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new southern writing

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Cover photo by Marion Post Wolcott. May, 1939. An old home which was built about 1850 called "Silverplace."

A portion of this issue was originally scheduled as Gallimaufry #15. Because Mary MacArthur was recently appointed Assistant Director of the Literature Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, it was necessary to suspend publication of Gallimaufry Journal. Because this particular issue was near completion at the time of her appointment, it has been completed under the supervision of Moira Crone and Susan Gossling, to whom Mary MacArthur is very grateful.

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Designed by Susan Gossling

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NEW SOUTHERN WRITING

Marjorie Pryse

LONELY-HEARTS

For the last six hours, Betty Trable had sat wedged against the window on the hot and over-crowded Greyhound. She was approaching her final destination. Any moment she expected the red clay, just about all she could see through the window with her one good eye, to turn into sandy beach. A month earlier, she had noticed an advertisement in the "lonely-hearts" paper that sometimes circulated Back of the Yards.

"Prospering farmer, mid-fifties, offers a home to a wifely companion who will cook, farm. Write Harry Hoover, General Delivery, Pine Island, Georgia."

She had gone directly to a travel agency in downtown Chicago and asked to see brochures. The sand, the sea, the Negro waiters serving up icy drinks, and the beautiful tanned models portrayed in the photographs made Jekyll and Sea Islands look like heaven to Betty. It was a natural thing for her to expect that Pine Island would resemble the resorts which lay just twenty miles out into the ocean. She had written the man Harry Hoover and he had replied that if she had enough money for the trip, she could move to Georgia right away. He said he would arrange for someone to meet her bus.

They arrived at last. Betty stood guard over the suitcase which contained all her earthly possessions and glanced about the station for a man who might be expecting a stranger. At first she saw no-one; she waited patiently. She had faith that Hoover would not forget her. She had given up her life in Chicago to follow his letter to Georgia.

A small, skinny fellow emerged from the Men's Room fastening the tops of his cover-hauls. The straps on the oversized garment caught the late afternoon sun and cast a shadow of wings behind him on the clay. He looked past Betty as if she were invisible and approached the bus driver. The driver stared at him hard, grunted, then squatted down to inspect the mammoth tires. The small fellow spoke to his turned back.

"You got a lady on here travellin' down to meet up with a gentleman in Pine Island?"

"Beats me," the driver shrugged.

Betty stepped forward.

"Here I am, mister. Here I am at last. I'm lookin' for a Mister Harry Hoover of General Delivery."

The skinny man popped his eyes at her and began to chew rhythmically. "Name's Roy," he said. He looked her up and down, then turned to one side and spit a rust-colored stream. "I've got some gear in the front, guess you'll have to ride in the back. It ain't far."

Betty climbed awkwardly into the pick-up and sat on a short bench built into the truck's frame. Roy threw in her suitcase and looked her over again. Without another word, he climbed into the cab and started the engine.

The road to Pine Island wound past some Negro shacks and an occasional marsh. There were deep ruts in the clay where the sand Betty had longed for sifted against the weight of the truck's tires. After a few miles Roy slowed the truck, and as he made the turn into a sandy driveway, a white Spitz leaped out at them, barking and snarling.

At first Betty couldn't see past the truck bed because the Spanish moss in the yard hung so low and so thick. Then she noticed that everything was pale and white: sand, dog, low buildings, moving shadows in the distance, even the moss itself. While she waited, Roy left the engine running while he knocked on the door of a small frame house badly in need of paint. A large white-haired man helped himself down the porch steps with a cane. The truck and the dog made so much noise that Betty couldn't hear what the men were saying. They might have been conversing in another world. Roy gestured in her direction, spat into the bushes, then left the man standing majestically on the stoop. In spite of his cane, he had towered over the skinny Roy.

"Get out, lady," Roy hollered as he neared the truck. "I ain't got all day. Hoover there's half-blind so I guess you'll do each other fine."

Betty shifted all two hundred pounds of herself to her feet with as much dignity as she could muster under the sharp eye of the tobacco chewer. She bent her head and stared down at him. She knew she was no angel. Her hair matted limp, grey, and balding; she had none at all on one side of her head. She'd been told that when she was a baby in carriage, a young cousin had thrown lye in her face. The boy had put out one eye which, after she had

forced it closed for many years, now involuntarily sealed itself. The lye had blanched one cheek, so that the skin there was whiter than the rest of her face and looked like cooled lava, and no hair had ever grown there. She had lived with her face and her gargantuan frame for fifty-four years. None of Roy's curious stares could spoil her trip. She had faith that Hoover would accept her as she was. No human being was born perfect. It was the person she was inside that mattered.

"Could you get him to call off his dog first," she said.

"Hey Harry," Roy called. "The lady here's worried about Christy. I ain't got all day."

Harry Hoover whistled for the Spitz. After the dog was safely inside the house, he motioned with his cane towards the truck. Then Betty helped herself down, pulling her own suitcase behind her. In the porch shadows, Hoover looked like a handsome man, but he was all of sixty if he was a day, and his place wasn't any plantation.

The contrast between the white sun on the yard and the darkness indoors momentarily blinded Betty. It was the hottest part of the day; yet inside the house, awninged by cypress trees and hanging moss, she began to shiver. Christy growled at her from behind an overstuffed chair. Screening hung on the windows in shreds, as if something had been trying to get out.

"Miss Trable," Hoover said. He spoke kindly, paternally. He seemed to focus his attention on her for the first time, and yet unlike Roy, he did not look directly at her. "Don't mind Christy. He's a little irritable in his old age, but then, so are we all. When he doesn't take readily to strangers, he's just trying to show his devotion. Try to get to know him. Try to get him to trust you. If you do, you'll discover he's really a lamb."

"Dogs don't like me," Betty said, moving as far away from the animal as she could.

In order to follow Hoover, Betty had to pass by Christy's protective gaze. With an occasional glance back over her shoulder, she inched forward and found herself standing in the back hall. The house divided geometrically into four small rooms of equal dimensions, one in each corner, with a bathroom wedged between two of them. Hoover gestured into one of the bedrooms.

"You'll sleep here," he said.

The room was musty, warm, and damp. It smelled almost as bad as a Chicago tenement in the summertime. Betty turned up her nose and sniffed.

"That's mildew you smell," Harry said. "You get used to it. Why don't you have a nice rest and we'll talk some more at supper." He smiled broadly in her general direction. Roy had been right; the man's sight had dimmed.

Hoover left her then and made his way slowly back to the front porch. She heard him call the dog and both go out the door. The two of them were inseparable, each the mirror image of the other with their heads of white

hair. She sat down on the bed which filled most of the space in the room. The mattress sagged unexpectedly in the middle and catapaulted her onto her back like a helpless turtle. Too tired to move, she lay absorbing the atmosphere of the new place. How far she had come, in just two days, from the world she had lived in a lifetime.

When Harry Hoover knocked loudly on the open door to call her to supper, Betty woke to discover that it was almost dark. She ran a comb through her hair and joined him in the kitchen, where he had laid a meal of shrimp and beans on an old picnic table. Christy lay on the floor under Hoover's feet.

"What I need to know," Betty said, balancing her bulk on the narrow bench as if she were trying to get comfortable in a church pew, "is when he's going to get here and how long I have to get ready."

Hoover sat hunched over his meal, drawn into himself. When she spoke, he looked up at her as if even though he had served two plates, he was surprised to see her sitting there.

"When who's going to get here?" he asked kindly.

"The preacher, Mr. Hoover," Betty said in a small voice, "that you've told about my comin', and who's going to make it all legal."

"Legal," Hoover said and paused. He wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve, pushed his empty plate to one side, and leaned forward on his large arms. "You're the only stranger I've been expecting," he said.

"It's just that I don't want to be here on false pretexes," Betty explained. "I wouldn't have come down here to live with a strange man if I wasn't planning on gettin' married to him."

Hoover smiled. "We'll see about that," he said. "First of all, there's plenty of work for two, and with two working, there's plenty of food for two."

"You could hire Roy or somebody to help with the work," Betty said. "But you advertised for a wifely companion."

"I was lonely, that's all," Harry said.

In the morning, her head clear at last from the rumble of the Greyhound, Betty woke to discover that Hoover was waiting for her to cook breakfast. She rolled to the edge of the bed, got to her feet, and moved out into the hall. The bathroom smelled like someone had recently died there, and when she opened the tap, first rusty water came out of the hot side, then a promising sputter, then nothing at all. She washed in the tepid cloudy stream which trickled out of the cold water faucet. Then she dressed, passed by Hoover's closed door, and entered the kitchen. In one of the cupboards she found a jar of mustard and a few cans of beans. On the counter, several brown eggs she could swear were still warm lay in a basket.

Hoover joined her in the kitchen before she had finished cooking the eggs.

"Chickens," he said, motioning with his head out the kitchen window.

Betty lifted the oilcloth shade and saw for herself. Then she knew exactly

what kind of a farmer Hoover was. She realized that she'd been hearing the noises the chickens made ever since her arrival; they were so regular and incessant and omnipresent that they'd just seemed part of the strange landscape.

"That's what we do here," Hoover said. "After breakfast I'll walk out back with you and show you how to gather and sort the eggs. Chickens are my life. I love each and every one of them even though they sometimes prove they're much more trouble than they're worth."

In the weeks following her arrival, Betty worked her fingers to the bone to prove herself worthy of sharing Harry's life. She knew her own good qualities and Hoover very shortly came to depend on her. She wasn't lazy, like some fat women. She wasn't greedy; she didn't want to share his name for the farm alone. She wasn't vain; she accepted her deformity and sat at Hoover's table with humility and gratitude.

Betty watched Hoover as closely as she could without violating his privacy or seeming disrespectful. Some weeks he could hardly walk except to move from his porch to the bathroom and back again. He was pale and thin in spite of his height and massive shoulders and Betty didn't think he could lift a full basket of market eggs if he'd had to.

Every morning Betty did the chores alone. She fed the chickens and swept out their roosts; she collected the eggs, then sized and weighed them on Hoover's scales; she raked the chicken-yard. In the evening she returned to the low buildings which housed the birds and scolded the hens who hid their eggs or weren't laying. At noon every day, Roy picked up the eggs in his truck and hauled them into town. Sometimes, if Edna, his wife, had errands there, Betty would go along for the ride.

Edna Rickters was as tall as her husband was slight and just as skinny, and she took pride in the fact that she and Roy possessed the only telephone in the neighborhood.

"But don't get the idea that we take kindly here to niggers or strangers," Edna said. "Harry's the only one allowed to use the phone, and then only in an emergency."

Edna said that in spite of the peaceful atmosphere of Pine Island, the place was no heaven. She and Roy had lived there for thirty years, ten years before Harry Hoover built his farm, "and in all that time, it's been the niggers who've made Pine Island such a dirt poor place. They don't work, but they eat. You can bet on that. Where they get it, I don't know."

All Betty saw of the niggers in question were children playing in sandy yards not much different from the Rickters' and women carrying heavy bundles of laundry down the red clay road towards town. She didn't know whether to disagree with Edna or to remain silent, but it seemed to her that the women, at least, worked as hard as she did. Pine Island was no resort.

It wasn't any one conversation with Edna that eventually provided Betty with Hoover's history, but the result of idle hours the two women spent together for the lack of other female company. Harry Hoover, according to Edna, had lived as many lives as a tomcat. The chicken farm was the venture of his old age. He'd been a Chicago boy too, or so one of his wives had claimed.

"One of them!" Betty had breathed.

"He's been married or after a fashion five times by my count," Edna said. "You're number six."

Betty shook her head in wonder and disbelief.

Who knew much about what he was like as a boy? Probably not even Hoover himself remembered. "He never had the cause to do much damage until he got to be a man," Edna said.

The history was a sordid one. It involved adultery, bigamy, bankruptcy, and deception on all sides. Only one woman emerged from the rest as a saint, then a martyr to Hoover's will. With this woman, Ellen, Hoover had settled down for almost twenty years. They gave birth to four children, close together, and Hoover had as many partners in moderately successful business enterprises until he met the man who cheated him.

"That's how *she* told it," Edna said. "One of the later ones added, 'who cheated as much as he did.' None of the women he's brought to live down here would believe he'd ever been a good man."

"What happened to all the women after *her*?" Betty asked.

Edna looked at her and thought for a moment.

"They couldn't live with Hoover in Ellen's shadow," she said at last. "She's his madonna. Haven't you seen her pictures?"

"I guess he's taken them down," Betty said. "I haven't heard one word about this woman Ellen." She spoke with false assurance. She felt her own security threatened and determined not to believe everything Edna said. "I think you're wrong about him," she concluded. "Or if not, then he's reformed."

"Wait and see," Edna said. "But then you'll be different," she consoled. "Anyone can see Harry's a dying man."

Once, her curiosity stronger than her fears, Betty asked Edna whether she had ever met Ellen.

"One time," Edna said. "He'd started out, a young man in Chicago, as a travelling salesman. Then after the bankruptcy, he went back on the road.

"He still did that for a few years when he came down here. I've seen his stuff. He sold ladies' jewelry and nighties, slips and things like that. Prettiest stuff you ever saw. Any lady would let him in to see what he had, he was such a handsome man. I guess that's how he met the second one.

"Anyway, he showed up here with this woman about fifteen years ago. I never had no cause to suspect. She stayed down here all the time, looking after the garden, and they had a few chickens then too. She said her husband, that's what she called him, was on the road a lot but wanted to retire in Pine Island."

"While he was setting up his second family in Georgia, his children at home in the north worked to help support their mother. Hoover never spent more than a few nights at home each month but they managed. Then his oldest daughter began to suspect her father. There was evidence: his tanned complexion, sand in his sample cases, a picture he tried to hide. He explained the farm in Georgia. Ellen said she'd been born in the north and wanted to die there. Hoover denied having another woman.

"That's how I met her. I guess she'd never done anything but trust him in her whole life, and she wasn't going to stop now. But somewhere along the line, someone—maybe the daughter—convinced her that she ought to come down and see for herself. So they got up the bus money for her and she showed up one spring. Just like you did, Betty, she got off in town and somebody drove her out here. There wasn't but the two of us families here then, and there still ain't, and like I always said, the fact that Pine Island got on the map with a population of three hundred people is somebody's big miscalculation."

"Maybe that's on account of the niggers living down the road," Betty said.

"Then somebody made up that number who don't know how to count. Besides us, I don't know of nobody living here but niggers and chickens, and they don't count for nothin'."

"Ellen showed up at Hoover's chicken farm and the result of her trip was that he lost both his old wife and his new one. One sued him for divorce, the other for bigamy.'

"I guess *she* didn't get much out of it either, because about that time, maybe because he was so worried about other things, all the chickens died, and he was lucky to keep ahold of the land. It ain't worth much, except for chickens. Who'd want to farm a sandhill? But from the looks of her, that one time I saw her, she decided it was a good thing that she wasn't going to have to have him in her house even as much as one night every two months, and now maybe she could remember him like he used to be. She looked like she was going to do that. As far as she was concerned, and she said her children too, Hoover was a dead man. Maybe that is when a man dies, when he just ain't anymore the man he used to be."

"He ain't dead yet, but he looks like he's about to go," Betty said.

"Seems to me, Harry," Betty said to him one afternoon over supper, "you'd be wanting to take some kind of a partner in this enterprise."

"Who'd want it?" he asked. "I'm insured for everything but an act of God, and the damn birds have still died on me four times now. It's a rotten business unless you know what you're getting into."

"Well I mean, suppose something happened to you, what would become of the chickens?"

"That's what I've got you for, Betty, to take care of the chickens. You must know by now just how much I depend on you."

"That's what I'm talking about, Harry. Seems to me there's only one way to make sure a woman like me sticks around, and that's to get married to her. That's what I thought I was getting into when I first come down here, and that's what I'm thinkin' right now."

"I've told you before and I'll tell you again, Betty." Hoover had a talent for turning the most unpleasant words into good news. He just softened his deep voice and smiled behind cloudy eyes. "A man of my age and with my health just hadn't got any call to getting married. I wouldn't be a proper husband to you Betty, and it hurts me to admit it. A girl deserves more than that."

Except for Hoover's closed mind on the subject of marriage, and except for Betty's mortal fear of the dog, Christy, who had nearly bitten her twice since her arrival, life in Pine Island nevertheless gave Betty something to dream about. She often felt like a sister of mercy as she tended Hoover and his farm. For all his failings and the distance he maintained between them, Harry Hoover inspired something very like devotion in Betty. She liked to think that by continuing to live with him in common law, instead of God's law, she was giving of herself but reaping a harvest in return. Hoover, Christy, and the chickens demanded her total surrender to their world. They became her entire universe. She couldn't help but lose weight, she had to work so hard. Down to a hundred and seventy-five by the egg scale, she felt the thin person inside her beginning to emerge. Even the blanched area on her cheek shrank as her face lost some of its fullness. If she lived long enough, she was confident, the beautiful person inside the ugly body would appear one day in the cracked mirror in Hoover's bathroom. She slaved for him and turned fifty-five. She felt as if she'd been born again.

Christy wandered every morning and it was only afternoons that she worried about him. Betty thought that Harry should never have let him roam, but there was a question even in her mind about the dog. Was Christy really vicious or was he only enraged, a puppy at heart just as trapped in his old dog's body as Betty was in hers? She came to believe Chirsty could easily bite her if he wanted to. The fact that he posed a constant threat but did not strike indicated to her that she had misunderstood him all along; and yet, her mortal fears remained.

One evening Christy didn't come home. Roy climbed into his truck and went out looking. He found the dog just down the road, lying in a ditch, hardly breathing, his eyes glazed.

It was the first time Harry left the house in weeks, the day Christy died.

He climbed into Roy's truck and the three of them—two men and Christy—drove into town to see the vet. The vet said he thought the dog had eaten glass.

"About once a week I see a dog that looks like that," he diagnosed. "Looks like the niggers got 'im."

Roy said he was vomiting blood when they brought him in and he gave up the ghost right there in the office.

Edna snorted in triumph. "What have I been telling you all this time about the niggers?" she asked Betty.

Betty stared past her neighbor and shook her head.

"I think it was an act of God," she said.

Harry started having bad dreams after Christy's death and he didn't seem to have much will left. He couldn't sleep, wouldn't talk. He'd already be sitting on his porch listening to the radio by the time she finished bringing in the morning eggs, and Betty began cooking for herself. Harry wouldn't take anything she brought him. Sometimes he'd start up from his own supper and accuse Betty of feeding him glass.

"He was just a dog," Edna said, when Betty told her.

"But he won't let him rest," Betty said.

Strangers began appearing at the house in the afternoons. The men would confer in low whispers with Harry and carried briefcases. Betty had to ask Edna what was going on; Hoover allowed only Roy to be present at his meetings.

"He's feeling sick and the doctor says he might have to go into the hospital. Hoover's worried they'll never let him out alive. The doctor says he's bound to die if he stays where he is. Then the lawyer comes out and they make sure the will is in order . . ."

"The will? What will?"

"I told you about those kids. There are grandkids too. Didn't I tell you that one daughter of his taken to visiting once every few years?"

"I thought you said he was as good as dead, as far as they were concerned."

"I said as far as *she* was concerned, and probably that's still true. I don't know what ever happened to her. I don't talk to the daughter when she comes. I just don't mess with it."

That's when Betty became angry for the first time. That night after she ate, she went out onto the porch and pulled up a chair.

"How come you never told me about those grandkids of yours?" she said.

Hoover didn't hear her the first time she asked. He was dozing or dreaming and she spoke again.

"Don't you think I get lonely out here too? Nobody to talk to but Edna? Do you think I come all the way down from Chicago just to gather your eggs and keep the porch clean for your grandkids? I'm asking for the last time,

when are we going to get married?"

Hoover opened his eyes and seemed to rouse himself with great effort. He looked at her briefly, then stared off into the dark.

"Betty," he said, "you're a good woman. You've been working and cooking here for months now and don't think I don't appreciate it. As far as marrying goes, I told you before and I'll tell you again. I'm too old and I'm not much in the mood."

It was the third time he denied her and this time she took him at his word. Pride got the best of her and that night, shut up in her room, she answered another ad in the lonely-hearts "wifes wanted" paper that Hoover still subscribed to.

The days dragged. Hoover sank deeper and deeper into himself. He took no more interest in the farm. No longer could Betty say with certainty that he was mourning Christy. He seemed literally to be fading from sight right in front of her eyes.

It wasn't either their adamant conversations in the dark or Betty's subsequent injured silences that pushed him over the line. He was going to die anyway that year and it was just that Betty had caught up with where he was in time to see it. It wasn't any fault of hers that when she got up one morning, she found him sitting on the porch where she'd taken to leaving him alone at night in her festering rage. It wasn't any fault of hers that she couldn't stop raving even as she went next door to get Roy and Edna.

"I don't have a prayer now," she complained bitterly.

"Didn't think he was going to last much longer," Roy said.

And it wasn't any fault of Betty's that she couldn't get a ride to the funeral. Edna came by to tell her that his daughter was coming down and she might not want to see Betty there. Now Betty directed her anger at Edna. Who would have telephoned the daughter about Hoover's death? None of them were treating her right and she sat all alone in a closed house thinking what to do.

When they all brought Hoover's lawyer out to the farm, none of them could get in. Neither could they raise anyone inside the house. Betty sat quietly, doors and shutters locked as if somebody had gone away and shut up against the changing season. They hollered and hollered and Betty sat tight.

"We drove down all last night in the rain. My sister caught a bad cold and she's resting now in the motel. As you might imagine, we're anxious to settle Dad's business and go home." Betty had never heard the woman's voice before and yet she knew it belonged to Ellen's daughter.

They sat on the porch and conferred in Betty's full hearing.

"I've never known the house to be locked." This was Roy speaking. Betty had all she could do not to open the front door and give him a piece of her mind. "There was a woman living here," he went on. "I'd say she just closed

up the house and left."

"I hate to break in if we don't have to, Mr. Rickters. I know my father well enough to know there's nothing inside that won't wait a day or two," the daughter said. "Mr. Arthur, don't you know a locksmith in Brunswick who might be able to help us out?"

"Yes ma'am," he said. "First things first. Let's worry about the burial and I can work on the papers in the meantime. Your father wasn't a rich man and there are bills piling up. There ought to be a buyer for the farm. Then there's the insurance. Harry Hoover insured against everything but an act of God," the lawyer laughed.

"I'd appreciate anything you can do," the daughter said. "I've got my mother to support."

Betty heard their conversation recede as they moved away from the porch. They hadn't known she was inside, hadn't tried to break in. But now she had nowhere to go. She couldn't stay here; they'd sell it out from under her. She couldn't return to Chicago; she had no one.

She sat until dark, then slept awhile. Before the dawn was full she collected enough eggs from the hen houses for her day's food, then shut herself back up in the dark house. She no longer trusted Edna, who had betrayed her. She sat listening to the radio turned as low as it would go, then, realizing her time was limited, she began to search the house. She turned over all the furniture in the small place, looked under the rugs, pried boards loose in the floors and cabinets, and finally, in desperation, entered Hoover's bedroom.

The first thing she had done, after Roy left with the body, was to make sure the bedroom door was securely closed. Now, after several days of being shut up, the room was musty. Betty entered it cautiously. The bedclothes were turned back, as if Hoover had just walked away from his bed; however, she knew that the night he died, he hadn't moved off the porch. Betty felt chills creeping up her spine. She was trespassing in a room she had never entered while he was alive.

Behind the door stood a small pigeon-hold desk. On the top shelf, she saw pictures of women and children in various stages of growth. One of the photos was old and faded; it was Ellen.

She sat down at the desk. It gave her pleasure to rifle the contents of its drawers in search of writing paper. She picked up a pen, filled it with ink, and began.

"To the Dauter. I was here the hole wile. Now yor gone. Dont you come back. I nursed Hover and am the riteful air. Yrs truely, Betty Trable."

When it was dark, she left the house and crept behind the back porch. She moved ghostlike through the hanging moss until she reached the street. Hoover's mailbox and the one belonging to Roy and Edna stood together. Betty moved cautiously but with one relief: at least Christy wasn't there to

spring out at her. It was only the ghost she had to fear. She placed the note in Edna's box knowing it would be delivered in the morning. She opened Hoover's and was surprised to find a letter inside.

When she returned to the house, she lit an oil lamp in her bedroom and peered at the envelope. It was addressed to "Betty Trabel" and then she remembered the letter she had written, herself, some weeks before. It was from a farmer in Nebraska who wanted her to come West on the next bus.

All the next day, after sleeping very little, she sat in the house and thought. She cleaned off the bathroom mirror and looked at herself, hard. She had gained back the weight she had shed and more. She was uglier than when she'd arrived. She couldn't bear to see herself anymore and as she sat back down in the living room, she felt a tear breaking through her lost eyesocket. "Lucky Hoover's blind," Roy had said when he'd taken a good look at her. It was too much to hope that the Nebraska farmer might also be losing his sight in his old age. By evening she fell into a dreamless sleep.

On the morning of the third day since the daughter's appearance at the house, Betty woke to discover that there was no food. She put on slippers and, for the first time since Hoover's death, found herself standing in the sun. It was brighter than she'd realized and she saw stars until her eye adjusted to the light. Then she noticed the loud silence. She shuffled quickly through the sand until she came in full view of the hen houses. Where were the chickens? Then she saw them, lying in sand-covered mounds, their frail bodies already stiff. There were no eggs.

Now Betty felt the full weight of the universe on her shoulders. She sank into the sand among the feathers. Hoover, Christy, and the chickens—all dead. She felt a great loneliness clutch her chest and move towards her overworked and constricting heart. She had deluded herself all along. She'd been living in sin. The chickens did not belong to her; they were Hoover's. He'd come during the night when she wasn't watching and taken them all away with him. She clenched her fist against the rising fear. She lifted her contorted face full into the sun. The empty sky turned black. Everywhere she looked, she discovered Hoover's absence in the world.

Then, clutching her only eye, moaning in dizziness and pain, she staggered to her feet. Groping her way towards the house, she heard Roy's truck pull into the driveway. She fell for the last time, within sight of the house. Her heart cracked in her ribs. Hoover, Christy, and the chickens; and now, their voices echoing then fading in the desert place, Roy Rickters the herald of bad news had arrived with the others to evict her from the farm.

Marjorie Pryse has published short fiction in *Story Quarterly* and *Mother Jones*. She was born in Kentucky and recently moved to Knoxville, Tennessee.