

Stephanie Dickinson

## Big-Headed Anna Making Soap

1909. I am told to make lye soap and sent off to the back pasture where the oldest of the long grasses weave and bend, where hidden things whisper. *Crutch twelve loaves of soap before you chore supper.* Once I found cradled in the weeds' green arms a missing ewe, her head severed from her body and set between her black legs. And the ewe's wool ripped by the knife, each wound as though an eye opening—ten, twenty until I counted forty eyes, and all of them weeping red tears that had been torn from her flesh. I buried the ewe and said prayers. Now the sun shadows my every step. I ferry hickory tinder into the fire pit and wheedle the first flames to lick my fingers. The cast iron kettle I feed suet and tallow to—a month's worth of dinner drippings—is fat enough to hide a kneeling man. The sun burns through my wide-brimmed hat, jumbles my thinking. Gnats fidget against my hips. I hear footfalls in the dry grass, skipping, a stick snapping, but when I turn I find no one there. In the fire's white smoke a figure forms, a crinoline dress, a girl-child's blonde ringlets. The dress against the form, a sopping watery lace. With my chore boot I bank the flames, add lye to water, stir the melting fat. Around and around the paddle goes until my hand cries from tiredness. Time seems to stop. The breeze stills and birds go silent. A child's voice rises like a chiming bell, tells of a girl drowned by her mother in the soap-making kettle. How the lye tasted like scorched flowers. That she is still floating over the back pasture's grassy tongue. Without hands nothing can save her from again flying into the giant kettle that squats in the fire on its iron belly. If she had fingers she'd pick a strawberry, drink its blood, and smear the crimson on her mother's sheets washed white as mare's milk. *Who cares?* the eating grass spits. *What makes the roots mutter?* *The Indian paintbrush singe?* The breeze wakes and shuffles through the wild oats. I see how it all goes. I too will vanish into wood ashes. There's no angels to be singing with. Earth opens and shuts, the sun-mouth breathes out.

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# Big-Headed Anna Fears the Parish Sheriff Coming for her Make-Believe Baby

Bayou Lafitte. Glinting up at the white sun with its diamond stickpin of an eye, a garfish floated on its side. The bait man (two of me could easily fit inside one of him) said I could hock that diamond eye so out slid his knife. “They’re sending the sheriff to take your newborn away,” he said, looking hard at my big head. When he told me I had a pretty mouth but the rest of me was plain as a bucket, my bones went hot and cold like pieces of ice that were sweating. The gar’s rubbery flesh sounded like sawing old bread. Making a square cut, he pried his gemstone out. It wasn’t a diamond just an iris and cornea. He laughed and gave it to me. I kept it—the eye that had seen in the weedy blindness of the bayou.



I rocked my baby while my ears listened for trouble. She woke from her smidgen of sleep trying to blink back the bits of sun, a spit bubble on her lip, and the light inside the bubble, shining. A sweetness like a handful of violets seeped from her as she tried to climb with her ten toes. We have nowhere to go, I thought. The bait man dozed under the shaggy moss tree, his bottom quarters spread across two kitchen chairs, and three of his four chins at rest on his chest. A black rooster throned himself on the bait man’s lap, and around them a choir of leghorn hens roosted on stepladders. The rooster kept watching me, his sharp beak looking about to speak. Better try escaping. Steal a flatboat from the bait man, I won’t tattle. Go before the hyacinth floats out from the banks and knots you up in hellfire’s stems. I believe the black rooster said those things. I borrowed the boat and oared us into the asparagus froth of the swamp, stirring the duckweed that covered the water—a bedspread of flowering rootlets and green bruises. The baby and I could hide here; we’d pretend to be cypress knees or tupelo trees. I kissed her, a kiss that had stickiness and insects in it. I told her a fairy tale about the twin boys stolen from the Nubian Desert for the auction block of New Orleans, real princes because their long necks

had been stretched with bands of welded gold; and their skin shone like chicory and their eyes were black lakes. A hundred and sixty some years ago they vanished and we'd surely meet them the farther we drifted into the shrimp grass and tangle. I patted her right-sized head, rubbing the fine hairs that felt like silk only softer. We would take pleasure in all her firsts when fish were birds that flew in the water, and trees were fishermen snagging the moon in its branches.

**Stephanie Dickinson**, an IA native, lives in New York City. Her work appears in *Hotel Amerika*, *Mudfish*, *Weber Studies*, *Fjords*, *Gargoyle*, *Rhino*, *Stone Canoe*, and *Westerly*, among others. Her novel *Half Girl* and novella *Lust Series* are published by Spuyten Duyvil, as is her recent novel *Love Highway*.