

THE STICKY SUFFOCATION OF KISSING

Three Saturday afternoons in a row in the back row of the movie show watching my 14-year-old babysitter kissing her boyfriend, her rosebud breasts full-blooming in his hands, their lips melting, their eyes fluttering butterflies, chiaroscuro in the black-and-white Orson Wells movie, that one where he plays that magician with crazy eyes, eyes just like the eyes of the man I'd marry 18 years later. I went out into the happy daylight of the lobby, flushed all the toilets in the ladies room, pulled the handles of the cigarette machine, smelled the salty popcorn and thought about the sticky suffocation of kissing, an experience as far away from me as ballet dancing on the moon in red shoes so that night I told my mother about my babysitter kissing her boyfriend three Saturday afternoons in a row in the back row of the movie show and my mother told my babysitter's mother who told my babysitter's boyfriend's mother who wouldn't let them see each other ever again my babysitter finally forgiving me, though, when she had children of her own.

PEARL HANDLES

One day the pearl-handled antique pistol my Grandma Nora had cherished for years, acquired some romantic way she never revealed, disappeared and she accused her son-in-law (who didn't like to work) of stealing it and from then on for 20 years at every family reunion or funeral she'd harp at my Uncle Jimmy to give it back, she'd cherished that pearl-handled pistol and she wanted it back where it belonged and everyone would get mad at her for ruining everyone's fun and tell her she was selfish and stingy for not forgetting about that damned pearl-handled gun

and one day I acquired in a romantic way a pearl-handled antique letter opener I hardly ever used, just liked to touch it: the pearl prettier than the moon,

and smoother, cooler than satin,
the handle gardenia, magnolia, plumeria
and orange blossoms turned to bone
and when I divorced my husband,
even though he got the big things: the armoire,
the pool table and two cars, he took
my pearl-handled antique letter opener, too,
kept hidden in the secret drawer of my rolltop,
and even though I harped about it for months,
he wouldn't give it back, lied like my Uncle Jimmy
and said he didn't take it, dammit

and during those midnights
when I talk to my Grandma Nora,
those summer nights I can't sleep beneath
the cotton quilt she made me in 1972,
I say to her, "You weren't selfish, you weren't stingy,"
and she says, "Honey, you weren't selfish,
you weren't stingy."

But
just what is it
about those things
with pearl handles
that people
just can't keep
their hands off of?

VODKA VERACITY

Every Thanksgiving my sister-in-law Babsie
would get drunk on pink chablis and tell
the whole fam damily how her brother Bart
raped her for years when she was a little
girl and Bart would call her a damned liar
and everyone would get disgusted because
she had ruined everyone's fun and Babsie
would drink more and cry because no one
believed her not even her husband who sent her
to a psychiatrist who didn't believe her
either said she harbored secret incestuous
feelings for her tall, dark, handsome brother
so Babsie quit drinking pink chablis
and started drinking vodka so her husband
divorced her and took the kids but Babsie
was cute and married again right away
but her new husband didn't believe her
either because she was always drunk and
you can't believe half of what drunks
say so Babsie went to Betty Ford Clinic
where they sort of believed her
but told her to get on with her life