



SOUTHERN WOMEN'S REVIEW

AN ON-LINE JOURNAL | POEMS • STORIES • PHOTOGRAPHY | SUMMER/FALL 2009



“No True Southern Lady Would Be Without It.”



Last Respects

by Joanne Emily Turnbull

Gladys kisses Myrtle. This is no small feat because her balance, always unreliable, is downright shaky today. This is because her right hand clutches a pouch instead of her cane. Because she refuses to wear glasses, Gladys cannot read the card that Myrtle's holding. No matter. Pinkerton's has been the family funeral home for three generations now and she knows what that card says like she knows her own name. The front never changes. Jesus --- blonde, blue-eyed, and backlit --- crowns the beginning of the 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

The reverse is customized for every death. Today it reads:

Myrtle Margaretta Perkins Harbison
Born July 27, 1898, Bakerstown, Pennsylvania
Died January 14, 1998, Venice, Florida

Gladys greets her sister. Welcome home, Myrtie-mine. Sure wish it was my name on that card. She closes her eyes to envision it: Gladys Gertrude Perkins Lambert. Thank goodness they didn't bury you in Florida. She remembers Myrtle weeping as she boarded a plane to serve a sentence of remaining days in her son's Florida home. Let's see, we were only seventy-nine when they made you go. Has it really been twenty years that you've been gone?

Birthdays softened the first decade of exile. Gladys shudders as she remembers that last visit. They were sitting knee-to-knee, talking about friends who had died in the past year, and how thankful they were for their own good health and sound minds. It was when Myrtle began to explain her gift to Gladys -- the drawstring pouch -- that Dot, Myrtle's daughter-in-law, interrupted. Travel so expensive. Too old. Too frail. No more visits.

And so, these last ten years the sisters have clung to each other by a slender thread of Sunday telephone calls.

Well, we're together now, Myrtie-mine and that's what matters. And see? The pouch? It's always with me.

Gladys tightens her grasp around the silk bag and turns to the work at hand. She had made up her mind as she inched her way on her nephew's arm through the mortuary's black-canopied entrance tunnel. She will take care of both tasks in a single visit to the casket. The first, their grandmother's ritual passed down by their mother, is to inspect the corpse and judge its resemblance to the living Myrtle. The second is to bury the pouch beside the body.

Gladys hovers two inches above the head to examine Myrtle's hair. She gasps as she takes in the tightly-wound, wispy rolls that look like planted rows on the bluish field of Myrtle's scalp. They didn't comb your hair when they took out the curlers! Gladys knows her sister is unhappy with this hairstyle because Myrtle complained about this very thing whenever they visited funeral parlors. She said it was a shame, a common affliction on dead women over eighty.

Gladys, suspecting the undertaker has cut corners to prepare Myrtle for eternity, asks her sister, Where is your blue rinse bouffant? Then she remembers that Sunday night telephone call. Myrtle told her that a beautician convinced her to give up the hair rinse. Cobalt rivulets were staining her neck in the south Florida heat. You shouldn't have listened to her, Myrtie-mine!

Gladys drifts back to last week's phone call. It was Myrtle's turn. Gladys waited in her studio apartment where she moved when Myrtle left. The call did not come. Myrtle was never late. No matter. Gladys passed this Sunday evening like all others, staring out at tracks that no longer carried trains, television static keeping her company. When the phone finally rang, a catch-breath "Aunt Gladys" was all her nephew had to say. She knew Myrtle was gone.

Gladys was surprised that Myrtle's death hurt less than her banishment to Florida. Gladys could still see when Myrtle left. She remembers how her nephew's brimming glass-green eyes, so like Myrtle's, met her stone-grey eyes and said more than his words. "You're my favorite aunt. I wish you could come too but Dot won't, I mean can't, care for you both."

With Myrtle dead, Dot doesn't have to care for either of them now, Gladys thought as she hung up the phone. Then she began



to anticipate how the funeral parlor's muted light would flatter Myrtle's porcelain complexion. Her lifelong wish flickered: Why weren't they born identical twins? How unfair that Myrtle remained wrinkle-free well into old age thanks to genes that skipped Gladys and aided by twice-daily slathers of Pond's Cold Cream.

But today, as Gladys tries to steady herself against the casket to examine Myrtle, she decides the corpse bears no resemblance to her twin. She pokes at translucent paper-thin tissue that strains against the protruding skull. "Good God, Girl! What happened to your face?" It does not occur to her that Myrtle's face could wizen in a decade. Gladys permits a single tear to drop into interlocking webs of crevices packed with orange powder. She resolves not to cry.

Then she notices Myrtle's lips. They were never without rose-colored lipstick during life. Now they are bloodless gray. An oversight? Gladys thinks not. She reasons the mortician has omitted the lipstick on purpose, another trick to save money.

Gladys steps right to examine her sister's fingernails and wobbles. She almost drops her drawstring pouch as she fights for balance. She clutches the container's steel edge as one about to plummet into the sea clings to a ship's rail. A semi-circle of arms reaches to catch her. Not this time. The casket proves worthy ballast and she holds on. Voices behind the arms sigh. She has fallen so often this past year, broken so many bones, that the family has taken to calling her "pieces of Aunt Gladys."

Gladys sighs too. She has resisted the family and dodged the nursing home, but the doctor warned: One more fall.

She discards the thought and slips the pouch in her purse so she can concentrate on the fingernails. Now she knows for sure. The undertaker's misapplied artistry is no mistake. Myrtle's nails are fire engine red. Gladys shakes her head, disgusted. She thinks how her twin buffed those nails daily, never defiling them with nail polish. Now they dangle like garish Christmas lights hanging from ice-laden branches.

Something else is wrong; something more important. Myrtle is in the wrong casket! Immediately Gladys knows her nephew has surrendered his mother's requested mahogany coffin to Dot's practicality. They've substituted a metal one. Anything more would waste their heritage. Well, Gladys will deal with this later.

She knows grandmother and mother would give their opinions of the corpse at this point. They would speak loudly to the gathered family. They would make sure the mortician heard their judgment. But Gladys has had enough. Her inspection is over. She needs to sit down.

Myrtle rests in the main parlor. Separated from smaller, adjoining rooms by an accordion curtain, it mimics a modest living room. Floral arrangements intermingle with brocade sofas and chairs. All line the perimeter to provide an expanse of leaf-patterned carpet for mourners to chat as if at a cocktail party. Gladys inhales the sickly-sweet floral aroma and looks behind her. She pictures the rows of folding chairs that will face the casket for tomorrow's service. Soft, unfamiliar recorded music plays. She doesn't like it.

Gladys needs help to get to her chair. She scans the room for her nephew. Instead she finds his wife Dot. Her platinum hair and sequined pants suit emit beams like a brassy lighthouse over the wave of relatives.

Dot's Appalachian twang betrays West Virginia roots as she holds several cousins captive. "Myrtle could have died in July, don't you think? Lordy, who wants to come north in the winter?" Her peppery laugh draws tight smiles. "I said let's bury the old girl in Florida and be done with it. Why waste money flying her up here? Not to mention our air fare and the rental fee to store her until the ground thaws! But no, that husband of mine said you don't do your mama like that. And family is family, I guess, so I got to respect that."

Gladys shares Myrtle's disregard for her nephew's second wife. The woman takes crude to an art form. "Damn Dot," Myrtle called her daughter-in-law. "Talks alot. Doesn't say much." Gladys wonders how Myrtle endured two decades under the same roof with this woman. Damn Dot makes Gladys glad she never had children.

Her nephew startles her as he comes from behind and grabs her upper arms. He leans down and around to kiss her cheek. The camera around his neck digs into the half-moon hump that rises from the valley between her shoulders. He takes her arm and she totters a few feet to a chair placed against the folding curtain.

"Why the camera?"

"I'm going to take some pictures since the only time the family gets together anymore is at funerals. How about I get your



picture now?" He lowers her shriveled shell onto the chair.

Gladys congratulates herself. How wise she was to pick this perch for Myrtle's wake. Position is crucial. She creaks her head left and glimpses hazy flowers beyond the casket. Damn Dot's arrangement of pink-orange gladiolas blazes with shiny gold letters---"It's Time."

"Take my picture?" Gladys asks, "I guess so. Just make sure Myrtle's not in it."

"Why not?" Her nephew cradles her hand tenderly, like a child cups a dead bird, fearful it will crumble if grasped too tightly.

"Well, they say a corpse gets in the photo, there's going to be another death. Soon."

"Who says?" Her nephew smiles as if she were a charming, silly child, her words amusing, irrelevant.

"I don't remember." Gladys hates to be asked questions she can't answer. Was it Myrtle that told her about corpses and cameras? Something she learned in Florida? "Get now. Let me rest. Take your picture later."

She wants to be left alone to spend her last day with Myrtle. The chair, placed near the head of the casket, faces away into the next room. She is comforted that Myrtle lies close behind. Her back to the body, relatives bending to give condolences will get a birds-eye view of the corpse, guaranteeing brief greetings.

Gladys settles in, crossing her ankles. She smoothes out the skirt of her knife-pleated black dress to make sure it covers her knees. Then she opens her purse for a handkerchief. Her fingers graze the pouch. She curses. How could she forget her second task? Gladys rubs the bag, an act repeated so often over the past ten years that the silk has thinned. She can feel the sharp creases of the folded aluminum treasure hiding within the material. Well, a promise is a promise, especially one made to Myrtle, so she'll just have to make another trip to the coffin.

But someone must help her to the casket. Who? How will she slip the pouch in beside the body without anyone seeing her? With a start, Gladys realizes she must accomplish her mission before the casket is closed at the end of today's visiting hours. She lets the tiny pouch fall onto her lap and groans. All this planning takes away from her time with Myrtle.

Turning her head left again, Gladys catches a blur shaped like a black pencil with a fresh eraser. Standing ramrod at the foot of the coffin is Thornton Pinkerton, the bald, black-suited undertaker. She motions with her fish hook forefinger. He can help her to the casket.

An image flashes as he approaches --- how awful their mother looked in her coffin, almost as bad as Myrtle. Thornton had covered her mother's hairless, formerly brunette head with a copper-colored wig. He had neglected to reshape her lower lip, grimaced by a stroke. Rage startles her, obliterating her intention for the pouch. It erupts from her bony chest and flows like lava up her chicken-throat. This is the man who is responsible. Gladys spews her judgment.

"Chiseler! That does not look like my Myrtle!" As Thornton pulls back, surprised by the old lady's force, Gladys recalls Thornton's assurances about the coffin. "What's more, you promised Myrtle she could have that mahogany casket! It's no wonder the dead people don't come here anymore! They're all going to McClelland's Mortuary." She amplifies her raspy screech to ensure Thornton grasps the depth of her condemnation.

Gladys' eyelids sag like worn elastic. She must tilt her head back in order to peer at Thornton. It's no use. Misty vision prevents her from seeing how her words scorch his face. No matter. She can almost feel the heat from his burning cheeks. She remembers how her mother and grandmother made Thornton's forebears endure this verdict. No Pinkerton had ever succeeded in making a dead Perkins look as she had looked in life. Gladys smiles. She visualizes the averted eyes and contained, amused expressions of onlooking family members. They've witnessed this scene before.

Gladys knows that Thornton despises her, just as he despises her revered family tradition. What does she care? It's finally her turn to administer justice on behalf of the deceased. It's an honor granted the oldest family member. Thornton is an idiot.

Gladys sees him in her mind's eye. She knows he's smirking, thinking he'll get her. He'll make her look worse than her sister when he's in charge of her embalming. He's sizing her up, guessing her time will come soon by the looks of her. Ha! Let him plot revenge. Let him ponder possibilities for her eternal hairstyle and cosmetics. As if she would come here!

Thornton tries to placate her. He bends down and gently places his hand on her arm. "I'm sorry Gladys. I did my best with what I had to work with. Myrtle was so frail."



Excuses! She has heard this lame explanation before, how ravages of illness, accident, and age, hinder his work. Truth be told, Gladys knows he's worried that close-by mourners will overhear them. That could cost him business. Thornton's stale breath irritates her. She swats his hand as if it were a pesky fly.

"Take your hand off me, you swindler, you! How dare you call me Gladys! It's Mrs. Lambert to you! Don't make nice with me. Myrtle paid you good money and you made her look awful. You did it on purpose!" Gladys averts her head to let Thornton know the conversation is over. He slumps back to his post like a junior high boy slinking away from a rejected dance proposal.

Heck! She forgot. Thornton was supposed to help her to the casket. How could she forget her precious drawstring pouch? Well, Myrtle knows it's not her fault. That stupid Thornton has riled her so. She can get her nephew to help her to the casket later. Right now she needs to talk to Myrtle.

I'm sorry, Myrtie-mine. I can't do anything about how you look. Listen, about the pouch... A voice begins to throb in her head, right behind her ears, regular and persistent, like the beat of a kettle drum.

Myrtle? Is that you? Gladys knows that it's Myrtle, all right, and she doesn't want to talk about the black silk pouch.

Forget it. Nothing can be done about how I look, Gladdy-girl. Too late.

Well, Myrtie-mine, there is one saving grace. You look nice in your blue nightgown. The nightgown was Gladys' birthday gift to Myrtle ten years ago, the last time they were together, the day Damn Dot announced no more visits. She remembers how Myrtle fondled the nightgown's lace trim and decided that it was too pretty to wear. "I'm going to save this, be laid out in it."

I'm pleased you remembered to wear the nightgown, Myrtie. But it's so big! I know I bought the right size. Remember? You checked the tags. Despite inflatable pads placed under the nightgown, the frail form behind her is withered and wasted, like her own.

I gave you the nightgown and you gave me this pouch. Remember how I thought you'd given me such a strange birthday present?

Gladdy, don't waste time! Get me in that mahogany coffin.

But the pouch, Myrtie, it's such a burden. Oh, why did you give it to me?

Gladdy! Have you no respect for the dead? Get that son of mine over here. Make him put me in the right casket. Keep Damn Dot out of it.

A familiar hymn plays. She likes this one: A Closer Walk with Thee. It was playing the day Damn Dot took the twins to Pinkerton's to select the casket. Myrtle wanted to make sure her funeral arrangements were in place before she left for Florida.

Thornton Pinkerton and Damn Dot watched in amusement. The twins picked over the features of different caskets like they were discussing how fresh the vegetables were at the market. "This one! I want this casket." Myrtle hissed, mesmerized, as she ran both hands over the polished mahogany, caressing the shining wood as she might a lover.

Damn Dot stepped in. "Now you don't need something that fancy, do you, Myrtle? Look at these nice gray ones."

Myrtle ignored Dot, tsking to Gladys, "Remember Fern Broadfield? She got stuck in one of those cheap steel boxes."

"I know, Myrtie, but it's rare, thank goodness."

"Their families don't love them. That's all there is to it, Gladdy. Promise me you won't let my boy put me in a metal box. Make sure I get the mahogany."

Gladys remembers Damn Dot rolling her eyes and winking at Thornton as she nudged the twins out the door. "Don't you worry, Myrtle. Leave it to Dot. I'll make sure you get just what you need."

Shameful! If her nephew and that Damn Dot think Gladys is going to stand for Myrtle being buried in that gray box, they've got another thing coming.

Don't you worry, Myrtie-mine, I'll take care of this! I'll get you moved.

Gladys prides herself on still being able to take care of several things at once. First she will give her nephew a piece of her mind. Next she'll get Myrtle moved. Then she'll get her nephew to help her to the casket. Finally, she will bury the drawstring bag.

As if he'd read her mind, her nephew arches over her. He covers her like a tent. Placing his hands on each arm of her chair, his camera swings in her face like the pendulum on a grandfather clock. Rapid-fire words shoot from her frail façade, surprising



them both.

"Shame on you! Shame, shame, shame! How could you bring your mother to this place? Thornton has made her look terrible."

Gladys knows her nephew. He will try to quiet her. He does not want a scene. He does not want to be embarrassed in front of the relatives. So what? Gladys wants the family to hear. Maybe if they know how badly Myrtle has been treated, they'll make her nephew to do the right thing. She pictures them shaking their heads in sympathy. She listens to her nephew plead tradition.

"Now, now, Aunt Gladys. The family has come to Pinkerton's for three generations. I played Little League with Thornton."

"No excuses! Where is the mahogany casket? Your mother deserves better than that cheap box. She can afford it and I aim to see she gets it."

Gladys remembers how guilty her nephew felt that she could not live in Florida with Myrtle. Well, Gladys guesses he feels guilty now, sacrificing his mother's wish to his wife's command. Too bad.

"Your mother doesn't like this one bit, I tell you. It's an outrage!" Gladys gives him no chance to explain, dismissing him with a wave that warns him not to bother with an answer. She returns to Myrtle.

"Lordy, Gladdy, you didn't get me moved!"

"Sorry, Myrtie." Her chin trembles. "Please. Let's talk about the pouch."

Gladys recognizes the song playing on the loudspeaker. It's her favorite: Abide With Me. She fingers the silk bag that rests on her lap. The drawstring has broken.

Her mind wanders again back to that last birthday visit ten years ago, their discussion of the pouch.

"How odd." She had thought. "Why would Myrtle give her a bumpy bag for a birthday gift?"

"Am-uh-what?" Gladys looked down to hide her disappointment. She'd been hoping for a blouse. Myrtle had good taste.

"Amitriptyline," Myrtle repeated. "And that's real silk, Gladdy. Embroidered those white crosses myself. They look nice against the black material, don't you think?"

"Amuh-trip-tuh-what?" Gladys was impressed that her twin could pronounce the word.

"Amitriptyline. It's a drug, Gladdy." Myrtle's impatient tone kicked off their life-long parry of spoken responses to unspoken questions. "It's a drug for people who get the depression."

"And just where did you get these pills, Myrtie?"

"Doctor. Been saving them up. Got me some too." Myrtle's next statement made Gladys wonder, not for the first time, if her gaping mouth was a periscope to her mind. "Two thousand milligrams in that bag. Woman at bingo said that should do it."

"Do what?" Gladys pushed. She suspected she would not like the answer.

Myrtle's jaw hardened. "If you go first, I'm taking those pills. If I go first ... well, it's up to you. You don't want to take them, put them in my coffin."

Ten years later, Gladys understands why Myrtle gave her the silk drawstring pouch. A wonderful gift! How could she fail her sister? She rolls the tiny of bag between her fingers. Her nephew tries to sneak past and she calls his name. Wary, he squats by her chair.

"Please help me to the casket." Gladys tries and fails to raise herself. "I must see Myrtle one last time."

"Hold on, Aunt Gladys. Thornton is closing the casket. I'll ask him to wait."

Gladys sinks back down into her chair. Yes, of course, she knows that Thornton will keep the casket open. But she misses Myrtle. Those Sunday calls, that decade of scant balm that barely dulled her ache for her twin, are gone now. Myrtle has stopped speaking.

Gladys makes up her mind.

"Never mind." She pats her nephew's cheek. "Go ahead. Take your picture. Make sure your mother is in it. Me and Myrtle. And get me a glass of water. Please."