

*Paula Licht*

## **The Breeder**

Uncle Stewart plots the family trees:  
hunched at his desk in rumpled clothes,  
he ferrets out superior genes  
for coat color, eye color, shape of head—  
the rest get marked with an X.  
He crosses sons and mothers,  
sisters, brothers;  
failed experiments get sterilized  
and sold as pets.

This year,  
we're growing classic Seal Point Siamese.  
Uncle Stewart's with a first-time queen:  
she lies flat against her cotton mat,  
belly taut and full.  
Breath comes faster, eyes grow distant . . .  
and the kittens come out twisted,  
wrapped too tightly in their glassy Baggies—  
Uncle Stewart has to intervene.

The queen rejects her heirs;  
we have to feed them all by hand.  
I poke milky droplets down their throats,  
stroke petal-soft infant fur.  
Heads wobble on their reedy necks;  
faces open to the light like flowers—  
azure eyes and rose-pink tongues.  
I want to will them life, every one,  
but only three out of five survive.

Uncle Stewart shakes his grizzled head:  
the male has splotches on his legs;  
the females have kinked tails.  
No stud fees, no prize queens, no blue-ribbon champions.  
We pack them in a cardboard box  
like baskets of geraniums.

Tan noses push through the air holes.

## Souvenirs

i tried to photograph the lizards:  
scuttling out from pitted rocks  
and dusty grass, their flat, olive bodies  
glinted like dull bottle glass. i waited  
in thickening heat, focusing,  
but they arrowed away, darting into brush  
as if i were a bird of prey.  
my shots were full of cracking sidewalk,  
empty paths and broken twigs.

with rare determination, i insisted  
on dismantling the bed each night,  
afraid one slithered in after the maid,  
but they preferred to burrow  
in soft sand outside our door.  
annoyed, my new husband watched t.v.,  
while purple twilight blackened slowly.

later we lay apart in silence;  
heat still billowed at midnight  
on this tiny island.  
coarse sheets chafed my sunburned skin—  
i wanted to sleep on the beach,  
pillowed in sand,  
but couldn't find the proper voice.  
i placed a hand upon my stomach, still flat,  
trembling at the slightest noise.

on tuesday i walked to town,  
eager for souvenirs—i had in mind  
distinctive handicrafts:  
native blouse or woven basket or perhaps  
a sterling silver lizard with diamond eyes  
to wear on a chain around my neck.  
but all they had were t-shirts and seashells  
and cheap plastic earrings  
made somewhere else.

while i learned to load suitcases correctly  
on the last day, a lizard skittered  
across my foot. she was quick,  
surprisingly dry and feather-like.  
she trembled on a stone, blinked,  
then disappeared.  
we drove carefully through rutted roads  
to the international airport  
and waited restlessly for our plane.