

ELIZABETH ANN JAMES

*Ida McKinley Speaks to Women's Studies 101
When They Meet for Conversation and Coffee*

Upon my first gasp of his cigar smoke
I was overwhelmed. Later, I learned
to sustain myself in a profusion
of lilac talcum drifting in white silt ribbons
upon my bureau meticulously arranged
in cotillions: pin trays, abalone shells,
miniature dogs; and the Chief Executive's
photograph, manly, imposing, tinged even then
with the slight green of embalming fluid.
—I collapsed at the inaugural ball
and posterity exhumed the satin gown
showing a permanent stain, an arterial leakage.
—During my seizures I saw mourning frocks
writhe into cobras!

William would never admit to my condition,
an epileptic malaise, nevertheless
his eyes swam, and he pined for my affection
while I swooned
in an illness as delicious as roses.
Each evening, a back brace holding my vertebrae erect,
I sat at the window until he appeared.
waving his salute, a sedate pendulum.

Both of my babies died, and I learned
in the aftermaths of convulsions,
to sit quietly, to recall evening musicales
in Canton when both of us played,
Senator Hanna turning the pages.
That certain morning
I told the maid: "There is death
in the Hall of Music,
Close up the room at once."

You see I was trying to preserve
even the slightest aroma of El Producto.
For six years I waited to die.
There was nothing at all left to do,
not even fashion his bow ties,
flatten them, shape them,
the satin of my life.