

2024 ADULT ESSAY CONTEST – HONORABLE MENTION

Palmetto Bugs

By Rachel Coonce

We're moving to Gainesville, and I'm finally getting out of this podunk, nowhere town, where everyone thinks I'm a slut. I walk down our street for the last time. I'm leaving this place: I'm leaving Highway 90 and the one square block they call downtown, I'm leaving all the skater boys, and our ranch-style house squatting under the oak tree that drips palmetto bugs into its walls.

Palmetto bugs are all I know cockroaches to be: black and shiny, as big as my father's big toe, with wings that carry them to the tallest thing in the room, which is usually someone's head. I felt the silkiness of their wings when I pulled one out of my combat boot. I felt the tickle of their feet as one crawled onto my hand while I sat on the living room loveseat, waiting for Robbie in the dark. I felt the crunch of their exoskeletons when I accidentally stepped on one, sneaking barefoot onto the back carport. That didn't kill it though. Killing them requires multiple direct hits with the hardest weapon in the house—a hard back book or a hard-soled shoe. They can be sucked up in the vacuum, if it's a particularly powerful vacuum, not clogged up with animal hair, human hair, and dust. But then the vacuum radiates a warm smell of dead cockroach until the whole house is filled with what Lily insists is the smell of Dr. Pepper.

Palmetto bugs terrorize us through the house, crawling up through crevices, swooping down from ceilings, occupying every dark corner. They scurry across the ceiling, as Lily and I hide under a blanket. We clutch each other atop a dining room chair as they scuttle under foot. We scream horror-movie, guttural cries of true terror when Stephen chases us through the house with one of their dead bodies. Even when they aren't around, I imagine them everywhere: all over my body, creeping up my widening thighs, or crawling over my pockmarked face with their furry legs and wavering antenna. Maybe they venture inside—my mouth, or my ears, or worst of all, my hair. My long, curly hair—they get lost, fluttering their wings through the tangled weave of auburn strands, the red shimmering against their dark bodies, their wings pounding against my head to fight their way out. The harder they struggle, the deeper they're buried.

But all of that is behind me now that we're getting out of Lake Shitty.

Robbie rides up beside me on his skates: They still have palmetto bugs in Gainesville, you know. You may be getting out of here, but you'll still be in the swamp.

Yeah right, I say to the thick breeze in his wake. Moving away means a fresh start. I pull the tie out of my hair and let it fall over my shoulders. It feels heavy in the afternoon heat, shimmering with the glare of the sun. I get a clean slate.