

Three Poems by Janis Harrington

Wake

Her Irish aunts tiptoe the house, stopping clocks,
draping glass, murmuring through her keyhole,
Cover your vanity, souls get lost in mirrors.

Cloistered since they brought her father home,
she ignores plump-knuckled rapping on her locked door,
hushed pleas to eat food cooked by neighbors.

She lays out school uniform and saddle shoes
her father polished. She pirouettes the dancer
on the music box he gave her—*My little ballerina,*

he boasted across frozen lake as she jumped,
joy lifting her like wings, landed and spun,
blades flashing, arms and face raised to a sun she owned.

Footsteps clatter to answer the bell, slowing to usher
mourners to the parlor, her mother and sister mute
beside him, flanked by dripping tapers,

the casket lid, open like a Dutch door, hiding—
his legs crushed by an iron safe sliding from a truck,
amputated too late to staunch mortal loss of blood.

When cut roses and lilies' scents invade her sanctuary,
she opens the window on the side yard, lit by a moon
broken in half. Men crowd the porch,

swapping whiskey-loud stories about Joe, while
wind flaps forgotten wash, stiff-limbed trousers
and shirts riding the line like a carousel.

She lowers the sash and shade, muffles voices
with the quilt pieced from clothes her father wore
as a boy. When she finally sleeps,

her father calls for her, his firstborn, as a weight,
black as the iron safe, compresses her chest
and new breasts, and cores her heart like an apple.

Voltage

With the telephone perched,
black as a raven, on her knees,

she waits to learn the banshee
March wind has widowed her.

An hour ago, swirling a mop
to the beat of the gleaming walnut radio,

a wedding gift too elegant
for married student housing,

a news bulletin stopped her mid-twirl:
civil engineering students surveying land

from a tall platform in gale winds,
a high voltage line—family to be notified.

Dusk slowly engulfs her, collapsing
daylight's last glimmers,

as the fickle campus radio station,
long since returned to music, plays a hit

from the years Del, the man she'd wanted to marry,
couldn't hold her close enough as they danced—

her husband bangs the front door open, balances
on the jamb, cheeks charcoal-streaked,

eyebrows singed—*You thought I got fried,*
you think I'm a ghost? He grips her arms

and pulls her up, letting the telephone crash—
You should've seen it, the bolt

shot straight through him, burned holes
the size of quarters. Face against his chest,

she breathes scorched fabric, staring
over his shoulder at the night he's brought:

branches slapped by wind, birds fled,
a final angry gust, slamming the door shut.

It Was the Fifties

She rehearses for the Women's Page reporter,
fluttering her hand at wedding china and sterling,
napkins pleated into swans, *Tim's away all week,*
so Saturday breakfast is special, it's no trouble.

Never mind she was up past midnight,
cleaning, ironing and polishing, impossible
to get anything done during the day,
with three children underfoot.

After toast and juice, her husband takes the girls
to the beach, while she stages a perfect set.
She'll mail the clipping to friends left behind
with their transfer to Florida.

Miniature suns of halved grapefruit glow
in crystal bowls, while storm clouds brood
beyond the picture window—just her luck,
the house will look dark in the photographs—

she'll switch on every lamp, before
exchanging flats and pedal pushers for pearls
and black dress, its red hour-glass pattern accenting
her still slender waist. As rain pummels the roof,

and the radio blares small craft warnings,
she latches the door against the threat
of drenched husband and daughters—
let the reporter imagine her perfect family.

She dreads the station wagon whining into the carport,
doors slamming, cranky children calling...
the flimsy screen and rusted hook, a useless levee
against the tide of their cannibal need.

An international health writer and editor, **Janis Harrington** lived in Switzerland and France for twenty years before returning to North Carolina. Her poems, stories and essays have appeared in journals and anthologies including *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease* (The Kent State University Press); *Kakalak 2016*; *New Southerner Anthology*; *Poetic Art*; *Iris*; and *So Far and Yet So Near: Stories of Americans Abroad*. Honors include the Southwest Writer's Award, the Geneva Literary Prize and a *Poetic Art Award* from the Lorton (VA) Arts Foundation. Her manuscript, which includes poems appearing in *The Homestead Review*, won the 2016-17 Lena M. Shull Book Award, sponsored by the North Carolina Poetry Society. Her book, *Waiting for the Hurricane*, will be published this Spring by St. Andrews University Press. She has a Masters degree in English and Creative Writing from North Carolina State University.