

Southern Women

by John Cantey Knight

For Mrs. Hugh (Betty) Oliver

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

She had that steel that Southern women are said to possess: the metal that straightened the spine as she knelt and prayed. A sense of good breeding surrounded her being as her hands combined in supplication. Even a Northerner, or a dog, would have known immediately that this was a lady, even if only by her manner of dress, things in and of themselves nothing. The old man, a retired lawyer, wasn't there. He was slowly dying and scheduled his religion by fits of feeling better, then the steady progression of depression, what the cancer's remission would permit him. In the warming of winter into spring, it seemed as though the hardships were endless. Northern Mississippi was gray and grim, but at noon blue peeked through the cloud covering. She saw the patrol in intervals moving through the budding trees. In a subterfuge of skirts to distract them, the women moved like ghosts to the columned porch as he ran to the back to mount the remaining horse. In the aftermath of the shots that tolled like church bells, she stood over him, a man not yet sixteen, dead, with not even a whisper of any last words. A girl of eleven, her backbone straightened, lips drawn in the torment of war in every age, in each country invaded, devastated, destroyed. The molten steel of silent rage solidified into inflexible vertebrae, the female soul growing cold. She told the story each day, if not to another, then to herself. The young girl, prim and proper, sitting erect, drove her father's car. With the new license came the obligation of driving her aging grandmother through Coahoma County's history. Each time, the story told was the same as yesterday. Her husband and I used to discuss the war.

I asked her how he was, that we missed him.
It was always a pleasure, our exchanges over
the glorious battlefields, our discussions
of the heroic figures of men that had fought and lost.
She said that she couldn't bear the stupidity,
the senselessness, the death, all for nothing—
for a passel of darkies. The next Sunday he was
better. We talked again of those familiar things
over coffee as the church reception buzzed
with the superficialities of women. He told me
the story of how as a young girl she drove
her grandmother through Mississippi and heard.