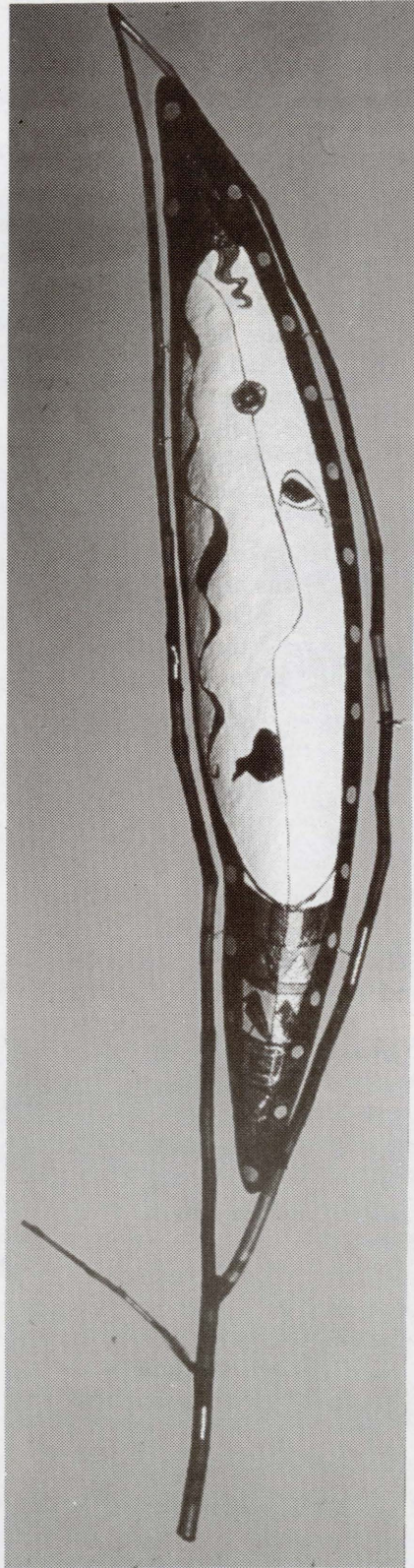
The man stops and stutters an apology

wishing he hadn't worn the white shirt with the spot on it.

Wine is so easy to spill.

*Craig Hultgren*





The Mask

*Paula Stallings*



### Baby Boomer Fantasy

Sometimes I dream that  
you are driving me to high school  
in that old '54 cherry-bomb Ford  
and you pull off the road  
into an alley  
thick with new-bloomed Spring  
and me  
lying in your backseat  
like Liz Taylor on her barge  
surrounded by redbud and dogwood  
and a cherry-bomb Spring

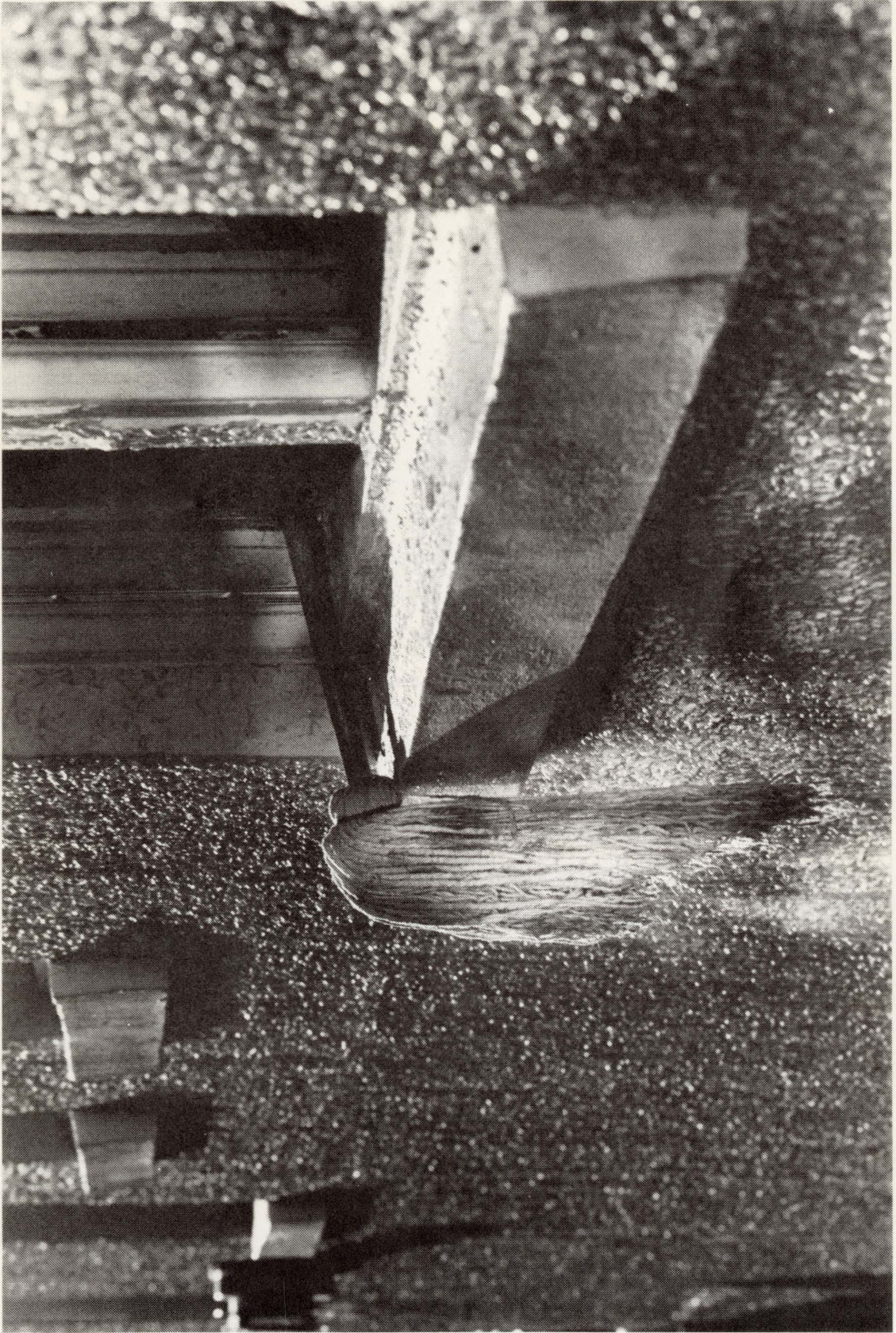
You make love to me  
and you are the First  
First  
and I cross that threshold with you  
and you come into me  
like Life/  
like Thunder/  
like Mystery

and

lift your head and our eyes meet  
laughing  
and I see the silver of your hair  
and the lines that crease your eyes  
and map your laughter  
where all my youth and hopes  
are resurrected  
and  
I see my body  
ravaged by years and 3 grown babies  
and we Laugh  
and we Laugh  
and we Love  
in a world gone mad with Spring  
where fig leaves have no function  
and age is a rumor  
spread by jealous tongues.

*Carla DeLane Wood*





Untitled

*John Hood*

*Astarte 25*





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