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LADIES TRESSES

by Margaret J. Vann

Small white blossoms spiral down a green stalk, virginal plaits that gleam in the afternoon sun. Named ladies tresses, the orchids live in shaded acid soil. Roaming through a country cemetery on a genial fall day, I found the orchids.

We had gone to clean grandmother's grave:
duty-bound, we took our rakes, shovels, and shears.
Rebecca and I left the others working.

We walked and read:
Jesus gathered her in His arms
she rests in the bosom of Abraham

Rebecca cried over the children.
She stood alive in the autumn sun shedding tears for the little lambs:
Dear Willie

I said:
See this stone: the gates of heaven are carved on it.

She said:
The baby lived just one day.

We walked and read:
He is not gone just sleeping

I said:
Look, cairns, animals have denned here.

She said:
They died so young.

We walked and read as the others cut and ranked and filled the sunken graves:
Our precious babies
Rebecca knelt to read the dates of the sisters.

I gasped:

*Ladies tresses; look, orchids growing wild—
orchids for my garden*

She would not let me dig the babies' flowers for my garden.

We walked and read
while others raked and trimmed.