

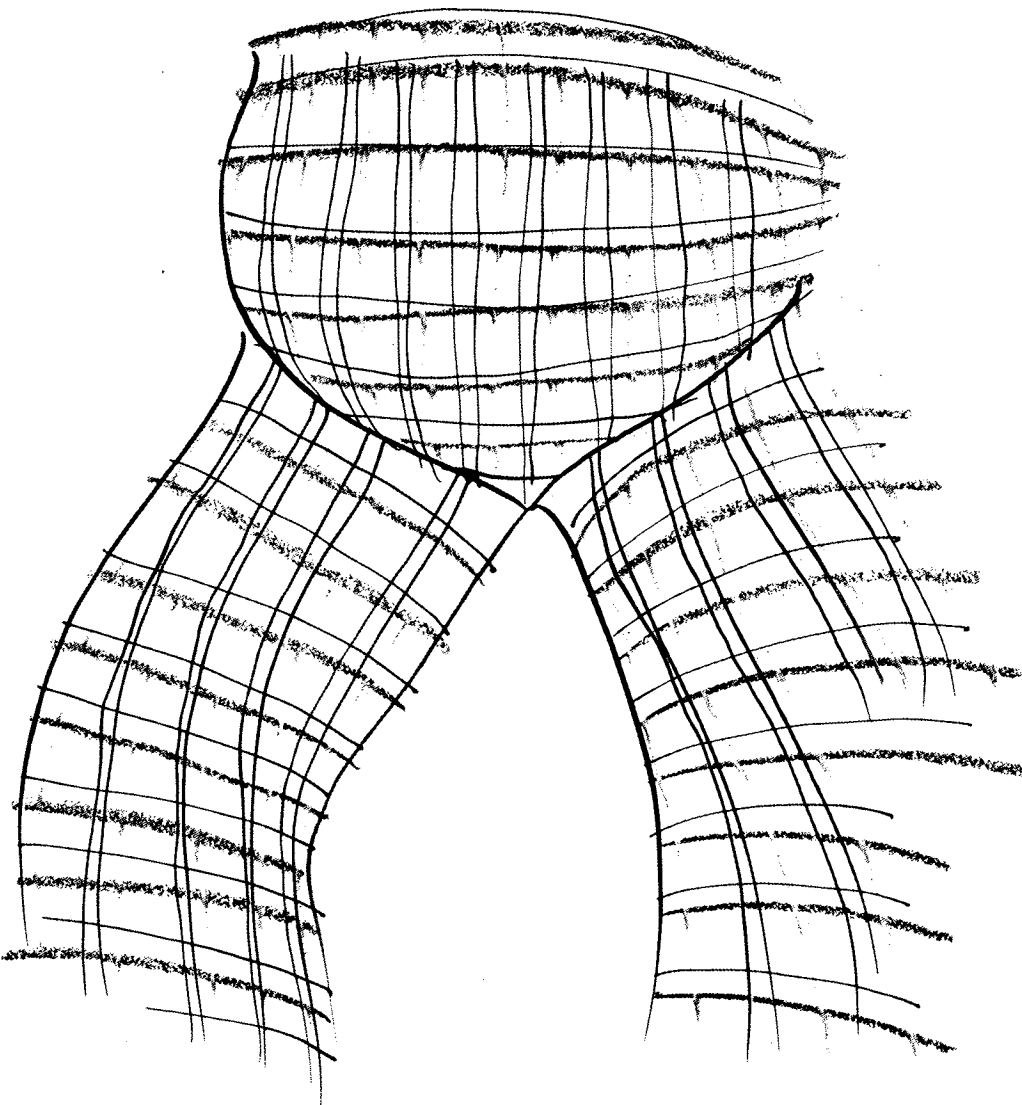


THRASHING SLACKS

The old woman, she hits me with a stick. She gets it from the wood pile, bends down, and she takes a cough of a breath and puts her hand on her chest.

“You little bugger,” she says and then she turns her head sideways while she puts her hand into the bottom of the wood pile. “You are going to cop it.” When she turns her head her hair at the back looks like stuff, not like hair. It’s all wound around itself and held on with three copper pins. When she’s down there in the wood pile you always know you could do something terrible to her just by leaning over and flicking those little copper pins out of her brown felty fluff-filled hair. But she’s always in her thrashing slacks. They’re a thick yellow (almost gold) and bottle green tartan. They flip around her ankles and are baggy at the knees and at the thighs, but all of a sudden they’re tight as a balloon around her belly. A big green and yellow tartan balloon.

“I told you. I told you to git out of there,” she says heaving herself up. Her dark brown knitted cardigan has bits of bark on the sleeve where she shoved it into the wood pile. “Go on, git.” She knows what she’s doing but she lets you think that she’s pretending it’s going to happen almost like an accident, even as she breaks the stick over her knee, leaving lots of little tiny spikes in the tartan. She points the stick at me. It’s off the old fence. It had been dry in January and the moss fell off. In February it was even drier and it started to fall down. In March we picked it up. We needed all the firewood we could get. The place was chilly. She always complained about the cold but it never seemed to stop her. She cropped up everywhere. In the cellar, where the dirt floor covered the foundations, you could peek up through the floorboards into the rooms upstairs. There was even a hole stopped with a cork from a claret flagon, and you could see quite a lot through that. The telephone wire went from place to place but you couldn’t really tell where the rooms were. That always came as a surprise. At the front of the cellar you could stand up straight. But as you went back it got lower and lower and darker as well so you had to crawl on your hands and knees until right at the back you were flat on your stomach with your arms out in front of you feeling the way because you couldn’t see a thing. You could hear everything the same as when you slide down into the bath under the water and you can hear the boiler clanking and the walls creaking and when someone shuts a door it’s like a bomb’s gone off. Down in the cellar, you could hear her scissor walk. She wears shoes she can get off quickly. Brown sandals with flat heels or black slippers with a milky lining with grey lines and black spots from her naked foot. She has a pair of jewelled Turkish



slippers turned up at the toes. She wears them all with the tartan slacks and it's the slacks you see when you hear the scissor walk.

Slap slap slap slap slap through the house. Slap slap across the breakfast room lino. Clap clap clap clap into the kitchen. Bang bang. Bang. She throws the pots and pans about, and the baking dish gongs in agony. From room to room the scissor walk keeps her going about her business. She hates the housework. It's dangerous to get in her way. And in the garden she hacks away at the oleander bushes crowding the entrance to the laundry and she prunes the waterfall of pigface back until you can see the bare brick of the crumbling walls. The despised rugs are hurled through the hall for a beating on the verandah. The flower pots along the front steps and the courtyard are force-fed from the front hose and the fuschia petals are forced as they drown to wave goodbye by the bulging tension at the rim.

"Come here you little bugger," she says, waiting by the wood pile. "Come here and be thrashed." She's not smiling at all. I walk towards her and know what is going to happen to me. The stick's end is uneven. It's part of the bottom of a paling and about a third of it is crusted with dirt. A rusty sliver of metal lies smoothly against its side. She's appraising it, moving one hand along the stick to feel how dirty it really is. In wet weather she uses the bigger wooden spoon which is clean. She doesn't want to dirty her hands or my corduroy trousers. I step back and let her examine her weapon. I can't stop seeing the gold and green of her tartan slacks, lines of rich, buttery yellow screaming up and down around the fence paling and going out of control around the bulge at the top of her thighs, crashing into each other and bouncing off again.

She takes too long. A shower of cream blossom falls from the almond tree. She doesn't look up with me but she wants to. She's annoyed by the blossom at her feet. She doesn't know it's in her hair, she's like her wedding photo on the sideboard and her lips are as shiny and tight and her eyes are as bare. You'd think I'd pity her standing there with the stick, its prickles in her slacks and her head covered by shards of almond blossom from next door's tree. But there's no time even to wonder about it. I never even want it to be over with.

"Come back here," she says leaving the dirty part of the stick at her end. She's going to grab me again if I don't. She has a way of doing that, she stretches out her arm, she keeps me ahead of her, but even then I can smell the lotion on her hands and I can get a closeup look at the rings, mellow gold and dirty opaque diamond, that strangle her finger. Her hands are mottled with flecks of blue, and rubbery green veins are plugged with the deliberate manicure she does in her bedroom. Sometimes when I look up through the wine cork's hole in the floor she is doing her nails. She has a little pot, white and blue with a gold lid, for the

expensive cream, two bottles of fluid that clear your nose just to see them, a bright pink filing board, and a blue scarf. She sits with her legs crossed at her dressing table with the radio on and taps her foot up and down beside the hole in the floor. Sometimes she sings, la la la la, or she mutters the words at the tunes that are blunt from all the people who have listened to them. She beckons her fingers and holds her hand before her face and that pink emery board cuts backwards and forwards, atomising the nail, giving its fragments a chance to spin into space before they are turned to dust in the carpet at her feet. She sharpens her nails as she files them and they pinch my ear as she grabs it. "I said come back here," she says.

Her voice has changed now; she's pretending to be someone else. It's not her, and we don't know each other.

"This is for wilful disobedience," she says looking at her stick, carefully stating each syllable. I do not ask her to clarify.

She generally gets worked up enough after the first few strokes, but this time it takes quite a while. I tend to hop about, and this makes it worse. But if I stand still it takes her longer to stop. The almond blossom quivers in her hair and falls from her shoulders as we go round and round. She has me by the ear. On one side I can feel the cold rings on her knuckle as she pushes me into her. On the other is the coarse cotton of her slacks, and their leaping yellow lines open up and she pushes me through them, into her belly, trapping me there.

JOAN PRIEST

A DANGEROUS WORLD

Current crinkled in Olsen dreamt
sequence, shoreline and sand
throw strange quilted patterns,
crabs skitter crazily
one lowly ugarie (Plebidoanax
deltonides in laboratories
only) is stranded.