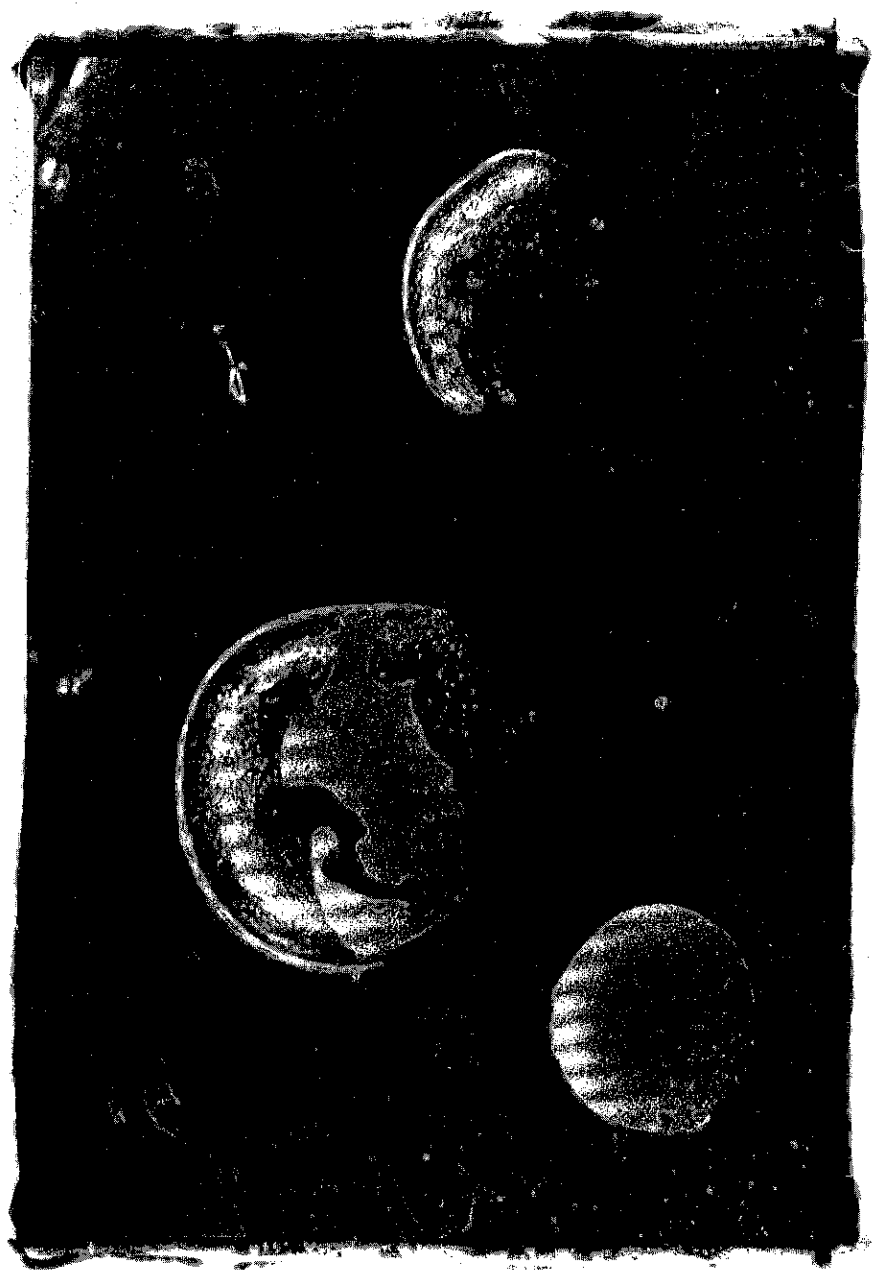


pulse



# **pulse**

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Department of English and Foreign Languages

Lamar University  
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## AWARDS

**Eleanor Poetry Award** Given to the best poem overall.  
Julie Gleason Alford "Night Song"

**de Schweinitz Poetry Award** Given to the best poem written in open form.  
C. Renee Field "Mayordomo"

**Barnes Poetry Award** Given to the best poem written in traditional form.  
Jody Pate "The Big Thicket: Three Haiku"

**Rowe Poetry Award** Chosen by the Pulse editors (limited to undergraduates).  
Jody Pate "And"

**Pulse Translation Award** Given to the best translation of a poem written in a foreign language.  
C. Renee Field "Time"

**Pulse Essay Award** Given to the best essay.  
Steven Collins "Aisles"

**Pulse Fiction Award** Given to the best short story.  
Mark Bankston "The Corey Jackson Story"

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We would like to thank all the faculty members who contributed their time, effort, and expertise to judge Pulse submissions. Without a supportive faculty, the production of Pulse would be impossible.

We wish to express our most sincere thanks to

**Eleanor Perlstein Weinbaum**

for her continued generous support of Pulse and the liberal arts of Lamar University.

## In Slow-Motion City

in slow-motion city  
i must walk without regard  
to the placement of my feet.

in the street fly  
bicycles with  
wings of chrome.

buildings let fall  
ripe acorns to the  
fertile concrete.

in slow-motion city  
the birds hum with the  
essence of sodium vapor.

an automobile stomps by  
with a trumpeting and  
a cracking of sticks.

in sudden silver surprise  
the sidewalk at my feet  
reveals flashes of fishes.

Jody Pate

## Evolution

The Great Hotel.  
On the Marble floor  
under the  
Chandelier,  
a crippled cockroach  
struggles on its back.  
With Great Wooshes  
the Residual Residents  
traipse by,  
unremarkably.  
i flip the cockroach up  
with my Calfskin Shoe,  
and it runs in circles,  
circles, circles.  
I smash it.  
( CRACKSPLAT )  
My Shoes aren't cheap.

Jody Pate

## de Schweinitz Poetry Award

### Mayordomo

In the morning, Victor cleans the acequia,  
hauls rocks and cuts weeds,  
builds up the ditch bank with caliche from the hill,  
burns the dry grass down to coarse, black stubble,  
oils the latch on the headgate to slide smoothly  
open to welcome the spring meltwater.

His rectangle of earth is ready,  
fertilized with the manure of obstinate cattle  
and the ash of ritual fires,  
tilled by hand with a wide-tined fork,  
turned over and over again,  
mixed with eggshells and coffee grounds,  
breakfast for the soil.

His seed is planted, dropped in familiar rows  
from precise hands calloused with their task,  
covered with the cracked toe of a dusty leather boot.  
He hopes that this year, for once,  
the corn and beans and squash will grow glossy  
as the pictures in the Burpee catalog.

His work done, Victor paces up and down the rows,  
checking the sky for thunderheads,  
glancing at the eastern horizon,  
in the direction of the acequia madre,  
fingering small pebbles like rosaries, longing  
for the mayordomo he has never seen  
to let him slide open the gate.

C. Renee Field

### Welder's Helper

The spit of sparks and spray of steam  
Surrounded the rusty metal. My father was working,  
Banging the steel into something  
It did not want to be.

The hood made his face anonymous  
And he was suddenly illuminated  
By the burst of light and sizzle  
Of electricity.

The twinge in the air wrinkled my nose.  
I peered through the green glass of my own hood.  
The hammer against the iron made my eyes blink.

I touched what he had made, and felt  
The warm metal through the thick  
Glove-leather.

I could see no use for the thing  
But my father smiled and patted my back hard  
And my hood fell down over my face.

Jakob Franzen

### Fishing Stories

He fishes from a chair now  
and I have to help him reel  
them in. He no longer cares  
about a catch, the gliding  
squawking sea gulls amuse him  
while the wind plays  
with soft silver and damp air  
moistens leathery, sunned skin--  
his wrinkles anthologize lifelong tales

He recites fishing stories  
illustrating them with torn,  
faded pictures he preserves  
in his robe pocket--strong, bronze arms  
now too flimsy to wave  
hold huge fish, and his smile,  
as big as his catch, pushes up  
his cheeks until they nearly bury  
his eyes

I remember when they would hook  
me and pull me in. Now they gaze  
and throw me back

Melissa Hudler

## Snakemares

Vicious vipers  
Swim the streams  
Of unclaimed dreams,  
Hunting a hole  
Into the soul,  
A crack in the mind  
To slither and wind.

Randy J. Stanley

## The Boogeyman

deep in nights with  
no moons outside he  
  
folds out of my closet  
smooth, like a damp rag  
  
me on sheetless beds  
nailed down with fear  
  
in my doorway he stands,  
stands in the empty  
  
he stands in grins,  
in grins ear to ear to

Jody Pate

## Eleanor Poetry Award

## Night Song

Gray clouds drift across the yellow moon.  
The wolves are singing. Dan steps out  
to the back porch of his cabin by the lake  
and lights a cigarette. He cannot sleep.  
A pack of county workers rambled by today  
and cleaned out the ditches. Dan looks  
at his trees lying by the ditch and cusses.  
Two oaks lie on the ground, torn roots  
raw and exposed, massive gnarled limbs  
sprawled across the yard and driveway.  
The wolves sing. He cannot hear them.  
The cigarette glows red in the shadows.

Someone's radio is playing low. Hank Williams  
wails and the faint whine of a steel guitar  
floats across the valley. The wolves sing.  
A cool breeze blows up and down the hills  
and over the quiet hay fields. The wind  
carries the wolf sounds to the brick house,  
into the window of Amy's room. Amy reaches  
for her Cabbage Patch doll, Gertrude Tuttle,  
and hugs her tightly. "Listen, Gerty,"  
she whispers. Gertrude's acrylic eyes stare  
at the ceiling while the howl whips through  
the bedroom window and Cujo runs down  
the red clay road behind the house, foam  
and flecks of blood splattered on his muzzle.  
Amy snuggles deeper under the soft,  
thick comforter. Gertrude is not afraid.

Sheila almost wakes. Eyes closed, she grunts and reaches for her Eddie. She rolls over into the sunken middle of the old mattress. A pink roller flips gently out of her hair and falls off the bed to the floor. She smacks her lips and slips back into a murky dream of malls and dark, faceless men. Eddie is asleep on the couch watching Bonanza reruns. On the coffee table, seven empty Miller cans are stacked in a pyramid. The wolves sing. The Cartwrights ride like thunder into Virginia City. Eddie is snoring.

A quarter mile away, a porch light comes on at a rust-scarred mobile home hidden among the trees. The sagging door slaps open and Jake stomps out in his boxer shorts, growling "Shutup" at T-Bone and Max. The wolves sing and the redbones answer them, howling and barking. Jake shouts again and thinks about the wolf traps he set at the creek this morning. The yelping grows louder. He spits a stream of tobacco juice at Max then tosses table scraps over the wire into the muddy pen. The yelps change to an eager whine as the dogs scramble for the scraps. Jake trudges back in silence, leaving the hounds gulping down the last bits of biscuits and pork rind.

The clouds drift and Gertrude keeps guard. An oak limb creaks. The redbones sleep and leaves rustle. The wind blows. The cigarette glows. Smoke curls and sharp steel glints under the leaves. The creek ripples and Eddie snores. Hank throws his date book over the fence. Sheila rolls. The hay fields shiver and the darkness moves

and deep in the woods, out of the shadows of great pines, the wolf song lifts, wavering and trembling, rising above the treetops, riding the blue night air up to the stars and somewhere beyond.

Julie Gleason Alford



10-1-88

the last of summer's  
 tears  
 fades hissing low  
 unseeming song  
 with embers'  
 dance  
 in counterpoint  
 to distant rumble  
 thunder brooding  
 in deepening  
 sky  
 october has crept  
 in disguised as  
 a promise of  
 cool soft  
 mornings

Kenesaw L. Bernsen, Jr.

7

i always end  
 up on my back  
 in the moist,  
 empty grass,

in the slow,  
 turning night,  
 staring up

at the infinite blackness of me,  
 and a billion sparkles of you.

Jody Pate

## Blue Horses

The vastness of the high desert in me  
 grows more and more immense.  
 Yesterday it was the distance  
 across the Jemez caldera;  
 Today it is the West Mesa,  
 falling off toward the sunset  
 just a line to stop the fall.

The blue desert horses stop their dusty loping,  
 snort,  
 stomp their hooves in the shade of a pinon tree.  
 They gaze at me with curious, impatient eyes.  
 The horses abide, wandering in slow circles,  
 not lost,  
 waiting.

The horses are my dreams.

C. Renee Field

## Hand Games

I called her "little grandma"  
 and when she kissed me  
 or told me a secret  
 she breathed tomato sauce  
 and oregano. White hair  
 as curly as her homemade  
 rotini tickled my cheek  
 when she hugged me.  
 We sat at her round oak table and traced  
 the eternal pattern of the wood  
 with our fingertips--  
 our hands like mice  
 in a maze, raced to get back  
 to the beginning

Once we found our way back,  
 we played the hand game.  
 We played over and over  
 our hands moving faster  
 and faster. Then she said "stop."  
 Her hand, draped with wrinkles  
 and sprinkled with age, rested  
 over mine. She squeezed  
 it, smiled, and told me  
 I wasn't fast enough--  
 I didn't want to be

The warmth from her palm wrapped  
 itself around me. It seeped  
 into me and sweltered inside--  
 a blanket that always hung  
 from my shoulders, always trailed  
 my heels, a blanket I never had to fold  
 and put away

Melissa Hudler

## Barnes Poetry Award

The Big Thicket  
Three Haiku

dawn	green fern shot through with crystalline beams of weak light, slicing pale thin air.
noon	the earth carpet rots, seeping pungent vapor up through drooping oak leaves.
dusk	in sifted gray light, a dead leaf in mid-air hangs on a spider's thread.

Jody Pate

## The Walk

I went for a walk.  
 I turned left instead  
 of the usual right.  
 I saw, in the distance,  
 John Keats eating a snowcone.  
 His hair was perfect.

I went back home.

Jody Pate

## Vertigo

Winter moonlight unsettles me.  
 It's harsh and cold  
 like the bare bulb in the bathroom  
 and your feet, naked at 3 a.m.

It glares through the unclothed window  
 to spit white paint upon my face  
 and cradle yours in darkness.  
 I know your eyes are open,  
 I wish I knew what they see.

Somebody's cat is crying outside  
 and the man downstairs is watching  
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly.  
 I'm getting that sick sensation  
 of slipping on an unexpected patch of ice,  
 falling in and out of love with you.

Karen Holstead

## Waxing Nordic

As the sun spills  
                     over the sharp summit,  
 the skier and her  
                     sparse surroundings  
 are suffused with  
                     a splendid shine.  
 Skinny skis slice  
                     through the silky,  
 sifting snow,  
                     suspiring softly.  
 The skier shifts  
                     her shoulders from  
 side to side,  
                     stroking, skating,  
 singing a song,  
                     She is smiling to  
 herself, sucking in  
                     the scant air,  
 spitting steam  
                     straight to the sky.

C. Renee Field

## On Having Loved a Writer

While we argue this morning  
over grapefruit and burnt toast,  
you are writing dialogue  
for your next play  
and I am trying to fight  
but can only think in metaphors:

You are the evil buzz of a 5 a.m. alarm  
too much scotch in weak coffee  
no clean spoons to eat grapefruit  
the black armor on my toast.

I wonder if you'll leave  
when you write the perfect scene  
and if I'll have to stay  
to write the perfect line.

Karen Holstead

## Skid Marks

I watched him ride  
his bike--white with splashes  
of mud--around and around  
while dogs barked, growled, and bit  
at its pedals

His eyes penetrated the pavement  
watching wheels trace the path  
he skidded into. Once-a-loop  
he kicked back to keep the dogs  
from biting his heels

Melissa Hudler

## I Carved Your Crutches

I carved your crutches today  
With the sharpness of my hands;  
Split and cut the wood perfectly  
To your height  
So you won't have to adjust them  
The splinters inserted themselves  
inside my tender flesh  
as redness trickled down my hands,  
across my wrists,  
and changed the whiteness of my shirt  
I think my tweezers did the trick,  
The soreness escaped my skin  
I only hope the wood is dry,  
so you don't stain your clothes

Stacy Lynette Dickey

### Cotton Candy

I often stare into swirls  
 of blue, pink, and white  
 and watch waves, mountains, and mushrooms levitate  
 They float by, one merging  
 into another, conceiving  
 faces, horses, and caves  
 that never look at me, gallop  
 to me, or lure me in

Like a child watching  
 a sugary web spinning  
 in gushes of air  
 I fantasize about wrapping  
 clouds around my finger  
 and feeling them melt  
 on my tongue

Melissa Hudler

### Dream Cycle--Introduction

when sleep  
 takes the mind  
 around a corner  
 or reality  
 and finds a berth  
 in some  
 uncounted niche  
 of fantasy  
 that waking lives  
 call  
 dreams...  
 images  
 dance  
 on painted fields  
 of endless  
 space and time  
 visions woven  
 in the fabric  
 of enchantment...

Kenesaw L. Bernsen, Jr.

## El Tiempo

De muchos días se hace el día, una hora  
tiene minutos astrados que llegaron y el día  
se forma con extravagantes olvidos, con metales,  
cristales, ropa que siguió en los rincones,  
predicciones, mensajes que no llegaron nunca.  
El día es un estanque en el bosque futuro,  
esperando, poblándose de hojas, de advertencias,  
de sonidos opacos que entraron en el agua  
como piedras celestes.

A la orilla

quedan las huellas doradas del zorro vespertino  
que como un pequeño rey rápido quiere la guerra:  
el día acumula en su luz briznas, murmullos:  
todo surge de pronto como una vestidura  
que es nuestra, es el fulgor acumulado  
que aguardaba y que muere por orden de la noche  
volcándose en la sombra.

Pablo Neruda

## Pulse Translation Award

## Time

The day is made of many days, an hour  
keeps slow minutes that have found their way, and the day  
is forged with extravagant omissions, with metals,  
crystals, clothes forever flung into corners,  
predictions, horoscopes, messages that never arrived.  
The day is a pool in a future forest,  
waiting, filled with leaves, with warnings,  
with dark sounds that sliced through the water  
like celestial stones.

On the bank

remain the golden footprints of the evening fox  
who like a small impetuous king wants war:  
the day collects in shards of light, in whispers:  
it springs suddenly up like a vestment  
that belongs to us, is the gathered radiance  
that waits and dies on orders from the night  
splashing in the shadows.

Translation by C. Renee Field

## Rowe Poetry Award

And

"...there is no quality in this world that is not what it is  
merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself."

--Herman Melville

, because i say you are here  
and walking in a tiny speck of  
light toward a huge darkness,  
stripped of nakedness, reading  
the page on the letters and  
flying through crowds of scowlers  
in large communities without  
floors; standing here without  
you, i can barely locate the  
reservations to press into  
a tree and disappear

slowly)

and i dreamed a dream:  
flowers and bumblebees, battling  
for freedom from each other.  
swift daisies draw gouts of honey  
with flashy swoops, which are  
praised by the multitudinous clover.  
zooming bees batter wild jonquils  
with pounding shiny eyes, pulping  
petals to colored masses, seeping  
under dirt. and  
after the bumblebees tame the wildflowers  
into passive ignorance (and honey drips  
from combs with resinous twinklings)  
the sky flares in August forms,  
opening with a loud split and  
voids its lifted content, just  
like the boy in the sandbox  
erupting dooms of dishsoap  
upon insolent insects(  
Our World turns in one direction

and spins in the other.)

Jody Pate

## Letting Go

I let go

and suddenly there is nothing but blue  
and silence and falling and falling  
and I try to arch.  
I claw the air instead.

Count, count, I'm supposed to count...  
One-thousand-one...

My voice sounds strange and empty  
bouncing off nothing  
but space.

Canvas flapping.

Metal buckles jangling.

I look up.

There is a wall of color above me--  
red, yellow, green--  
a rainbow splashed on blue.

The breeze is cool.

I look down below my dangling feet  
and the green and brown patchwork  
comes into focus at last--  
a lake, a rice field, a subdivision,  
trees and more trees, roads,  
ribbons of roads.

Floating between the blue and the green,  
I laugh out loud.

I am free.

The blue envelops me and the seconds stop  
and I drift, suspended in the cloudless sky.  
Then I hear the voice.

The voice says everything is o.k.

I obey the voice

and pull the toggle.

My rainbow moves slowly, rolling  
into a right turn, swinging me gently  
back and forth. I see the green rising.

The blue falls upward

away from me

as I give another pull

and the radio man talks me

back to earth.

Julie Gleason Alford

### She Says She Talks to Angels

She eyes old women  
 buying frutta in the mercato,  
 and smells the green wetness of the Po.  
 But she is far away from them,  
 calling out in warm, fluid vowels  
 that spill from her tongue like rich wine.

When I was little,  
 I spent my afternoons  
 on the wooden counter in her kitchen.  
 She sang opera for me  
 while she rolled out dough  
 for vermicelli and raviolis.  
 She taught me how to use  
 garlic and oregano and basil,  
 and let me stir her thick, red sauce  
 as it cooked.  
 Every Monday we made candles;  
 every Friday we baked bread.

She always wore black  
 and her hugs smelled  
 of tomatoes and sunshine.  
 She let me drink coffee  
 from a tiny china cup  
 while we rested on the old red parlor sofa.  
 Twice a day she lit a votive  
 for a husband who could never  
 come home from the war.

She made an altar in her bedroom  
 with a statue of the Pieta  
 and a picture of four generations of Italians  
 crowded on the steps of the cathedral  
 where I was christened.  
 Christ hangs on the wall above it,  
 tortured and dead.

Last night she made me kneel  
 on the wooden floor  
 with rice beneath my knees  
 and pray the rosary.  
 Her gnarled fingers kneaded the worn beads  
 while my tears slapped the brown wood.

She wants me to be a nun;  
 I want her to live forever.  
 But now the angels crawl out of the walls  
 to dance in her soup  
 whenever I leave the room.

Karen Holstead



## Culverts

They sat discarded in the field just behind our house.  
I never knew what the concrete culverts were for.

They were smooth and round and the sun made them warm to lie upon.  
But the inside was cool and I would, at times, curl up in that  
Coolness to read.

They were places to think.  
Thoughts would bounce off of their curves and collide,  
Shattering simultaneously into a thousand pictures past.

The sounds that surrounded my boyish body,  
Reverberated, splashing off of the  
Surrounding sides.

They were a telescope to the world.  
Through the portal of their end, one could see tiny creatures  
Cascading over blades of grass, marching to some unheard call,  
Crying for them, carrying them.

I watched like a god removed and would splash songs  
Off of the sides of the concrete culvert and feel the  
Fullness of their echo.

Jakob Franzen

## Aisles

Hesitantly, he peered down the aisle. And yes, she was watching him. His next actions were predictable. He pulled the toys in closer to his body, turned, and moved suspiciously to the next aisle. Hair pinned and glasses resting on the edge of her long, thin, pointed nose, she quickly followed. But not fast enough. With record speed he had put the toys down and returned to the original aisle. Hurriedly, she returned too. Upon seeing that the toys were no longer in his hands, she promptly returned to the other aisle to see if he had put them down. She was smart, quick too, and she knew thieves when she saw them.

"Stevie," I stepped to him, "what are you doing?" I asked.

"That woman thinks I'm stealin'," he said in his boyish, but well bassed voice. "She's followin' me."

"So?" I quietly lashed back at him. "Why don't you just leave people alone?"

"Why won't she leave me alone?" he sharply replied.

Inconspicuously attempting to peer at us, she had now positioned herself at the corner of our end of the aisle.

"What... can I help you boys find today?" we heard and turned our heads upward. She was now hovering directly above us.

"Oh, nothin'," I quickly whelped out, hoping Stevie would keep his mouth shut. "We were just looking." But my effort wasn't enough. "Nutton'," I heard and grew fearfully numb from not knowing what Stevie was going to say next. "Nutton'," he said again in an illiterate and deadened sounding voice, "we's a jus' b' look'n," he aped, demonstrating to the woman that he had absolutely no learning. He had always been one who could never seem to let anything go.... He always had to say or do something.

From behind the lenses of her steel-rimmed, horn-edged glasses, she looked at us as though we were animated. Picking up several more toys and positioning them in front of his body, Stevie walked up the aisle and turned the corner. Again she followed.

Indeed she was a curious woman. She looked like nothing. She was thin and pale, with horrible and frightening bluish-green veins pirouetting up from her neck into her head and face. Her cheeks were drawn in and lifeless; it looked as though she had been dehydrated. Everything about her motions seemed stiff and mechanical. Since, I have often wondered if she were actually human. Dressed in cheap and unattractive flats, she wore a simple combination of dull clothing. Her skirt, made from old school cotton, was plain and uninteresting. It, like she, lacked color and life. Her clothing and general disposition seemed quite awkward for the gaiety of summertime. Her blouse, plain with poorly stitched rounded collars, I am confident, was made from the cheapest fibers that could be bought or sold in the polyester family.

Passing me by, she was fast on Steven's trail. Steven would peer down from his end of an aisle, and sure enough, dusting a shelf or straightening a

rack of toys-- draped in cheap linens-- she was there.

Frequently, I also wondered where her sort came from. Was she married? Did she have children? If so, were they the cause of all those painful and murderous veins running through her body? Had she ever been to a big city or even to another state? And what about books and contemporary magazines? Had she ever read any? Was she cognizant as to what was going on in the world around her? Or, as is most probable, did the entirety of her life hinge on dirt roads, chickens, and protecting the worthless merchandise in that store?

Notwithstanding, the show went on. From aisle to aisle, Steven continued moving merchandise. Veins bulging, she followed. Light layers of perspiration began to build on her face, and for a while I thought she would stop. But she didn't. And then it ended. Steven's fortune had run out. At the end of an aisle, she had trapped him. He was cornered. Standing silent, he looked at her as though he were making some sort of appeal that words could not communicate. His eyes watered, and there was an unexplainable resolve written in his face. He had not stolen anything; nor had he done anything wrong. I could never understand his passion. Profoundly perplexed, I remembered that he had always been an emotional child.

"May I help you?" she sternly asked, in a tone which not only indicated that she knew she had him trapped, but that she had also won. Smug-faced, she had at last caught him. And indeed she had. With Hot Wheels and toy soldiers overflowing from his pockets, she now knew her keen intuition had paid off. She had waited her entire life for this moment, and now she was complete. He had stuffed a toy gun in the crotch of his britches, and who knew what else was hidden in there. His socks were stuffed with comic books. She could see their imprints on the outside of his pants' legs. Indeed, he had toys under his arms, behind his ears and even hidden within the curls of his hair. His very eyes, in fact, had turned into marbles--one blue and the other green, or one red and the other orange. Color didn't matter, though; she had caught him. He was a criminal, and she had known it all along. But only she could see these things. They could only be seen from behind her glasses. And who can imagine what else she saw or what else was going on in her head.

A shrewder and more stern "may I help you," was bawled, after she realized that he actually had nothing in his possession; and that she had momentarily been hallucinating. This time, however, she thrust the total of her scrawny and unshapely body into her voice. In retrospect, it was a nonverbal maneuver which actually did nothing to the weight of her voice. But it did leave her body in a frighteningly threatening position. Her shoulders were monstrously humped over her back. And her head, neck extended outward, rested deep in the cavity of her chest. Her arms had launched upward, reaching out toward him, and now her veins were at full bulge. She looked hideous, and, for a moment, I thought she would rip Steven completely apart, if not devour him whole. But her glasses began sliding from the edge of her long, thin nose. Pushing them back, she regained her erect posture. In the madness, a few strands of her neatly

pinned, dingy blonde hair had fallen from their bun; they now waved wildly in the air. Uncomfortable silence filled the store, and it seemed as if we were the only people there. But we weren't. It was Saturday, the small store was crowded. When we didn't leave and go into the city, we always went to town on Saturdays.

What set of estranged and unnatural forces could have birthed such a performance, I quietly wondered. Had the earth slipped from its orbit? Maybe it was the hot, dry country heat. Moreover, though, I began to wonder, because of her adamant disposition, if Stevie hadn't actually stolen something. It certainly wasn't beyond him. I remembered once how he had stolen money from his father. Another time he had stolen candy from the corner store at home. Maybe, carefully, with her discerning eyes, she had seen him slip something into one of his pockets. Something I had not seen. She was sharp and quick too. And she knew thieves when she saw them.

There were also other things that baffled me, however. Mainly, I wondered why she hadn't chosen to follow me. I was the youngest; any fool could see this. In the past I had always gotten all the attention. Who was she to ignore this? Certainly she had not been as courteous to me as she had been with the other children in the store. But nor, as with Steven, did she relentlessly pursue me. I also wondered what was so criminal about him. Was it his eyes? They were small, and somewhere I had heard that all criminals had small, tight, beady eyes. I remembered how all the girls in school used to say he had Chinese eyes. They seemed to go for that type of thing. Maybe it was his broad, flaring nose. Everyone noticed that. It was the most outstanding feature on his face. Perhaps, as I would conclude, it was the shape of his head. Humorously, God had shaped it like a peanut. Without question, however, there was a distinct quality about him she didn't like.

"What do you want?!" she squawked, now spewing unfiltered hatred toward him. Eyes swollen with tears, Steven looked as though something within him had been crushed. He had always been an emotional child, I remembered. He could never let anything go.

"Why are you following me?" he asked, voice cracking with no bass.

"I'm doing my job!" she barked with more hatred.

"You're not following that boy," Steven said, pointing to a comely little white boy with freckles standing a good distance up the aisle.

"Well... I'm... just doing my job," she said confusedly, looking at him as though he didn't actually exist.

Neither of us purchased anything. With the day rapidly coming to an end, we went home. Stevie was staying with us that summer. We usually spent the summers together.

Sometimes at dusk, when the sun is setting, I think of her. Despite her passing and the store's closing and being demolished, I am sure that, looking for Stevie, her spirit, robed in cheap garments and damned, still walks the aisles of that store. Peering around corners and bitter, Stevie may one day be there, too.

# Pulse Fiction Award

## The Corey Jackson Story

There were crawdad holes in right field and small white flowers and patches of clover. Bees flew sorties to the flowers, even at night, because the vapor lights were so bright, and it was almost like day. The mosquitoes left skid marks on your arm when they landed, Texas mosquitoes that could drill for blood, gushers of it at one time. I used to notice all these things because nobody ever hit the ball to right field; well, sometimes they did, but it seemed like I was never in the game at the time. I think my coach planned it that way.

Coach Briggs worked at the Mobil plant, and lived in the Amelia area nearby. He got off at 4:30 p.m. and our practice was at five, alternating Mondays and Wednesdays one week, Tuesdays and Thursdays the next, depending on what days our games were. I figured him to be around forty, but it was hard to tell because his hair was silver, and he wore glasses. He was the kind of guy who could be in a Red Man commercial or a special guest on a bass fishing show.

Coach came to the high school where we practiced with our gear thrown into the back of his Chevy pickup and the stink of beer on him. I had nothing against drinking, but his breath was already bad and the beer just made it worse when he got in your face and yelled at you for missing the cut-off man, which he did often in my case.

I just didn't have good baseball instincts. I got into little league late, around fourth grade, and was way behind guys my own age. Since I never played tee ball, I didn't have any knowledge of the nuances of a good swing. My dad worked with me, hitting me ground balls and pop flies, but he didn't know very much either. He was too busy at his job with the railroad to know much more than the inner workings of a train yard. So while everybody else was progressing, I was scrambling to catch up.

I couldn't say when exactly the fever hit me, baseball fever that is. Maybe it was just inevitable, growing up in Southeast Texas where the Trinity was, and still is, Football the Father, Basketball the Son, and Baseball the Holy Spirit. Or maybe it had been the year before I ever put on that navy blue Owls jersey and stepped into a Double AA right field for the first time, on a September afternoon in the Astrodome, Nolan Ryan versus the

Dodgers. My parents and I had sat in the left field mezzanine by the foul pole and watched the Express break Sandy Koufax's record and pitch his fifth no-hitter. I hadn't had a clue as to what a no-hitter was or its significance, but that hadn't mattered. It had been such a good feeling, like no other I had felt before, and one which I wanted to recapture. That was why I endured bench splinters and ridicule by teammates with more talent, and Coach Brigg's tirades.

Coach's son Jerry was our catcher and was an all right guy who got to pitch sometimes. He threw hard, but he couldn't find the strike zone with

radar. In fact, one time Jerry hit a kid in the head and cracked his batting helmet open like a coconut. If Jerry had been anyone else's son, he probably would've never been allowed to pitch in the first place. But Coach Briggs had his favorites, his son, of course, and others.

My dad managed to get away from the train depot, rush home to pick me up, and take me to practice and games. Amtrak didn't come through town until 7:30 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at noon the other days, except Saturday when it didn't come at all, and he took his lunch break around 4:00. He dropped me off at the high school or the ballpark and I had to wait for Coach Briggs and the guys to show up. To pass the time, I flung rocks at the globes of arc-lights, tossed their empty bottles into the air above the teacher's parking lot, and watched them explode against the cement, spraying slivers of glass everywhere.

My mom worked until six at a pre-school and always picked me up, drained after a full day of wiping noses and butts, and keeping brats from biting each other, but she still had enough energy to worry about me getting hurt, wanting to know how my hat got dirty or why my pants were torn. But what mom didn't worry about those things?

Girls came to watch their boyfriends play ball. They sat in the stands hardly dressed in shorts and t-shirts, except on cool nights, when they wore jeans. Their boyfriends pitched and played first base and also shortstop. Those were the glamor positions, the ones girls would sit still to watch and cheer for. My position was in the dugout most of the time, that is, when I wasn't sentenced to right field.

In the Majors, right is a glamour position. Ask Darryl Strawberry or Jose Canseco. But that was senior league baseball for thirteen and fourteen year olds, and right field was Siberia.

The guys who wore the same colors as me--yellow, white, and black--were good ballplayers, and we had lost only three games that season. There were eleven of us, nine regular starters, and the two scrubs--myself and a kid named Marcus Knight who was thirteen, small, and fast. Coach used him to pinch run late in games when we needed a run or to try to bunt for a base hit.

Our best pitcher was named Rusty, and he led his age group in Texas strikeouts. His teeth had hardware on them, and he was a real religious guy, always preaching to us at practice, getting mad if anyone cussed, and even stopping to pray while he was out on the mound. He would step off the rubber, hang his head, mouth some words, then slam the ball into his glove. After taking the sign, he went into the wind up and launched the ball up powder river. Rusty's girlfriend got called a bow-head by some of the guys on our team, but she came to every game and would often bring him a Coke between innings.

Philip manned first base and was our cleanup hitter. He was six-feet tall, gorilla armed, and thick-chested, and could drive the ball about a mile. One of his dingers bombed a train rumbling behind the ballpark and almost derailed it.

Philip regularly got thrown out at first base by outfielders. He ran like a fire hydrant, all day in one place. The thing that made me hate Philip was the way he talked about his girlfriend, bragging about the things she did with him, smugly telling us after every home run, "Boy, I'm gonna get me some tonight," as if that was the only reason he even tried.

Philip did not love baseball.

I tried everything to get better at the game. After going hitless my first seven at-bats, I bought every brand and flavor of bubble and chewing gum on the market, and started popping a different kind on each trip to the plate. Then I tried combinations of strawberry and banana, grape and watermelon, orange and raspberry, you name it. I mowed yards to save up enough money to buy an Easton Black Magic and Franklin batting gloves. I put up a shrine to Will Clark, complete with pictures, trading cards, and a Foul ball of his I had caught in the Astrodome the year before, and I tried to copy his swing.

Finally, while chomping on a mix of cherry and grape Bubble Yum, and Wrigley's Double Mint, and with my imitation of Will the Thrill's cut just about perfected, I got my first hit, a soft liner into center left field. My teammates were amazed. Standing on first base with needles in my hands from the vibration of the bat, I heard someone say, "Damn, Jackson's been eating his Wheaties."

When I got home that night, I marked my underwear and socks and for the rest of that season, I made sure I wore the same ones for every game.

By the end of the year, I had four hits in seventeen at-bats, which came to a .235 average. We were tied with the Braves for the best record in our league, 17-3, and we had to play a tie-breaker game against them to decide the championship. It was a one game playoff, win or lose, sudden death, and Rusty drew the start.

Amtrak was running late and my Dad couldn't stay for the game. Mom wouldn't sit in the stands by herself, so there would be no Corey Jackson rooting section, but I didn't really care because when they did stay, I would get nervous and strike out. They wanted to see me do well and it wasn't that I wanted them to be proud of me, but to be proud of themselves.

Coach Briggs and Jerry were already at the park when I arrived, and the line-up card was taped onto the concrete wall of the dugout. I walked over to take a look and felt my heart springboard.

Penciled into the nine hole was my name, Corey Jackson, right field, number 17.

I fumbled in my back pocket for my packs of gum and started mixing.

Right field was never so big or so far away from the diamond, and my arms never felt so weighted down, like I had railroad ties chained to them. Standing out there, feet heavy, planted in clover, it seemed that if a ball was hit into the gap, I could run for days and not get to it. I worked over my gum--the success-combo of cherry, grape, and Double Mint--and leaned

forward as Rusty delivered the first pitch, a called strike.

My belly was full of lava. The batter grounded to our third baseman who picked up the ball and fired it to Philip. I chugged over to the right foul line just in case the throw was a bad one and got away. I got short-winded; my heart thumped and throbbed with pain. But I was loving it. Finally, all my hard work had paid off. Lady luck was in my corner. Coach didn't say anything, but he must've seen the improvement. Why else would he have given me my first start of the season? He had confidence that I could do the job, and I was bound and determined not to let him or my teammates down.

Rusty retired the side, one-two-three, and it was our turn to bat.

The Braves were a good defensive team, and after our lead-off guy walked, they turned a double play. Rusty hit next, and he hung out a rope into left field. That brought up Philip with two outs and Rusty on base.

Philip swung at the first offering and put it into orbit, a long, arcing moonshot that rose majestically, high above the park, and cleared the center field fence by a good twenty feet.

"Whoa, that dog'll hunt!" somebody yelled.

Jerry Briggs, who sat next to me said, "Call Mission Control! That baby's outta here!"

Everyone poured out of the dugout to greet Rusty and Philip behind him, as they circled the bases. High-fives, low-fives, pats on the back, and elbow smashes went around when they crossed the pay station. Philip came out of the pack and walked near the backstop, a chain-link fence that separated the field and the bleachers. His girl friend was standing and clapping, a grin on her face like Philip had just been elected to Cooperstown. He smiled back and pointed at her.

When everyone was settled once more, I heard Philip say, "Well, I guess ya'll know what I'll be doing after the game tonight."

The next batter struck out and at the end of the first inning the score was 2-0, our favor.

My turn to bat came in the bottom of the third frame. Even as nervous as I was, I could be grateful that I was the first hitter and didn't have to worry about making the last out of the inning.

While I stood, taking practice cuts at the air in the on-deck circle, I scanned the crowd. The bleachers were full of parents, little brothers and sisters, and teen-agers. I spotted Philip's and Rusty's girl friends huddled in a group of other girls; bow-heads, Jerry called them. I didn't think they were really into the game as they giggled and poked and grabbed each other. I got so caught up in watching their antics that I almost didn't hear my name announced, "Leading off for the Pirates, right fielder, no. 17, Corey Jackson."

I turned toward the field, half-expecting to see a burning bush, struck with sudden urges to run, to urinate, to crawl under home plate until the game was finished. I stepped into the batter's box and swung at the air some more, dug in, and tried to get over myself.

The pitcher didn't stare at me, didn't even meet my eyes, as I kept reminding myself to watch the ball. I blinked and it was past me, popping the catcher's mitt, my heart skipping a beat as the umpire cried, "Ball one."

I thought I could hear someone say my name in the distance, "All right, Corey!"

"Good eye, babe, good eye."

"Give it a ride, Jackson!"

A girl's voice, "C'mon, Corey, get a hit!"

The next pitch zoomed in, outside corner, "Strike one!"

More cheers from the stands, people I didn't know, "That's all right, kiddo, work the count."

"C'mon, Jackson, get the bat off your shoulder!" Coach Briggs boomed out.

With a 1-1 count, I swung and popped the ball straight up into the air. The Braves' infield collapsed and converged on the ball, each guy flapping his arms like a buzzard, but it was the third baseman who charged in, called everybody off, and made the catch.

I ran it out, hoping that maybe a couple of guys would collide and drop the ball, but it was no good. I saw the first base ump raise his arm and ring me up.

In the top of the fifth, the Braves scored two runs on three base hits and a walk to knot things up. Something was bugging Rusty. He was off his game.

After the second run came home on a double down the left field line, Rusty went behind the mound and performed his ritual. The park fell silent, as if in respect or, more likely, misunderstanding. I heard one of the Braves scream from their dugout, "Yeah, you better pray, boy! We got you on the ropes!"

Rusty took an unusually long time. I was too far away to tell, but could he have been crying, cracking under the stress? Coach Briggs came out of our dugout, dressed in a Pirates top and cap and Wrangler jeans. Jerry walked out to the mound and the three of them held a conference.

After a couple of minutes, Coach Briggs lift the field, Jerry popped Rusty on the butt with his mitt, and went back behind the plate. Rusty flung the ball into his glove and got back on the hill.

"C'mon, Rusty, bear down!" I shouted, and raised my hand, pointing two fingers at the sky to signify two outs.

Our ace threw two quick strikes to the Braves' next batter, both fastballs, and then a worm killer curve ball to make the count 1-2. From the stretch, Rusty made his next pitch, which the right-handed hitter swung at and lifted into right center field.

I broke immediately, crossing my left foot over my right, senses aware of everything, the building crescendo of the crowd noise, the arc of the ball as it traveled just under the mercury glare of the field lights, the slippery grass under my cleats. I reached out with my right hand and opened my glove, running with it stuck into the air, like a bug freak chasing a butterfly with a net. I locked on and changed direction as the ball carried

further, trying to go faster, reminding myself to run on my tip-toes so things wouldn't bounce around and I wouldn't lose perspective, stretching, reaching.

The ball landed in the pocket of my glove at waist level. I squeezed and tucked it against my ribs, at the same time, slowing down, taking bigger strides to put on the brakes. I heard our center fielder say, "All right!" as he streaked past me, and the peak of the crowd's cheers in the background.

Now at a jog, I circled around and headed toward the infield, looking at Coach Briggs who was shaking his fists at me, and then clapping. I tossed the ball onto the pitcher's mound and got to the dugout where everyone was waiting at the entrance to congratulate me on a "nice catch, Jackson."

Rusty held up his hand for me to slap. Philip patted me on the back, and for a while, I was disappointed that my parents hadn't come, knowing that my second-hand recounting of the event wouldn't be the same.

Bottom of the fifth, our shortstop walked, bringing me up with nobody out and a runner on first.

I pounded the Black Magic against the ground and knocked the donut loose, a new confidence in my chest as I started for home plate. The Braves' pitcher was tired. I could tell watching him warm up that he'd lost some zip on his fastball. He'd probably throw me junk, breaking stuff, offspeed. All I needed was one fat, hanging slider.

Then a tug at my elbow and a waft of something wretched below my nose, like stale dog crap.

I turned and saw Coach Briggs. "Let's let Marcus hit, okay Jackson?"

My good feeling whirled down the pipes as Coach ed me away from the on-deck circle like a child who has been staring at an aquarium of lobsters for too long, nose pressed against the glass, words fogging it up.

I took off my batting helmet and dropped it beside my bat. Nobody said a word to me. I sat on the bench, crossed my arms, and told myself it was no big deal. Sure, it made perfect sense to go against the percentages and pinch hit a righty for a lefty against a right-handed pitcher. It wasn't like it would be in the papers tomorrow or on ESPN that night. Coach was doing what was best for the team.

Marcus Knight, thirteen, batting .231 with 4 RBI's, squared around and bunted the base runner over to second, getting thrown out at first himself. Just like that.

I felt like peeling off my uniform, leaving it in a pile on the bench, and walking off. If Coach Briggs had been laying on the ground on fire, I wouldn't have pissed on him.

Marcus came back into the dugout and received rounds of thanks for his sacrifice. Coach pumped his hand and hugged him and told him, "Way to go, babe!"

A few minutes later, a base hit brought home the go-ahead run, and the dugout erupted.

I shouldn't have felt as bad as I did. I should've been able to take comfort in my earlier contributions. It had been a good catch, had saved a

run, and had taken the color out of the Braves' war paint. It was baseball, and that was the way the world worked. But I did feel bad. I could've laid down a bunt for crying out loud. Anybody could have. Anybody the coach had confidence in.

We went into the top of the seventh with a 3-2 lead. It was getting late and the umpires declared that this would be the last inning unless the Braves scored and then we would have to play the bottom of the frame.

I was sitting in the same place on the bench, arms folded, staring out at the field. While Rusty was warming up on the mound, Coach Briggs walked in and said, "Jackson, why don't you grab your glove and go play catch with Marcus in right field."

I looked up at him, but he had already turned away. What a useless job, warming up an outfielder. It ranked right up there with first base coach on the senior league of scrub jobs. I started to tell Coach to go to hell, but I held my tongue. Instead, I did exactly what he told me. I stuffed my hand into my glove, took a ball, and walked out to the bullpen area which was right outside the foul line.

I whistled and yelled, "Marcus!" Then I waved my left arm like I was going to throw to him and he held up his own glove as a target.

I took aim and fired as hard as I could. The ball sailed over Marcus' head and he chased after it.

I stared out past the fence, where the tracks were. They stretched for miles in two directions. Either one of them would have taken me far away from there, from Coach Briggs and the bees, white flowers, and crowdad holes. All I had to do was get a running start, hop the fence, and take off. East or West, it didn't matter.

Marcus called out to me and threw the ball back. It bounced twenty feet in front of me and skipped to my glove. That little pipsqueak had a rubber band for an arm.

The home plate umpire cried "Play ball" and I headed back for the dugout, mulling it over in my mind what a joke it would be if somehow the Braves mounted a rally and hit a ball to Marcus, and a runner was racing toward home, and he, with his rubber band arm, tried to throw the runner out at the plate. That would be hilarious. I would come unglued, right in Coach Briggs' face. "You idiot," I would laugh, "You should've left me in the game. I could've thrown the guy out. I've got a better arm than Marcus."

But Rusty had other ideas. He struck out the side, one-two-three. Everyone in yellow and black began leaping into the air, throwing their hats and gloves around, hooting and hollering; they were the champions.

Walking toward the field to congratulate them, I passed Coach Briggs who was shaking his fists and whistling through his teeth. I felt his hand whack me hard on the butt, and say, "Good game, Jackson! How's it feel to be on a champion?!"

I didn't answer. We weren't getting any rings for this. There wouldn't even be anything in the newspaper tomorrow listing Rusty's performance, Philip's home run, or the fifth inning rally. By the time school started back

up in the fall, everybody would've already forgotten it. People wouldn't get nostalgic thinking about it years later either, like they might a Nolan Ryan no-hitter.

And me, I would only remember it from a distance, from a field patched with clover.

Mark Bankston

## Advances

### King Condom

#### The Safe Sex Gift Shop

That's my baby, the condom store account, the first bone with any meat on it they've thrown me since I caught on with Golightly and Ryerson last month, after finishing that correspondence course in marketing I ordered off late night TV. There's a woman I work under; she's got a title, senior copywriter, and her name is Holly Sharpe. I know I shouldn't admit it, but she scares the green shit out of me.

Maybe it's because she's got blonde hair and small boobs and a lot of teeth and doesn't sweet talk anyone, which is not to say that she's a bitch, although I'm making it sound that way. I just can't figure her out.

I'm sitting in her office one morning, and she's looking over some of my roughs. My face feels like it's pressed against a burner, and my heart is beating heavy like a kettle drum.

Ms. Sharpe swivels around on her chair and reveals her profile, holding a piece of white paper in front of her eyes, chewing on the tip of her navy-framed glasses. She's dressed like a today woman in a cream shawl-collared blouse, tan twill jacket and slit skirt which ends just above the knee. Her office smells of peach-scented potpourri and Giorgio perfume, and it tickles my nose every time I breathe in.

She sits like a man, legs crossed in a broken four, jacket open, elbows on the arms of her chair, and when she talks, she uses big gestures to drive home her point.

"Because your life isn't only in your hands? Are you satisfied with that?"

Stammering, I tell her that I can change it, and think to myself that no woman has ever made me feel like such a wimp.

"Do it," she says. "This begs for something snappier. Get it fixed by this afternoon."

"All right," I answer.

"I can't believe someone would open up a condom store," Ms. Sharpe says, "Time's they are a changin'."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I say.

"I don't know though. It seems like it would be less embarrassing than going into a drugstore. What do you think?"

I shrug and tell her that I guess it's so.

She turns to me and smiles. "I bet you blush like a schoolboy when you go to buy rubbers, don't you?"

I start to tell her that I wouldn't know what I look like picking up a box of Trojans since the little surveillance screens in drugstores are all black and white, and besides, I'm near-sighted and hate to wear my glasses, but she cuts me off with a laugh.

"Yes, you do," she taunts. "You're turning red now just talking about it. But that's okay. Being bashful these days is in."

I tell her that I better get to work on that condom store ad.

"Okay," she says and leans back on her chair. As I stand, my eyes slip down to see that the slit in her skirt is open and showing part of her thigh, but I quickly look away, remembering the time I stumbled onto my big sister douching herself in the bathroom when I was twelve.

"Oh, hey, some of us are going to Bayou Mama's after work for drinks, if you want to come along," she says.

The "some of us" stumps me, and my mind fumbles thoughts, a crowd of people I don't know, laughing, drinking, whispering, me in a corner somewhere. I stutter around, trying to find the right words to beg off.

Ms. Sharpe listens to my excuse, and I arm myself against her trying to talk me into it. But she doesn't. She just says, "Some other time then," and picks up her phone.

I start for the door with a voice in my head like a gnat, pissed at me for turning down a chance to make friends with a few people from the office, for wimping out in front of her again. I glance back at Ms. Sharpe, not sure if I've changed my mind or not, but she is already cocked back with the receiver hugged next to her ear, staring at the ceiling, smiling, and I might as well have fallen off the face of the world.

A copywriter is not what I want to be. It's kind of a sidetrack, while I get my singing career out of the mud. On Thursday and Friday nights I fingerpick an acoustic and sing at a beer and hamburger joint. I've got a playlist of around a hundred songs, mostly country and western, with some folk rock, and standards like "Stairway to Heaven," "500 Miles," and "Dust in the Wind." The audiences are 100% yuppies and co-eds, and they keep my fishbowl, which is always on the floor close to my stool, full of long green.

What's strange is that I feel comfortable performing in front of people. I guess it's because I have the guitar there and something to do, and I can make a connection with folks through the songs, but get me in a social situation, say a party with a bunch of strangers, and I mutate into this jellyfish with a stupid half-grin on its face who can't think of anything to talk about and who kind of stands around clinging to a drink and getting to know the fake trees.

If it's a family thing or with friends from high school, I'm okay. But I've been out on my own for just over a year, and I haven't adjusted yet, while all my buddies are off at college and in fraternities, the pricks.

I tried community college here in Houston for a couple of semesters, but it just wasn't happening. All that shit bores me. Being in the remote control generation has done me in, and my attention span lasts no longer than twenty seconds.

Anyway, before landing this job with the ad agency, I bounced around, from delivering pizzas to working in a video store for a year and a half, all the while finding places to sing. I hope to move up to bars soon, but I ought to get a band first and write some songs.

One of the girls who works at the joint where I play won't leave me alone. Melissa Harris is twenty, but you'd never know it from the way she wears her make-up, like a five-year-old who has snuck into her mother's bathroom. The powder blue eyeshadow and mascara too heavy, the blush uneven on the edges of her features, the lipstick smeared at the corners of her mouth. Her parents must not have been able to afford braces when she was a kid because her teeth are crooked, gapped, and jut in all directions, but I'm afraid to ask her, because I don't want to learn too much about her past. Every inch of her body is full, but not really fat, and her hair is oily and limp. The thing that bugs me most about her is that she breaks into hysterics at the least amusing joke, and her laugh is not a laugh, it's a bray.

In between sets, Melissa brings me beers, and every so often, she sits with me on her break. Even though she's always mentioning a boyfriend, I swear she's got the hots for me.

The Thursday after finishing the condom store roughs, I'm resting after a 45 minute set when Melissa comes out of the kitchen with a longneck Bud and a salad drenched in Thousand Island dressing.

I thank her for the beer and she sits next to me.

"Did you see Arsenio last night?" she asks.

I shake my head, no.

"Oh, you missed it. Dr. Ruth was on the show. Oh, God. You should've heard some of the things she said."

I bite the hook and ask her what the pint-sized sexpert had to say. Melissa stabs a huge piece of lettuce and some other junk I can't recognize because of the dressing and stuffs it into her mouth. "Well," she muffles, "Arsenio asked her if there was something weird about a guy not wanting to do it all the time, you know? And Dr. Ruth told him it wudn't nothing to worry about cause women would rather get flowers and little surprise presents anyway."

"Yeah, right," I say.

"It's true!" Melissa protests, "I'd rather get flowers from Rick any day, even if he does get them from Kroger."

I start to make a crack about what that said about her boyfriend's swordsmanship, but decide against it. I don't want the conversation to get any more personal.

Melissa goes on, "Anyway, then Arsenio asked her about women who really like it, and what they should do if their boyfriends start losing interest, and you know what she said?"

"I have no idea."

"Know and love your vagina," Melissa says and starts giggling. Her whole body shakes and she covers her mouth, convulsing, as if she's about to suffocate.

Tipping back the bottle of Bud, I take long swallows and wait for Melissa to get over herself. "Are you on a diet or something?" I ask. "Why are you eating rabbit food?"

"Well, I'm not really on a diet; I'm just cutting down and



exercising. Rick just got me one of those Stairmasters. You know one of those things that's like walking stairs?"

"Yeah, I've seen them. Why are you trying to lose weight?"

"Cause," she says and pauses, "Rick's on this health kick, and you know, he's always on me about taking better care of myself while I'm young, so I guess he's right."

Watch it, I tell myself, it's getting personal again. I glance at my watch. "Uh-oh, back to the salt mines."

Melissa gawks at me, the black junk around her eyes like charcoal. "Is it time to go back already?" she asks.

I hold out my hands at both sides. "My public's waiting," I tell her and hurry to my stool and guitar standing patiently in the middle of the room.

The next night, Friday, my spiel at the start of the first set goes something like this, "Good evening. I'm Chris Lambrusco. Hope ya'll're having a good time. Good crowd tonight, all right. I want to thank Neal, the manager, for having me here tonight. Wanna kick things off here with a song ya'll probably know. Goes something like this. . ."

And with that I start strumming "Margaritaville" and everything's going fine until midway through the second chorus Holly Sharpe, my boss, walks in with a couple of girl friends. She cuts a royal path through the room, leaving slack-jawed men and frowning women in her wake.

They sit at a round table facing me, which is on the border of the crowd, and right away I forget all about my fingers, screwing up a chord and getting tongue-tied on a verse. Glaring down at the fretboard, I find my place again and keep my head lowered until the song is over and a polite round of clapping seeps through.

"Thank you," I speak into the microphone, and glance out at Holly Sharpe who has a daiquiri and is sucking it through a straw. If I had better eyesight or was wearing my glasses, I could tell for sure whether or not she is staring at me, into my eyes I mean, and if her look is a smoldering one.

"Like to do a song for all the pretty ladies here tonight," I tell the audience, and then pick the intro to the Eagles' "Best of My Love."

I don't care that Holly Sharpe is my boss and is about the same age as my sister. I want her like I've never wanted anyone before.

I wonder how she would react if I stood up to her flirting, if I went out with her and the office people to a nightclub, grabbed her hand, led her to the dance floor, and then under the strobes and black lights, kissed her and asked her how she felt about water sports.

Then somewhere between a "Whoah-oh" and a "sweet darling," three guys in dark suits and loud ties come over to Holly Sharpe's table, each holding two drinks in his hands. Bleached white teeth flash. The ladies accept the drinks and soon, the guys are borrowing chairs from other tables and pitching camp.

Holly Sharpe's attention is now focused on a man with salt and pepper hair and beard and a flashy gold watch, which keeps catching the

light and blinding me for long seconds at a time. I finish the Eagles song and this time the smattering of applause is louder.

I say a couple of thank yous but can't think of a good segue for the next song on my play list, "Dust in the Wind." I hate that song, but so many people request it that I don't have any choice.

Holly Sharpe leaves with the salt and pepper guy an hour later, having eaten dinner together and listened to me sing. I've been depressed ever since the first "All we are is dust in the wind" came out of my mouth. I have run my set longer than usual so I could keep a slightly out of focus eye on her. But I don't know why. It has only made me sick and embarrassed. Trying to lift myself out of the doldrums, I finish the first set with "All My Ex's Live in Texas." It doesn't do much good. I walk out of the center of the room to a corner table, where no one will bother me.

But even that gets screwed up when Melissa shows, carrying a beer and a basket full of cheesesticks. I'm not glad to see her, but I am glad to see the longneck.

Melissa sits at my table, her mascara running, and brings the beer to her own lips, soon taking long gulps. She's been crying.

I watch half the beer drain from the bottle with longing. It's just not my night.

Melissa sets the bottle down and belches. "I hate guys. I mean, I really do. Do you know what I mean?"

I don't answer and she swigs some more brew.

Rick walked out on me," she says.

Uneasy, I tell her, "Sorry to hear that."

Melissa's face scrunches up and the waterworks break open. She takes a cheesestick and dunks it in marinara sauce, rolling it around, catching a chunk of tomato, a piece of a mushroom, then shoving it in her mouth. "He came home late last night, and I was eating ice cream and watching Arsenio, and he just blew up at me, you know? He started yelling about the apartment being dirty and the ironing piling up and that I wasn't taking care of myself, and then he said something about going to get drunk and walked out. Why would he do something like that, Chris? I mean, why would he be so mean?"

"Maybe he's worried about your health."

Melissa stops cold and glares at me and says, "Why's everyone so worried about my health, huh? I'm twenty years old for crying out loud."

I tell her I didn't mean it that way, but I don't think she's buying it.

"Guys are such jerks," she snaps.

"Hey, not all of us are assholes."

"No, some of you are the whole ass."

That crack really makes me want to tee off on her and tell her she has no right to dump on me just because old Rick got tired of her braying laugh and messy make-up and crooked teeth. But I hold my tongue, knowing that yelling at her will only make things worse and opt instead for a nasty look.

Melissa glances at me and hangs her head. "I'm sorry," she says. "You're a nice guy, Chris. You're a lot nicer than Rick."

"He probably likes Andrew Dice Clay, doesn't he?"

"Loves him," Melissa answers and then giggles. The laughter bubbles a bit and then erupts into a bray. Her face brightens for a few seconds then grows long again and her laugh turns into a whine, "Oh, I don't know what I'm gonna do."

I tell her that the best way to get over an ex-boyfriend is to get a new one.

"Yeah, I know," she says. "Hey, want to go out after I get off?"

I should've seen it coming. Stupid, I'm so damn stupid. I don't answer her right away, and my silence gets awkward in a hurry.

"Uh, I can't, I mean, I'm not looking for a relationship right now."

Melissa's face falls again.

I stutter on, making up the excuse as I go along, "I'm kinda going solo for a while, you know, getting to know myself, getting settled, used to living alone."

Melissa keeps giving me that hang-dog look. Her eyes fill with water. Her oily, limp hair does not shine. The clouds are fixing to burst again at any moment, and I almost feel sorry for her.

Then she stands, with her beer tucked close to her body, and hitches out, "Chris, know and love your penis." Then she whirls and scurries in the direction of the kitchen.

I stare at the basket of cheesesticks for a while, not really thinking, just listening to the din of the crowd, a Friday night crowd of yuppies. Say what you want to about them, yuppies are the best audiences. They get into acoustic stuff and old songs and always keep my bowl full.

Mark Bankston

## Contributors

**C. Renee Field** is working on a master's degree in English. A six-time Pulse award winner, and past Pulse editor, Renee serves as the unpaid, but much appreciated editorial consultant for Karen and Melissa. Her top four writers include Annie Dillard, Jimmy Buffett, Nanci Griffith, and Alice Walker ("Storytellers, all.").

**Mark Bankston** is a junior English major. He plans to write professionally, or become a money-grubbing lawyer. Favorite writers: Rick Bass, Larry McMurtry, and Hemingway ("Of course.").

**Jakob Franzen** graduated from Texas A&M with a B.A. in Speech Communication. After spending two years with the Yuppies in Houston, he has seen the light and is now pursuing an M.A. in English. He has a preference for 19th century literature and plans to write professionally. If he decides to teach, he promises never to make his students read The Portrait of a Lady.

**Julie Gleason Alford** is working on her master's degree in English. She is a songwriter at heart, and is actively seeking a good voice for her demos. Her favorite writers include Johnny Cash, Bonnie Raitt, Kris Kristofferson, and John Prine.

**Jody Pate** is a sophomore English major. He plans to teach English and write.

**Kenesaw L. Bernsen, Jr.** is doing post-baccalaureate work in Psychology. He plans to do work in the field of Psychology and write on the side. Befitting his interest in mysticism and possibility, writing influences include Poe, Robert Heinlen, and J.R. Tolkien.

**Steven Collins** is a senior struggling with math. If he passes, he'll graduate in December with a degree in Mass Communication. He plans to teach English and write. Richard Wright is among his favorite writers. He cites Dr. Kirkland Jones as a source for guidance and discipline in his writing.

**Stacy Lynette Dickey** has not decided on a major, but she wants to work with people and ideas. She enjoys literature and wants to continue writing. Favorite writer? Sylvia Plath.

**Randy J. Stanley** is a senior Criminal Justice major.

**Janna Smith** is a senior Mass Communication major. She plans to be a professional photographer. Fall '91 is Janna's third Pulse cover, and due to her infinite patience and obvious skill, we think she'll be rich and famous some day.

**Melissa Hudler** is a senior English major. I plan to one day learn consistent voice, and she plans to teach English all her lives. Her goal is to be able to recite Pound while doing aerobics. Inspirations: Jack Kerouac, Rick Bass, Wendy Barker, Amy Gerstler, Sam Gwynn, and Shirley Maclaine, and Shirley Maclaine, and

**Karen Holstead** is a senior English major. Having taken a vow of poverty, she plans to someday earn a Ph.D and teach folks how to write real good English and how to edit real weird poe-try. Idols? Doc Williams, Billie Holiday, the Beats, Bob Dylan, Milan Kundera, and Sam Gwynn.