**Under the World**

Virginia Watts

In my grandparents’ root cellar, the spiders were the world leaders. They flattened in and out of the cracks in the cement walls, vanished then reappeared from behind the rusting washer and dryer, sauntered up and over wooden crates of yellow apples, red potatoes, and orchard pears, meandered the copper pipes over human heads. They were a lazy bunch. No predators underground. No birds or frogs or army ants.

Intricate webs sagged across the panes of the root cellar’s window wells like closed, transparent drapes speckled with the unfortunate flies, moths and other insects who had perished struggling in the sticky traps. My recurring fantasy was to push aside one of the web drapes with a twig. I felt sure I would find myself face to face with a fortune teller spider sitting on a tiny chair blinking her long, silky black, spidery eyelashes at me, a turban of deep purple velvet wrapped around her head. *I’ve been expecting you,* she would intone, a fluorescent green magic ball no bigger than a dried-up pea pulsating on a silvery-skirted table between us. *What took you so long?*

She would read my thoughts, chuckling to herself, dressed in a black gown dabbled with glittering star points. Gazing into her orb, she would see my life unfold and tell me whether it would amount to anything or not. I never searched for her because I was afraid of tearing her web. I couldn’t bear to undo all the sorcery that had gone into spinning such magnificent, intricate artwork.

My grandparents’ home was originally a one room schoolhouse established in 1887 in a forested, northern Pennsylvania county. The mountain spiders who took up residence in the root cellar underneath that stone and wood structure were never small, unless they were babies. Trust me. Full grown, the spiders were the size of quarters going toward half dollars. But I was never afraid of them, their fangs, or their bulbous abdomens. I began visiting them in the early 1960’s before I could walk on my own, gripping my grandmother’s smooth, dry hand. I spent my childhood examining the colony of arthropods with a magnifying glass I borrowed from my grandfather’s desk drawer.

When I was older, my grandmother would send me to the root cellar on my own with a flashlight and a reminder to wear shoes. I ignored the suggestion about shoes. The root cellar had a dirt floor, silty soft, fine as talcum powder, deliciously cold on hot summer afternoons. I’d skate around, penetrating the tan dirt deep inside my pores and nails beds. Nothing some rigorous swishing in the frigid water of Elk Creek a few steps away couldn’t wash away.

Starting down the stone steps into the root cellar, I would repeat the list of what my grandmother needed to the tune of whatever my favorite song was at the time or one that the radio stations had played so often that I had grown to despise it.

One year I was crazy about the “The Sound of Silence” by Simon and Garfunkel. I sang:

*Hello Darkness, she wants turnips and pears my friend*

*I’ve come for raspberry jam not plum jelly again*

In the summer of 1977, I had grown sick and tired of “Brick House” by The Commodores. They’d played that one to death.

*She’s a jar of red beets and dill pickles*

*She’s four medium potatoes and a yellow squash*

*She’s lookin’ for canned corn from 1972, letting it all hang out*

The root cellar was lined with simple wooden shelves my grandfather had built. Penciled into the shelves were the dates the jarred goods had been preserved and stored there. Mason jars of all sizes, some clear, some aqua blue, embossed with a cursive “*Ball”* and a printed “Mason.”

The oldest shelf: “Fall of 1951.” After a point in time, the contents of some jars appeared no longer edible. I’d choose bread and butter pickles, cherry pie filling, pickled cabbage, apple butter, peaches, or lima beans past their prime, shake the jar and shine my flashlight into the middle of the glass. The inside looked space age, psychedelic, maybe a substance that belonged inside the laboratory beakers of a mad scientist. Some harbored a pinkish hue, some a sickly, greenish yellow cast. There were purple ones, burgundy and even black. One afternoon in her kitchen after I’d washed my feet, I asked my grandmother.

*Isn’t some of that old stuff down there poisonous by now?*

*Probably.*

*Why do you keep it then?*

*Don’t you like looking at it?*

*Well, yea.*

*Maybe something really good is cooking down there. Like a cure for something that might save us and the rest of the world someday. A magic potion in the making.*

*That’s kind of far-fetched, don’t you think?*

*Maybe. Maybe not.*

That late July day she was making peach pies. We saw the giant spider who had hitched a ride under my shorts at the same time. The girl was high stepping her long, thin legs down my thigh. Really taking her own sweet time. Of course, I wasn’t afraid. I felt still and peaceful inside. She had no reason to want to bite me. She paused on top of my boney kneecap.

*Well now. You’ve found yourself quite a beauty there, Virginia.*

My grandmother reached over to the sink, grabbed a Dixie cup from the stack near the faucet, gently tapped the spider inside, pinched the top of the cup closed and handed it to me.

*Better take Cleopatra back to the root cellar. Mark Anthony will be sick without her. Don’t forget your shoes.*