

“Picture in a Battered Frame”

by Deborah Baxter

If I could do it now, I would take you
in my arms and hold you, my lost boy,
a child loved who didn't feel that love,
whose spirit wasn't fed enough.

I would tell you, my sad-eyed son,
how your voice was what kept me
awake as we drove dark roads
from Palm Beach to Panama City,
to Philly, Boston, or even New York.
We were searching for Daddy's ship
and a time to be together through
the gray days before the war.

When World War II loomed near,
we sought refuge in the fragrant
orange groves of Florida,
Little Grandma's two-stall barn
filled with cats and one black cow,
and Aunt Cattie's rickety farmhouse.
Here bed-time stories lived inside
your head and grew into your play.
Tigers hid under tall canna leaves
in your grandma's backyard. Clouds
changed into toys that flew above
our heads in the south Florida skies:
a cat, a horse, a ship like Daddy's.
We could wander down a clay lane
to Aunt Cattie's hen-house and return
with six brown eggs for supper. We played
hide-and-seek behind the clothesline,
careful not to touch the flapping shirts
whose sleeves could grab us. You raced
to Pappy's pasture, laughing, because
you always won. Breathless, we dropped
down on tender grass and looked for frogs.

Your daddy, far away on his ship
somewhere in the Pacific, wrote us letters,
fought a war and his own dark heartaches.

When he returned to us, his face was hard.
He didn't know our songs. "I need quiet!"
he would shout. But he kept your picture
in a pocket near his heart, called you
his little man, and said you took good
care of your mama. When he left us again,
he stiffly shook your hand.

Deborah Baxter is a native of Norfolk, Virginia. The Navy brought her father to Norfolk in 1947, where he remained after his retirement in 1953. Her mother and brother's experiences before WWII and shortly after have always fascinated Deborah. She is a poet and graduate of Old Dominion University who enjoys writing about her Navy family's experiences. Her 106-year-old mother, Mary, lives with her and has shared many tales of her adventurous life as a Navy wife.