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Playing the Rio Palm Isle

Carol Ann Johnston

My wife chucked her pan full
of hot bacon fat at me one morning,
skillet and all. I was unfaithful;
I'd come in later every day.
She wasn't having it
in her house no more.

Burnt grease, lye eating
through my lips.
I ran into the street,
my horn in my arms.
They said my hair
flared, a hundred fuses.

I wonder.

Lately, folks who come hear
the band play the Rio Palm Isle—ladies
with their fine red hats pulled way down
over their ears—they can't say
nothing but how good we are,
how we remind them of when they
were little girls and their daddies
would take them downtown
to see the nigger shows.

I do wonder.

I breathe, shiver
in sound. This mean black
case, lined in velvet.
Pomade and music.