

# MERIDIAN

The Semi-Annual  
from the  
University of Virginia

Issue 9 ♦ Spring/Summer 2002

JAMES KIMBRELL

from *Elegy for My Mother*

I.

Far to the left of the placard that read “Eternal Urns,”  
a cardboard container. To the right, a vase worthy  
of Liberace’s bedside table. My sister named a mid-  
range gang of three, “Last Thermos,” “Quaker Oats”  
and (her favorite) “Prince Edward in a Can.” I think  
we freaked the director out with our “silly mourners”  
routine, which seemed, I would guess, odd, disrespectful.  
Or perhaps we were nothing special, not the first  
customers ready to be hustled amid the air-tight  
silver-plated resting places, not so unique in our relief  
that a few jokes left us feeling sophisticated, less  
transparent, almost in control, our faces still swollen  
from the doctor saying *She’s gone, Mr. Kimbrell,*  
*we couldn’t get her back*—like stepping into  
another country, the sea off-kilter, the air tilted, the sky  
in the window utterly different, and I was thinking  
*She can see us.* There was no other way to believe it.  
A nurse led us into a room that didn’t seem  
anywhere. My mother’s jewelry in a white envelope.  
Then someone’s hand on my shoulder. A man  
we did not know kept telling us what time it was.

II.

My mother swatting a mosquito off my shoulder.  
Sugar-sludge in the tupperware emptied of tea.  
A pecan tree dotted with woodpecker holes.  
To look at us from this distance it's hard to say

what we were thinking. I don't recall, but likely  
it had nothing to do with the cement porch steps  
cool on the back of my legs, or with the umber  
light across the chinaberry and driveway gravel,

the sort of detail love looks for when calculating  
what was real, what supposition, and what  
a wish for any condition under which the facts  
might change, and she be here again, talking,

pushing up her glasses. To look at us from this  
distance you might say we were happy then.  
Grass growing over the sidewalk's edges. Slight  
breeze. Lights coming on in the pastel houses.

III.

*Love had a thousand shapes* was my mother's favorite line in all of Woolf. Not that I expected her to be unhappy, but when I walked in the nursing home she was laughing, drinking coffee, books in bed, books stacked atop the medicine shelf. *The thing itself before it has been made anything*, shape of loved Lily Briscoe's wish, that very jar on the nerves. My sense that things were poorly rehearsed—the oyster-shell patio was trying too hard, the Spanish moss ill-planned, the clouds hanging from visible strings. *Get that and start afresh...* I worried the tubes would get hung up, would pull a stack of books over. I wanted to hold her. To fall asleep. The storm blew so hard I thought the building would turn over. She was listening to *Madam Butterfly*. Aluminum foil on the windows kept the room cool.

## IV.

*Send me a sign from the other side*—my request of her in one of our more candid conversations, but the leaves did not point in unusual directions, and the birds did not stop policing the grass, and the sky went on fronting God's blue business. Each night I kept the light on—I pictured a coin-sized glint at the bottom of a well she peered down into. A candle fell off the coffee table—a good omen, or a bad one. No sooner than I set foot in the funeral parlor, my box of ashes in a mall bag, a loose group of mourners began filing out to the parking lot (why did their loss look so insincere?). A woman stopped, *your shirt, son*. A boutonniere of ink, its black island widening outward from my pocket. Then a man pointing toward a procession of cars—*Do you know how to get there?*