

The Whittling · *B. S. Jones*

HE WORKED on the whittling every evening after work while she made dinner. It was starting to take on human shape, thin, straight, arms crossed over the sex.

“Is it me?” she said, through the screen.

“I don’t know.” He closed the knife. “Maybe.”

She brought a plate of food out on the porch. He set it down on the railing. “You’re not eating again tonight?”

She shook her head, firm.

“Is this for my benefit?”

She smiled. “It’s like breaking the seal of a wet suit.”

He put his fork down.

“I’m free form.”

He was so angry he couldn’t eat, looking at her breasts shrunk smaller than the palms of his hands.

After they made love she always bathed.

He leaned against the cold porcelain, watching her soap her legs. “Here.” He slid his hands up and down, feeling what was left of the calf muscle.

“That’s the first thing you said to me—I had nice legs. Do you remember?”

He nodded.

“Now they have no shape at all.” She sounded proud.

She slid under the water, holding her breath for as long as she could, surfacing in her own backwash like a garland or halo.

He walked out on the porch and picked up the whittling, fingering the smooth face, flat like a reflection.

He reached into his pocket for the knife, taking the tip of it and gouging out eyes. He stooped and picked up the little curls of wood.

She came out wrapped in a towel, her skin shiny with moonlight.

Their eyes met and she saw that he was hungry again.

She laughed and pointed at the trees on the hill. “They stick out like sore thumbs.”

He looked at them, isolated by their own deep thrust.

Sometimes when he came home from work, it was like there was a black hole around the house, some dark gravity, the whole place spinning around her waistline.

He could almost fit his hands around. He kissed her neck. “Eat with me tonight.”

She unclasped his thumbs like a tight belt.

He walked out on the porch and picked up the whittling. It was as if she possessed the house, pulling it around her like an empty shell. Perhaps she had outgrown it and was trying to shrink herself . . .

The knife slipped—blood all over the little statuette—the face still expressionless.

She came out with a plate of food, not crying out. She knelt down, pressing her cool dress to his wrist.

His eyes felt big and wet.

“There,” she said like a mother. “That’s better.”

She licked her fingers, kneading the statuette, thinning the red to pink and then to spittle so that the fine hard grain shone through again.

“Why, it’s a man!” she said.