

**AFFAIRS RUN IN THE FAMILY by Lee Varon
(Finishing Line Press, 2017)**

Review by Julia Carlson

Lee Varon's book, *Affairs Run in the Family*, (Finishing Line Press, 2017) is an exploration of and testament to the fragile feelings of the author's memories of her Southern upbringing and relationship with her grandmother. When the husband of the grandfather's mistress attempted to murder him, her grandmother's life was forever changed. And then, there were also the events of the civil rights era, which played out during the author's childhood and left a deep impression on her. Those complex feelings



are explored as the author attempts to reconcile these events and their consequences to her grandparents, family, and herself. In "Court", Varon describes her grandmother at the trial of her husband's aggressor -

*"You wear your grey tweed
threaded with lavender
smoky silk stockings,
sensible shoes.
Nothing too flashy...."*

*Let Mrs. Harlot paint herself
wear her flared skirt
her pink cloche skirt
in discrete perfume...."*

*"You have been with him
teaching him slowly
to hold a cup
sip water..."*

And her grandfather in "After the Affair" -

*"After the affair, he cursed the bullet embedded in his brain
After the affair, he never saw her green eyes
After the affair, all they had were fireflies-*

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small lanterns of longing scattered between them."

Varon is on point describing her childhood confusion about the mixed messages she received from her grandmother, a Southern woman who carries on despite the shame of her husband's indiscretion. We meet the steely will and fight for respectability of this woman done wrong, in both her judgement of her husband's mistress, and other aspects of her Southern life. Varon's desire for her grandmother's love are especially poignant in the poem "Blister" -

*"Every summer
I entered the cage
of her love
dreaming in a circle of fire..."*

*I wanted her to love me forever
but what will I do
for her love?
Skate out
over the black ice."*

all the while acknowledging that her grandmother's character did not sit quite right with her.

In "1959 With My Grandmother", waiting in the bus station with Grandmother, they are sitting across from a black woman:

*"You don't know the black woman
across from us.*

*You lean over, loudly whisper,
"Honey, everyday I thank God*

*I wasn't born a colored person."
I try to fold my ticket*

*into a schoolyard fortune teller,
to lean against the blonde oak bench*

become invisible."

Varon's poems deal with her experience of the negative aspects of the South during her childhood. In her poem "We Sat Every Night", Varon describes how her 11 year old mind tries to make sense of this -

*"The government says colored people can vote, Nana.
Why are whites against it?*

*People up North are always criticizing us southerners
but the colored are still treated
with more respect here*

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than most anywhere else....

"Where is that anywhere else?"

*When I argued with you
you chalked it up to my tainted Jewish blood
something I couldn't help..."*

Varon's descriptive, lyrical language evokes many flavors of the South: pecan pie, crab cakes, burnt sugar cake, lavender, cedar, cinnamon, honeysuckle scent on a hot night, the sound of birdsong. In her poem "After", written about her mother's death, Varon writes:

*".....I watch birds fall
from the sky and shake*

*their wings in the dying sun.
Vireo, Thrush, Cedar Waxwing.
The magnolias have just begun
to spread pink gauze over deepening*

*green, as your face returns
in the luster of dark wood..."*

There are many more excellent poems in this fine collection and it's well-worth reading more than once. I was taken back to that time when church bombings and Freedom Riders dominated the evening news, and recalled the same question I had: Why do grownups do these awful things? A longer compilation of these poems was awarded the