Michele Harding

Mother Martyr

She was always the victim. She slept with other men because my dad wasn't around enough. She refused to work because *it was his responsibility to take care of us.* She was stubborn. We were hungry. The electricity was shut off again and our small red faces stared at the antique glass oil lamp. The pot-bellied stove crackled with frozen wood. The tarp on the wall moved in and out as the ancient house breathed. We knew what was coming. We knew what we would have to do. My youngest brother whimpered a soft cry and she cursed something about being quiet. She sat down the bowls. Rice, milk, and sugar was one of our favorite meals. My brother started to cry as he stirred the rice. The rice squirmed. She demonstrated what we already knew. *We just pick them out or go hungry.* She gave us a hard look and we leaned closer to the precious light. With each spoonful, we carefully examined each kernel of rice. The maggots fought for air pushing their brown heads above the surface. Small fingers tenderly scooped out the baby moths. They squirmed for a short time beside the bowl before becoming completely still. They were dying. I searched faster for fear I would not find them all. Cursing her eyesight, she began to scoop them in without searching. She said they would not kill her. She said they tasted the same as the rice.