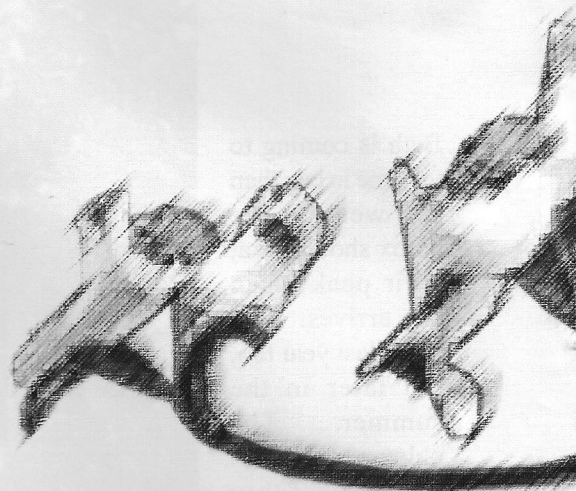


by Jody Mace

The Dogwood's Last Day



When my husband finally gave up on the dogwood and broke off the brittle limbs, he found pulling the tree from the crumbly ground surprisingly easy, considering how heavy it was to move two years ago. He dragged it down to the curb, and left it to wait next to the red recycling bin for trash pickup.

Two years ago he studied the dogwood, healthy and blooming reliably under the oak, and determined that it must be moved. He heaved the tree onto his shoulder confidently, consulting no one, and, as if it were a tree in a painting, planted it in an empty space in the yard. It did look good there. I couldn't fault him for his artist's eye.

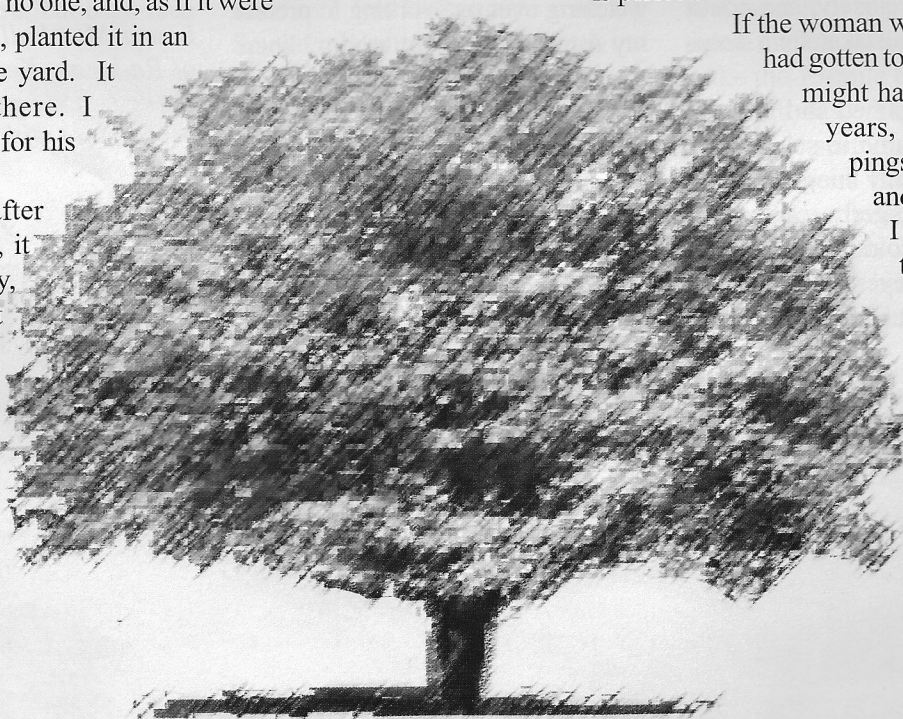
The first year after being transplanted, it bloomed hesitantly, as though it wasn't sure it liked its new home but was willing to give it a try. The second year it didn't bloom at all, and this year it was clearly dead. I looked at my husband with reproachful eyes. I

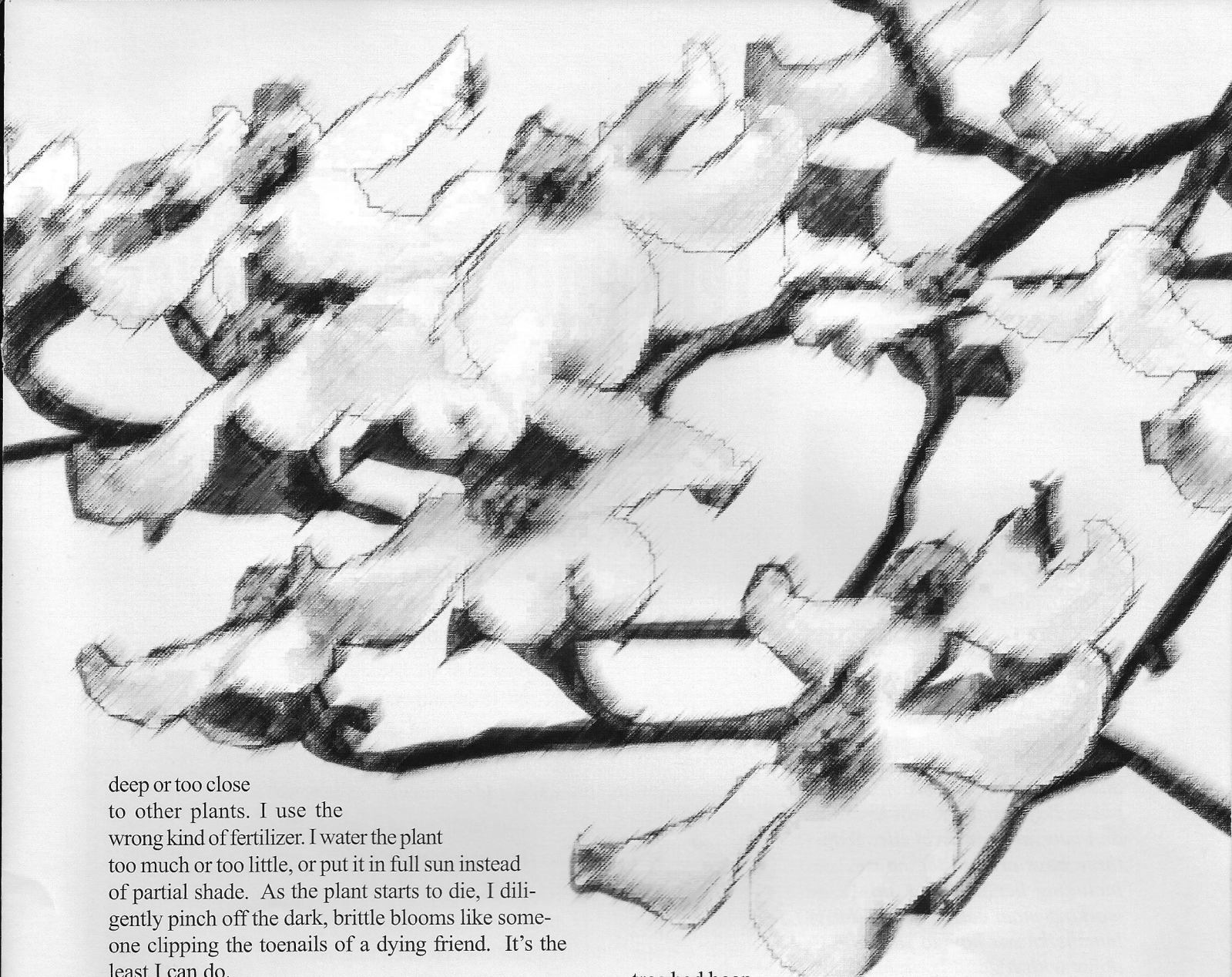
don't know anything about trees, but my philosophy is that you should just leave them alone, because we would surely do more harm than good if we interfered.

A dogwood tree is more than I deserve anyway. When I buy plants, I pity them, beginning their slow death march to my backyard. Often right next to me at the nursery is a woman who looks like she knows what she's doing. She's wearing a floppy hat. She looks critically at parts of plants I'd never think of examining: the underside of leaves, the stem near the roots. She clearly knows what she's looking for. I, on the other hand, pull out that little plastic stick that tells you what time of year to put the plant in the ground.

"May?" I say to myself, "Hey, it's May right now! This is perfect."

If the woman with the floppy hat had gotten to the plant first, she might have nurtured it for years, passing on clippings to her daughters and neighbors. But I buy it, full of optimism and confidence, and when I get home, I promptly lose the little plastic stick and forget what the plant is called, never mind the instructions on caring for it. I plant it too





deep or too close to other plants. I use the wrong kind of fertilizer. I water the plant too much or too little, or put it in full sun instead of partial shade. As the plant starts to die, I diligently pinch off the dark, brittle blooms like someone clipping the toenails of a dying friend. It's the least I can do.

I identify a little bit with the plants that I bring home. I, too, am a transplant to Southern soil. When I moved to the South, I didn't know if my placement would be advantageous to me. I was unsure how deep to plant myself. Would I fit in? Would I want to stay?

I've had better luck than my plants. After 14 years in the South, my roots seem to have taken hold. When I'm away, I long for the soft breezes, the gentle cadence of Southern voices, the subtle sense of humor. I've been nurtured by the warmth of the South in a way that my plants have never enjoyed under my care.

I don't yet understand the mystery of getting plants to live. Part of it may be not losing that little plastic stick with the instructions, but I think it's more than that. I have neighbors who seem to have a sense of what plants need, like a mother who can tell what is wrong with her baby from the pitch of his cry. I don't have that sense yet when it comes to plants. It's an amazing mystery to me.

That's why when my husband moved the dogwood tree I felt that he was treading on shaky ground. That

tree had been planted by the wind before we even lived in this house. It had been nourished by the sun and the rain, not by us. It had withstood droughts and hurricanes and the attack of insects. It seems arrogant, maybe even a bit sacrilegious, to think that we can improve on Nature's placement when it comes to dogwood trees.

I'm going to miss those blossoms. Those few, brief days of white velvety petals signaled the advent of spring to me. I've forgiven my husband. He knows that he was wrong. And in case he forgets, that gaping hole in the backyard will remind him. I'm thinking of consoling myself by going to the garden center and buying a new plant, maybe something flowering. My dogwood might have died, but hope springs eternal.

Jody Mace lives with her husband and two children in Charlotte, North Carolina. They have one living dogwood tree, and her husband is closely watched whenever he's near it.