

*Mary M. Harris*

## Swallows

Each March the swallows return,  
glue mud into a hive-like nest  
beneath terra cotta tiles.  
Droppings splatter onto flagstones;  
I take up arms against trespassers.

Waiting until the birds leave for food,  
I reel out the hose with jet-spray nozzle  
and shatter the clay mound into shards.  
Mud walls melt. Straw needles stick  
out of the torrent, clutch air.

I had not known there were eggs until  
babies, barely bigger than embryos,  
tumble down deflated. Nearly dry,  
the stucco wall is crumbly as cottage cheese.  
I sweep the rubble into the gutter.

The swallows reappear, circle the yard  
like hawks after prey, accusing.  
I shut the door against their screams.  
Their cries ring through the oak door  
like iron bells in an old mission.

## Two Wives on One Sofa

His ex-wife and I  
sit side by side  
on a loveseat at Christmas.  
I know her as well as any friend  
but we will never be closer  
than this breadth between us.

I know the size of her diamond,  
how her bangs cover a scar  
on her forehead where  
she was scalded as a child.  
Her voice is familiar,  
her walk, her adamant signature  
that endorsed child support checks.  
We share the same surname,  
spoil mutual grandchildren,  
have gone to the same hairdresser  
who gave us similar styles once,  
but we are wary as teenaged girls  
wearing identical dresses at a dance.

If we were ordinary women  
not appended to one man,  
we might meet for lunch  
and confide in each other.  
I would tell her about the time  
he called me by her name,  
how I cleared their closet  
of her discarded clothes,  
the bald styrofoam wig stands  
that accused me of violation,

why I resent her for being first  
in his life, for intruding on mine,  
but it is not my place.

So we sit on this sofa,  
silks and sweats juxtaposed,  
pumps and Reeboks aligned  
parallel but never touching  
and discuss how much  
snow fell in Saugus.

## Balboa Island, 1961

for Linda Lee

The summer we were nine, we inhabited  
the island like sea animals in shells  
confined between the landing and the bridge.  
Glass bottles in the cottage window glowed  
like gems in a jeweler's display case: topaz  
and emerald, ruby, sapphire, amethyst.  
Days, wading into the bay to our knees,  
we mounted rafts and paddled on our bellies,  
skin plastered to the plastic and our scalps  
imprinted with grooves by rubber bathing caps.  
Your father uncovered treasure coins in the sand  
while building castles, and we scoured most of  
the beach before we guessed he'd buried them.  
Nights after dinner, we strolled to the boardwalk  
where we bought frozen bananas skewered  
on sticks and dipped in chocolate, rolled in nuts.  
We sketched the *Bay Queen* from the dock and took  
a strip of photos of ourselves in a booth.  
Now standing on a distant shore before  
another ferry carries us home again,

we have abandoned our shells for stonger armor.  
Pressed against my ear, a conch shell still relays  
the message like a bottle cast to sea;  
pink chambers echo with memories that fade.  
Now you and I cross time's reef to a place  
where we were nine and freckled, frivolous,  
each morning swimming farther out to sea.