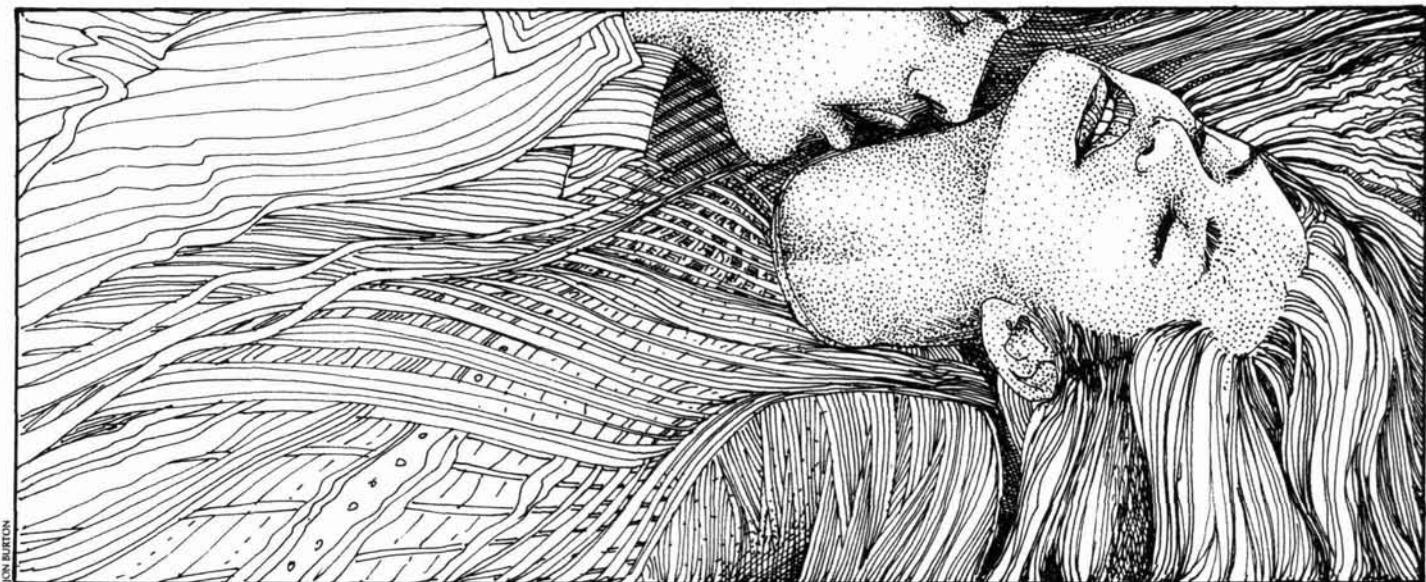


1993 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Winner

OTHER HANDS

By Carol B. Quist



"Men think power is physical. Women, whose bodies are always vulnerable, know it isn't."

THE FIRST TIME SISTER SAXON LEFT HER BODY, she didn't even know which prayer had finally worked. Someone much like . . . mother wrapped her in the first hug in years that didn't grip her crotch. As Viv cried, the mother whispered, "Stay as long as you can. Then we'll show you the way back."

Mother hadn't said the way "home." And sisters surrounding her also seemed to know that the house she kept for Errol wasn't home. No, upon this giving yet sustaining . . . firmament? . . . was the home she hadn't known since childhood.

Cleansed and clothed by the sisters' eyes and coached by the child's hand, she walked, then ran for what seemed hours beneath warming light. She read, talked, watched. And no one criticized or interrupted.

But, oh, how painful was reentry. Left kneeling at the sofa, her body had crumpled into cramps. Crawling to the tub, writhing out of her clothes, she'd rolled into the warm water just as Errol burst in, bawling, "Viv! Where are you, Viv?"

"Ouch!" she said. He hurt.

CAROL B. QUIST is a writer who lives in Salt Lake City.

Grunting, he reared back, then left.

Other hands massaged the knotted muscles, lingered on her shoulder as she later made dinner and parried Errol's questions.

From then on, she was careful to leave her body at rest. And she left it often, seeking learning in freedom. Her classmates varied, also coming when they could. She came to know them on earth, too, in the caring places.

Once she overstayed and returned to Errol's crushing CPR. "Breathe! Breathe!"

"Get off!" she finally gasped as sirens flared, then paused outside. Paramedics—sisters—burst in.

At the hospital, the head internist introduced the heads of neurosurgery and plastic surgery—also sisters. They granted Errol's request to give Viv a complete physical and bed rest.

While running standard tests, physicians reconfirmed the unlikelihood of Viv's bearing children.

"But she was perfectly fine when we married," Errol protested.

After the silence during which everyone looked at him, the gynecologist said, "Our infertility and adoption services are the

best in the nation. And you should have that wart removed."

But Errol would not consider adoption either, even of the foster children he'd come to care for through Viv's volunteering at the shelter.

At the hospital, she never left her body. She had no need. And Errol might come at any time, too. Later, she learned to make the firmament transparent and monitor her body regularly. She realized she should probably care for it more while in it, too.

She considered what would happen if she grabbed Errol's crotch when she hugged him. How much was he a prisoner of his body? In her journal, she often listed the qualities she'd loved enough to marry, still loved. His constant courtesy, whether to beggar or bank president. His generosity—he'd buy Scout-A-Rama tickets from everyone who asked. His participation in any service project. His strict honesty. His respect and devotion to their parents. She was grateful for such temporal, spiritual, and cultural support and identity and status as Errol gave her. She began to ponder what status she gave him, why he seemed to need to control their activities and choices.

One afternoon as she was about to embody, Errol's—no, some other man's head pierced the firmament and turned to her. No one even screamed as the eyes bulged and head tilted. Instinctively Viv hugged the sister beside her, the man's wife. Instantly, the neurosurgeons and plastic surgeons were there.

"Men think power is physical. Women, whose bodies are always vulnerable, know it isn't." The two surgeons spoke as they sutured between the man's gaping shoulders in the second bloodless operation Viv had seen in—how long had it been?

The firmament had done the first—causing Viv to try to recall the physics about equal and opposite forces. Now she was in that sister's house, still hugging, marveling at stitches beginning deep in muscle tissue and rising to the skin. Why hadn't she gone mad, and how could the firmament cauterize?

"Shock, and we don't know either—yet," the surgeons answered sorrowfully. "We can only repair."

"He found and somehow used my journal," the sister said, pulling Viv to where it lay open on a nightstand.

"You have a hard choice," the surgeons said almost together. Shucking their gloves, they stepped forward. Sirens sounded as they reached for the journal.

"No!" the sister cried, "I can't lose all I've learned, won!"

The surgeons bundled their equipment and other evidence. "But I'm not finished here, either," the sister cried at Viv.

Was that her sister's choice? To leave her body beside his? Or to become a fugitive on earth?

"A 'witness protection program,' isn't it?" Viv cried, "to dodge a murder charge. New face, hair, even toeprints and fingerprints—" she told the sister staring at her.

The sirens whined down as Viv envisioned her sister checking into the hospital alone, assuming a new name, having all memory removed, really being reborn all because—"I'll nurse you!" Viv vowed. "I'll—become a real nurse?" she asked herself.

Hope rose and fell in her sister's eyes as the surgeons shook

their heads.

"Well, risky now, maybe," Viv nodded, "but I'll find a way to spare others this pain and—I will!"

She was already gone when the paramedics, certainly sisters, entered to help deal with the head and body. And already, even before her appointment with the mother, she was planning to prevent the head and body ever being Errol's. ☐



LAKE CHELAN

Someone moved the lake, or swallowed part—it looks like the first Chinese brother was here.
My husband (the old quarterback) paces a first down,
tells me the length, three football fields.
We walk toward the water, past bleached stumps,
four dead buoys attached to concrete, a mooring
dock that stands alone, directionless.

First our feet filled with good intentions
remember beachcombing.
We collect pebbles, petrified wood,
follow sandtracks of birds, crisscross words drawn
with a stick, *Karen was here*.
Wind makes little waves; they break with a surf sound
like low tide at the Jersey shore—we laugh
"You should have seen the Atlantic in the old days . . ."
We miss salt, broken shells, the lifeguard stand,
digging holes to find China at the other end.

When the sun drops, we look up at last;
we are surrounded. Mountains protect
with great brown flanks, some bristle
with trees, some are hung with cloud-smoke
hiding the peaks of snow. Ah Chelan—
all that is mysterious and deep,
glacier-fed and green in August,
past memory, not telling its secrets,
only whispered native names
Wapato . . . Okanogan . . . Stehikin . . .
soundings not accessible to travelers
on foot. Ice gouges places
deeper than we know.

—ANNE FASULO