



pulse

pulse

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AWARDS

Eleanor Poetry Award	Beth Kushner Nelson
de Schweinitz Poetry Award	Sally Lombardo
Barnes Poetry Award	Diane Lehmiller
Rowe Poetry Award	Beth Kushner Nelson
<u>Pulse</u> Translation Award	Julie Gleason Alford
<u>Pulse</u> Essay Award	Linda Doucett
<u>Pulse</u> Fiction Award	Mark Bankston

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A Tale of Old

An aged hag clad all in black
Standing alone in a one-room shack
Stirring a cauldron full of things
Like eye-of-newt and cockroach wings
Referred to her grimoire for a magic spell
Tightly clutching book, candle and bell
Fire leaped from the candle to her eyes
As she removed her garb and shed her guise
The wrinkles faded and the face grew young
A beautiful lady stood where there was none
"The spell has worked," she exclaimed with a roar
Then she clutched her heart and fell to the floor
The moral of the story can well be told
Though her face was young, her organs were old

Kerry D. Moak

Sonnet to the Namer of Battles A Desert Storm

You name red shards of war for falling rain.
You flirt with maidens but you steal your kiss
from easy dames of hell. You make fond pain
inside my mind. You prey and make a fist
to grasp me from my mythic ancient fears.
You name war safe with shadow names made new.
You frame fine names so I forget old tears,
code-maker of my psyche, wizard, you who
seduce my mind with trickster words of whores.
You make romance of earth on fire in storm.
And so my world is never as before.
I search my mind to know how words find form
and pray somehow I hear a poet's lyre--
but know his fire from fire of killing fire.

Diane Lehmiller

Showers, 12/90

"Meteor showers" in the gym!
Showers for "her", showers for "him",
And "meteor showers." I sneaked in;
I peaked as pieces of planets sprayed,
Geysers disguised as stars, on parade,
These precious gymstones, rocking across the darkness.

Towel about me, I streaked out and gazed,
Eyes raised to heaven, with others', amazed
As stars fell, like angels to hell,
All around us they fell,
Plummeting into the deep velvet night.

Incredible sight! We stood, transfixed
As awe, with primitive fear, now mixed,
Scattering the crowd, whose whispers grew,
Those who vowed and those who knew
That the end was very near.

And, for one more minute, I took it all in,
Blissed and oblivious to the panic and din;
I saw, heard, tasted and touched those skies,
The stars' last light and the angels' cries,
And returned to the gym; the show must go
Off, not on. . . I destroyed that odd faucet.

The drama, the wonder, these things for which we ache
And hold within our grasp? These things we cannot take.
But, in soap and water, in steam and spray
We revel; they take our breath away
Safely. And we breathe life through the sting
And tingle of showers.

Beth Kushner Nelson

Beatitude

With tiny hands on the pane,
You stand watching
The rain beat down on mossy steps outside,
Your eyes in a trance that transfixes me.
Almighty child, what lies
Beyond this door that keeps you in?
Listen as rain pounds the muddy ground--
A magic world of earth and stone calls.
Like a shepherd you must tend your sticks, your rocks,
Your withered stems,
Like a hunter follow birds and wind
And sounds,
Remarking all.

Child of a flood,
Can you imagine
Drought
Or abstract, tameless thought?
Your hands squeak on the wet glass
As you draw a picture of the sun.

Sally Lombardo

On Revisited a Sweetgum Tree with Carved Initials

Seeds of love
Are buried deep
And planted by the signs
But far apart
The lovers' hearts
Share only lonely rhymes
A ray of light
From you to me
Someday again will shine
Shards of glass
From broken dreams
Cut whispers into time

Kerry D. Moak

Eleanor Poetry Award

For Farmer Dom

I'll remember you, Granddad,
Your rich, acrylic days.
That burst of spring, when every
Thing awakens overnight;
Brilliant, keen, a different green
For every tree in sight.
Abundance and overflow,
A clarity, a lost Van Gogh.
Color spilt over to sound we could touch,
Senses set free by such
A riveting, roiling rush of life.

The spectrum grown spectral,
Now, we wait.
As you, pale and grey,
Drip slow and brown,
Watercolor, watered down.
I squint to see if you're still there.
Barely an image, barely aware,
A vestige, a hint,
A stain remains,
Your canvas nearly blank.

Beth Kushner Nelson

A Disturbance

As fate would have it one spring morn,
I came upon a shallow pool--
Silent, still, forlorn.

I paused a moment at the spot
And contemplated if or not
Disturbing it would be so wrong,
Thinking hard, but not too long.

As I stood, leaning over it,
I peered at my reflection
And spit,
Turning away, so as not to see
The ripples now disturbing it.

For if I persist in looking down,
I may falter, fall in, and drown.

Browning Hollomon

The Women's Movement?

What does it mean
to be me
these days?
I sit
I listen
I hear talk of rights.
People ask
People push
Peddling opinions.
A dime a dozen
I say.

Once a majority
now a minority
I sit quiet
and listen.
What they want
Isn't for me.

I don't want
to be them.
I'd rather
iron clothes.

Judy Brookshear

Rowe Poetry Award

A pig named Raymond (what would a shrink say?)

I met a pig-male eons ago.
Silky persuader, smooth and sure,
He caught women like disease.
Fever pitched and swollen gland,
Their every wish his piggy command,
Poked his way through many a porcine pallor.

I, too, was a morsel at the trough,
Swallowed whole, consumed, devoured,
(Consumption his malady-of-the-hour),
He rutted and reveled til he'd had enough.

Now, I hear, his spoke got broke.
(Word like that gets around.)
And suddenly, ferociously,
Carnivorous glee grabs hold of me.
I rush to the store for chops, and more,
Shove that hambone into the pot,
Fry up the bacon, cholesterol or not;
I roast and toast old Porky's loins,
And bite that little piggy back.

He went to market once too often;
He really should have stayed home.

Beth Kushner Nelson

Clean Underwear

If you don't think
it's hard work
to be who I am
and see what I see,
it won't bother me.

The Robes of Actaeon

I knew Diana. Standing in the
Robes of Actaeon I watched
the young girl bathe
Eternally captured, we two alone.

Damned, leaving my road of good
Intentions so eager, so hungry
To hold that soul, that flesh by my flesh,
She giving her hand, that cold, distant hand
While I died
in the robes of Actaeon.

Jim Baxter

Prey for Morning

The early cold grabbed my feet
and before I could admit defeat
it sat quite firmly upon my head
and painted my nose a rosy red

Pray for Mourning

In my car I sat and slumbered
Froze to death and no one wondered
How the sun could be so cruel
As not to warm this hapless fool

Kerry D. Moak

Survivor

My eyes bore into you, Granddad,
Looking for signs of me.
Your eyes the mirror
Of my soul and
I cast no reflection.

Gently, desperately,
I take your hand,
Grafting your palm lines
Onto mine. Branding with
Your fingertips my flesh,
My fragments, me: the dismembered,
Half frantic to deny,
Half desperate to remember
The love, so I can hold you,
Comfort you, as age rages,
Ravages, and razes your face.

But feelings have dissolved.
Solution of
Disillusion and
I am pooling darkly;
Seeping through the cracks,
I'll soon be just a stain.

Beth Kushner Nelson

Circles

Life is a repeating calm, dry spell.
But the damn breaks
so all is swallowed by the unfortunate see.
Then comes the son's generation
and a calm, dry spell.

Jim Baxter

de Schweinitz Poetry Award

To Georgia O'Keeffe, who Spoke in Light

Secret petal, burning greens and reds,
cow's skull, fertile flower,
snake-like tree--you are
hot red dust on Texas roads,
flash of terra cotta on thirsty arid plain,
blood that trickles, wandering,
from tiny cuts in skin.

O'Keeffe's strong hands spray light
across canvas.
Indian women of Taos smear mud,
with long strokes,
laughing, unaware their great soft hands
spread heritage, power.
Indian women cover O'Keeffe's house,
insulating women
inside.

O'Keeffe lives in Taos
and Steiglitz
never comes.
A female becomes a burning flower,
a garden of trumpetvines, a blaze of mesa verde color,
a burial ground
of white hot light.

Sally Lombardo

Creation

Sitting
with forearms pressed
on hard thighs
head down
eyes closed
a prayer to an unknown god

Long, deep inhale
released through trembling lips-
he slowly raises his head
arms extend down
fingers touch cold
hungry hands wrap
around iron
nails press into palms

He pulls himself up-
a stare
at the raw reflection
a stare
from craving eyes
pounding heart vibrates
every muscle
every nerve-
a drum beats in his ears

He pulls an iron-filled hand
to his shoulder-
sacred breath held
behind tight lips
blue veins protrude
from neck and arms-
hard, as if carved from stone,
biceps bulge
beneath bronze
wet skin

He chisels flesh and muscle
in slow, meditative ecstasy
Apollo of himself
the stone
the artist
the art

Melissa Hudler

Imagination

Imagination is always free
And a child's can wander far,
To see a castle in a tree
Or battlefields in a yard.

A favorite game would be to find
A cloud of rarest shape,
A thunder-god aloft, reclined,
Eating a fluffy grape.

Or, perhaps, a hound,
Nose to the wind,
Chasing a wispy hare,
A bounding race,
A hurtling pace,
Vanishing in the air.

On fantasy alone we flew
Across the winds of time.
No boundaries of the distant past
Or future came to mind.

To be a hero or face defeat
As a champion to the end,
We caught a glimpse of glory days
Then traveled on again;

'Til beckoned home from beyond the hill
By mother's searching call,
Begrudgingly, we stumbled home,
Warriors, crooks and all.

Where soon arrived,
Safe and sound,
By the light of this dimming torch,
The swords were tossed
And helmets lost
As we climbed upon the porch.

Charles W. Smith

Poetry Cellar

Steps down into dark

slowly

smooth hands full of rough railing.

Pull string

light's on

this sway

that sway.

Rack rows go way back

to dusty dark

still ringing

songs of the maker.

Choose

Pull

Blow

Rub

Free

Pour

See

Smell

Taste

Remember

Jim Baxter

The Mental Processes of a Fish

The stars seem calm
And, too, the sea
The waves are high
But not to me
For I am fish
I play in the crests
I am of scales
Not of flesh
I can be thrown
And tossed about
And laugh soulfully
At my perilous route

Kerry D. Moak

Losing Her Skirt, Joan Joins the Soldiers

Too hot a day to wear a skirt,

Too hot a day by far to worry about clasps
and buckles and the paraphernalia of clothes,
So when the skirt is lost there are no
regrets,
and she swings laughing through the wind,
Lost to her own thoughts, as always.

A war is on with the English,

A war that fires her imagination just as
the bonfires within the soldiers' camps,
A new world of potentialities and pious
glories,
in which she might live but one of her dreams,
So maintaining her abandon, she leaves town.

The soldiers aren't sympathetic,

The soldiers whom she trusts to carry her
to new worlds, not to their smelly beds;
A waste of the men of France are these
lechers,
and it kindles within her a new rage,
Born of fires she's known, but never tasted.

No one is more surprised than she,

No one quite prepared for the new course
which arises with the cruel English attack;
A fury of feminine coarseness and womanly
frustrations,
she drives the men around her to the fray,
Taking a sword for herself, to put to good use.

Her men rally around her yet again,

Her men who would follow the steel-eyed maven
to the fires of Hell and back again,
The cool commander in her armor and her
petticoats,
clothes forced upon her by her lieutenants,
She laughs at the battle won, as if by her alone.

She speaks to the fools who would oppose her,
 She speaks for the first time of her visions
 and the voices of angels which fill her ears,
 The legend forged which keeps loyal her
 soldiers,
 and if she swoons and screams prayer with bellsong,
 She can't hear them joke, "It's that time of the month."

Kevin A. Poston

Yellow

A rose is red, and violet, blue.
 But those have common type and hue.
 I can't compare those things to you,
 My little dancing Black-eyed Sue.

Out catching raindrops on your tongue,
 You spin around and drops are flung
 Form off your yellow raincoat, hung
 Upon your frame, so frail and young.

There in your eye a tiny sun
 Is shinning bright. And soon a ton
 Of fragrant rainbows have begun
 To race around you. Yellow won.

Angella Redding

White on Blue

Gliders danced with white wings,
 one high, one low.
 I sat like two tons.

Jim Baxter

On Looking at a Photograph Of World War One Troops Walking Through a Cloud of Mustard Gas

Sentinels of The Truth,
 garbed in black,
 faceless, careless, moving forward
 but reeling amidst the clouds
 that impair their reason.

Defenders of The Right,
 they must ever be armed,
 must hold their faith violently,
 lest doubt slip in through the mask
 and obscure the solid earth of the past.

Ministers of The Way
 bearers of an amorphous burden,
 listing to left and right
 under its weight, the dark responsibility
 that clutches with a death-grip.

Angels of The Lord,
 representatives of their monarch,
 squatting in froggish majesty,
 far above the doubts and deaths of his agents,
 safe from the swirling mists of the earth.

Kevin A. Poston

THANK YOU,
 I LOVE YOU,
 I'M SORRY

It is those little words we often omit,
 And replace with ones we think would better fit,
 That would have been the best at first,
 Instead of that lengthy, flowery verse.

Vonette McBride

LEAF
TAKES
A
RIDE

Swiftly gushing upward on the index finger of Wind,

Gliding gleefully over cool Earth;

Hoboing a ride on his massive friend.

Finally, drifting

quietly

d
o
w
n
w
a
r
d

Uttering on last plea for continuence of the airy dancing,

Leaf halts his begging;

Settling instead to merely enjoy the last moments of his fling.

Vonette McBride

Barnes Poetry Award

A Distorted Anthology: A Ballad of Ladies

"Wake up, wake up," shouts Madonna to us,
"I will sing you the truth in my rhymes."
The bards have all sung to the virgins in trust,
To us who make so much of time.

Once there was Laura, lost-in-love lass,
And Phaedre so rich in her rage--
Ladies as real as a world spun of glass,
Cut images traced on the page.

The Wife of Bath swiped tricks from Delilah.
The Muses won't sing in the shade.
Such ladies turn tricks to the flute of Athena--
Each tune only played by a knave.

Tammy Faye lies to her face's intrusion,
Her masking as clear as her god's.
So much for we women who live by illusion.
King Henry would give us a nod.

Charlatans, charmers, fond mothers of yore,
Old Grendel would stir up a storm.
Rude mixture of witch of vixen of whore,
We ladies can really perform.

We know about masking and playing to win.
Penelope weaves her own lore.
"One Life to Live" is the theme of our kin.
The audience is close to the shore.

We love the High Drama. We love the High Mass.
We all know the role that we play.
The crowds all adore us. We make-up with class.
Only we know the truth which we say.

Our name is Madonna. We trade on illusion.
We vie with the mother of God.
We play to the audience--cast bright delusion.
We bow as we let them applaud.

Diane Lehmilller

The Local Poor Cat

The pouting look of this meowing tom cat
is crying for a suitcase of flounders
and pastromi slices,
some possibly heavy.

This guy should become near to partly roudy
as his hunger flowers for a finny dish.

"Hi"s to the fluffy kitties
and a "Hello" tonight in the midst of the felines
can be expected
as the old frump moves through the area.

The extended poor cat
cries for bunny fries
and mostly wild,
tempting critters.

Currently, the tempting critters
are not to be ate.

Jim Baxter

Train Goes West, Boy Goes East

It's chalky dust,
wind blow,
and clickitty-clack
the train go.

And off I go
stumble walk
back to club car
for rest.

'cause butt-head
in the front seat
keeps talking train wrecks,
loudly, too loudly.

Jim Baxter

Honeymoon

I dreamed a poem last night
A private myth to unravel
In a morning of solid reality.

The gnarled old tree stood
Steeped in tea brown tradition,
Confident, sturdy, a basilisk with no eyes.
His beckoning tentacles held delectable fruit
Which all good Eves must certainly desire.

But I dodged the shade of his branches
And skirted rootline's edge
Sensing danger.

Sill I ventured too close.
A serpent root struck and twisted around my foot,
Curling gold that bit into flesh,
Climbed my limb in groping spirals,
Flesh artrophying to the touch.

"I will not let you go," he vowed.

He envisioned his verdant growth
Fed by my fertile image,
His leaves greener, limbs brawnier
Mirrored to twice their size,
And so he desired me.

"No further," I will.

Forever trying to extract myself,
A spiteful mired Daphne
Who claws and twists like the half-eaten insect
Writhing in a lizard's mouth.
And my rotting limb poisons his soil,
And my hurricane words slash him,
And sunhot fury scorches his leaves,
And he withers each day.

He must set me free or perish
But stubbornly he clings
Choosing ruin over disillusion.

Adrienne M. Berry

Living House

Tension is a river
Flowing silent through their house--
Sometimes boiling over
Like a pot of macaroni
Sometimes turning to steam
To be absorbed into the breath
Sometimes seeping into cracks
But never drying up.

Happiness is a pine tree
Growing up through their house--
Sometimes dropping a cone
Like a package from a plane
Sometimes sprouting buds of limbs
But never within reach
Sometimes bending with the wind
And oozing sap out on the rug.

Bitter is the water that they drink,
But soothing is the fire of fresh cut wood.

Angella Redding

Haiku Obverse: (Human) Nature in Jeopardy Photo of the Battle Scene

Green glows the afterimage
The live-photo red
Fertile tracing etched in blood

Diane Lehmiller

The First Time a poem for Maggie

And spiralling--

That was what I felt,
The gravity gone, or at least juxtaposed,
The feeling of strength within my chest,
My heart racing beside the passion of her intent.

Passion was what drove me,
Breaking the boundaries of my past life,
Casting aside the fears that had crippled me
To continue this pistoning action.

And release--

The escape of this spasmodic moment,
Shooting forward at the impetus of her love,
Being rewarded for all these months
Of insecurity and dejection.

I thought myself heroic,
Full of a courage that few others had dared
As I rode the arc of gravity
To take my place among the Immortals.

And at last, at last--

I took four halting steps across the floor
And stumbled into the waiting hands of Mommy.

Kevin A. Poston

In Praise of Intimacy

i

I do not want stock options or fox hounds or diamonds
but your sunburned back hot beneath my fingers
some Drakkar hidden behind my Poison
two coffee cups on the drainboard
beard hairs in the sink
an answering machine with two voices
your loafers mixed with mine in the closet

ii

The night that we met
you were red
like the tight beam of a laser
like blood on the face of a boxer.
I fell in love with you the next day
while you were green
like grass by a Texas highway
like the moist pulp of an avocado.
The first time we made love
you were blue
like twilight in the Catskills
like the water by the Virgin Islands.
One morning at 3 a.m. I reached out for you
and you were purple
like a cold bottle of Grape Nehi
like the robe of an imperial Roman.
Once when you couldn't stop laughing
I watched you turn yellow
like the French's mustard jar
like an unchewed No. 2 pencil.
But lately you keep waking up brown
like a tweed coat in April
like a hundred unmarked police cars
like the bruised spots on a banana
like the slow ooze of molasses.

iii

I am fascinated by moonlight
how it lights up ~~the~~ dew before dawn
paints a white path on the ocean
and creeps through a crack in the blinds.
How it touches your face when you're sleeping
and slaps the cold walls when you're gone.

iv

it should be easy

hiding in the darkness
between
soft damp sheets

to tell you what daylight
shoves into dark boxes

but we lie

back to back
and when I finally
roll over

to say that I love you
you're snoring

Karen Holstead

By Jiminy

Jiminy jumped to the water's lick,
golden dawn looking on,
still on the rise the creek was quick,
Jiminy Cricket, he was gone.

Breast stroke, side stroke, back stroke too,
he swam for tree stump, drift stick, leafy canoe.
Pushing, pulling, the water was swollen.
Slowly, wickedly, his muscles stollen.

Fought hard for a handy hold, for a second wind,
keenly aware of dangers, perhaps his woeful end.
When up in prayer his eyes did look to the sunny sky,
and down below his shadow crossed a big bass eye.

He climbed aboard a creepy raft
as Snavelly Snake looked on and laughed.
Letting go his only chance
he boarded a ship of hungry ants.

Jiminy Cricket died that day,
ripped and torn and passed around,
and Snavelly Snake and the bass die say,
"At least with grace he could have drowned."

Jim Baxter

Boob Tube Addiction

Addicted eyes, magnets that draw to view
The screen that offers such escape to all.
Outside we know reality isn't new.

The eyes command the hands to change on cue
When news alarms--the senses dull do call.
Addicted eyes, magnets that draw to view.

Electronic and square--there sits the brew.
Compare the screen against the drink, the bottle.
Outside we know reality isn't new.

From screen to eyes the force is going through.
A tonic form--perhaps in optical.
Addicted eyes, magnets that draw to view.

Alarming news may grab the staring crew,
But training keeps the truth at minimal.
Outside we know reality isn't new.

The eyes are scared of anything that's true--
Too bad the facts of life aren't rational.
Addicted eyes, magnets that draw to view--
Outside we know reality isn't new.

Byron A. Hughes

Rain

I watch from the window
water snakes down the glass-
I close my eyes
turn from the window
and tilt my head
against the pane

The rain strums notes
against the sky-
my heart slows
to this rhythm
to this music
I've never heard

Melissa Hudler

Pulse Translation Award

Médaille d'Or

*La nuit bouscule ses étoiles
Il pleut du sable et du coton
Il fait si chaud
mais le silence tisse des soupirs
et la gloire de l'été
On signale un peu partout
des crimes de chaleur
des orages d'hommes qui vont renverser les trônes
et une grande lumière
à l'ouest
et à l'est
tendre comme l'arc-en-ciel
Il est midi
Toutes les cloches
répondent
midi
Une attente sourde
comme un grand animal
Sort ses membres de tous les coins
il avance ses piquants
ce sont les ombres et les rayons
Le ciel nous tombera sur la tête
On attend le vent
Qui aujourd'hui doit être bleu
comme un drapeau*

Philippe Soupault

Gold Medal

Night jostles its stars
Sand and cotton rain down
It is so hot
but the silence is weaving sighs
and the summer's glory
There are little signs everywhere
crimes of passion
storms of men ready to overturn thrones
and a great light
in the west
and in the east
stretches like a rainbow
It is noon
All the bells
reply
noon
A muffled expectation
like a great beast
draws its limbs up from all corners
and thrusts forth its prickly barbs
of shadows and rays
The skies will fall upon us
We wait for the wind
Which today should be blue
like a flag

Translated by Julie Gleason Alford

*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

Time

The day is made of many days, an hour
keeps slow minutes that have found their way, and the day
is forged with fantastic forgottens, with metals,
crystals, clothes forever flung into corners,
predictions, 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 waited and dies on the order of the night
splashing in the shadows.

Translated by C. Renee Field

An Old Tree

I love old trees. There is something about their majestic beauty that fills my heart with wonder and solitude. Lodged in the depths of my memories is one old tree I cannot forget.

The first time I saw this tree was on a spring day. The sun was shining brightly and there was a clean, crisp feeling in the air. A friend and I were planning a treasure hunt for a group of young people at Claiborne West Park. We were discussing where to hide out next clue when she paid me a warm-hearted compliment. The compliment, the sunshine, and the joy of being around so many trees was exhilarating. We were walking on the trails behind Claiborne West when came to the old tree.

Today, I can still remember the awe this tree struck in my heart. Standing in front of the tree, I felt an affinity with it, at peace with the world, and reluctant to walk away. I could only breathe, "What a beautiful old tree." My friend mentioned another person who loved trees, but I could sense she was only making conversation. Not wanting to be rude, I turned away; but I could not forget the old tree and decided I would return one day alone.

"A descriptive essay...", the professor said, eighteen months later, and I remembered that day. I wondered if the tree was really beautiful and if I could describe the beauty. When the professor advised us not to rely on our memory, I knew it was time for me to return.

The season had changed and I deliberately put off returning. The skies were overcast and there had been a slow steady rain for several days. Driving past the exit one day, I decided to either face the tree or change essay subjects. For the past few minutes the rain had slowed to sprinkling; as I left the highway, it stopped completely. Knowing the leaves would have fallen the previous fall, I almost convinced myself to drive away. I knew I was feeling the gloom of the weather and decided it would be easier to park my car and get out than to drive away.

Walking down the familiar path I came to an old, scarred tree. Standing there wondering if this could be the same one, my eyes followed the trunk up to the twisted old limbs. Following the limbs out, I was stunned to realize they reached over my head and behind me, although I was standing some thirty feet from the tree. As I turned back, my eyes were drawn to the old trunk again. The symmetric beauty of its limbs seemed to pull me closer. Walking nearer, I realized this was my tree.

There was something about the trunk that spoke to my heart. As I stood beside its base, I felt sheltered. The twisted old limbs reached out and formed a roof over the entire area. The land appeared to sink under the weight of the tree, and its gnarled twisted roots pushed up from the ground offering a comfortable place to rest.

Sitting down on the roots and leaning against the trunk, I felt the pressures of the day dissipate. I placed my hand on the bark and wondered at the reality of life. How many years does it take to acquire inner beauty and peace? At what point do perplexities cease to perplex? When does knowledge become wisdom and understanding win wars? I leaned heavily against the solid old tree.

When does a man become a king? And when a king is stripped of his lands, his royal robe, and his jewels-- is he still a king? Is the beauty in the man's surroundings or in the man himself? The old tree was stripped of the color of spring, surrounded with clouds of winter, bare and exposed to the elements of nature, and yet there was a beauty so strong I felt comforted and protected. The beauty was in the trunk and not easily destroyed. This tree was surely a king.

I walked away with my faith and confidence restored. There would be more trials, there would be more pain, but where there is beauty there is hope. The old tree had withstood the test of time!

Linda Doucett

Pulse Fiction Award

Drought in North Texas

By noon the mercury was sizzling at 107°. Ray Olmsted felt the back of his neck baking under the sun's glare but at least he wasn't sweating all that much. He didn't know whether or not to be thankful for the low humidity because six weeks of zero rainfall had turned his prime farm soil into dry, gray dust. As he stood between two rows of stunted and withering corn stalks, he tried to figure out how he was going to survive back-to-back crop failures. He removed his Cat Power, bee-colored baseball cap and wiped his brow with his shirt-tail.

Olmsted's grandparents had come across the Atlantic from Germany in the 1890's. After landing at Galveston, they travelled north and settled in Ellis County, just a few miles outside of Waxahachie. They claimed 120 acres in accordance with the Homestead Act of 1862, built a farm, and raised a family of thirteen.

Eventually, the farm passed down to Ray. He was serving in the Army at the time his father died in 1963. He obtained an honorable discharge, left Germany where he was stationed, and returned to Texas.

Ray married Connie Rogers when he was twenty-three and she was eighteen. They moved into the farm house with his mother. Although Ray had never held a love for the soil, he worked hard and was able to increase production and add acreage during the sixties and seventies. Then in the heat wave of 1980, Ray's mother died from sun stroke. Now years later, Ray wondered if the Texas summer wouldn't claim him and the farm as well.

Ray's youngest son Clint Olmsted walked barefoot into the field, hitching up hand-me-down Wranglers. He was eight years-old with a round, freckled face. Everytime Ray saw Clint, the first thing he noticed was the boy's haircut. The top was so short it spiked up, but the back reached his shoulders in stringy locks. On the sides, he had cut a zig-zag line with his mother's electric leg shaver. Ray thought it looked stupid, but he never said anything. Connie called it cute. Clint came up to his father and said, "Lunch oughtta be ready by now."

Ray replaced his cap, pulled an ear of corn, shucked it, and turned it over in his hands. "I'll be along shortly," he muttered, then flung the shriveled ear aside.

"If we was Indians, we could do a dance."

"We ain't Indians," Ray said.

"I know," Clint said, "Momma thinks we oughtta pray."

"Well, that's fine and good, but God don't have no say in the matter."

"He made it rain on Noah's Ark," Clint argued.

"That's a story in a book. A very old book."

"Don't you believe it?"

Ray didn't answer. He moved down the row and inspected another ear.

Clint pressed the issue, "Huh, Daddy?"

"I reckon," Ray said.

"Why does God let the corn burn up?"

"Well, it ain't like that. Them teachers taught you about gravity last year, didn't they?"

"Yessir."

"That's what keeps us from floating off into the stars, right? That's what keeps the world turning around the sun and the moon around the world. You learned that, didn't you?"

Clint nodded.

"If it weren't for gravity, then God would have to keep the world spinning like that Michael Jordan does a basketball. See what I mean? That's how the weather is. It's like a machine that runs by itself. If it breaks down, it fixes itself. The tractor can't do that, now can it?"

"No, sir."

"That's why there ain't no miracles. God just made the machines so they'd run by themselves and then cut 'em loose. And we just have to wait for the weather to fix itself."

"What if it don't ever fix itself?"

"It will," Ray said, "Sooner or later. Now get on in the truck."

Clint turned and headed back out of the field. Ray tilted his head back and gazed skyward at an infinite azure blue splotted here and there by a high altitude, wispy cloud. He looked up and down the row one more time, then slowly kneeled down. He dug his fingers into the ground in frustration, stood, and followed his son.

The Olmsted farm house was one and a half stories of white clapboards and green trim. It remained in remarkably good condition for its age. The screen in front of the porch needed replacing though. Rust had set in, and it bulged in places. Also, a couple of louvers were missing from one of the front window shutters as were several shingles off the roof. But the foundation was still solid, and termites had never been a problem. When he had inherited the farm, Ray had had the house wired and indoor plumbing installed. Since natural gas had always been used for the kitchen stove and all the space heaters, he put it in a gas water heater. Instead of central air conditioning, Ray placed ceiling fans in the family room and the bedrooms. And electricity allowed the Olmsteds modern conveniences like a television, VCR, stereo, and microwave oven. But these were for Connie and the children. Leisure for Ray was still fishing in Lake Waxahachie and smoking a pipe at sundown.

Ray and Clint drove up to the house along the gravel road which led out to the fields. The Ford pick-up's springs squeaked as they got out. Clint ran to the back door, his oversized Dallas Cowboys' jersey with the royal blue number 12 on it flapping around him. He flung open the screen door and rushed into the kitchen. Ray couldn't remember ever having that

much energy.

He stepped inside and saw Connie pouring lemonade into three mason jars. They had two other children besides Clint. Morgan was twenty-four, married to an insurance salesman in Arlington. Jason was seventeen and a senior in high school. Today he was at football practice in Waxahachie.

Clint was sitting at the kitchen table, eyeing his bologna sandwich. Connie set a jar in front of him and looked at Ray. "Hot enough for you?" she asked.

Ray had thought Connie to be irresistibly beautiful at eighteen with thick and curly brunette tresses and magnetic brownish-yellow eyes. Although she was never slim, her figure had been well-proportioned. Ray had especially liked her behind ever since their first date at the bowling alley. But child-bearing had put inches on her hips and made her hour-glass figure into a bell. The long brown hair was now short and permed, and her amber eyes sparkled through thick glasses. She suffered with swelling of the ankles and dry, itchy skin. But Ray really didn't care. The shape of her butt and the length of her hair just didn't seem important anymore.

He answered, "Cactus don't like it this hot."

Connie smiled at him and set a jar of lemonade by his plate on the table. She'd made for him a grilled cheese and bacon sandwich with Fritos on the side. "The crops look any worse?" she asked.

"Yeah," Ray said as he sat down. "I wouldn't have thought it possible, but they do."

Clint said, "Say Grace so we can eat."

"You say it, son," Connie told him.

They each lowered eyelid and chin as Clint recited, "God is good. God is great. Thanks for the food on my plate." He picked up his sandwich and took a big bite.

Ray started to eat and shook his head slowly. He swallowed and said, "I swear this county's turning into a desert."

"Alice Terrell called this morning," Connie said. "She wanted to tell me that there's a full-time opening for a second grade teacher at the new elementary school. Doris Baines decided to retire."

"That so?"

"Uh-huh. I thought I'd apply for the job, Ray. I've been substituting a these years. Now that Clint's eight, I'd like to take up teaching full time."

Ray fell quiet. The opportunity was a good one. He knew how much Connie enjoyed teaching, but raising kids and running the household had always taken precedence. There had been offers in the past. Twice before and old teacher had retired, leaving a spot to fill. Twice before Alice Terrell had called urging Connie to apply. But on both prior occasions Connie had begged off with a speech she recounted to Ray about how much she was needed at home. Ray knew how much she wanted to teach full time, to have her own classroom, twenty minds to shape, and a steady income. He had resented her for the guilt he felt.

Now, he felt guilty for resenting her.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ray said.

"Honey, we barely survived the drought last year. I mean, having to mortgage the house and all. And we've been delinquent on two payments."

"I know what you're saying," Ray said.

"If we're late again, our credit will--"

"Look, let's not talk about this right now," Ray snapped. He looked at Clint who didn't seem to be paying them any attention.

Connie cast her eyes down at the table and took a sip of lemonade. Ray knew she was upset. And he was mad at her for it. The pressures were mounting on him, and now his wife was telling him that she didn't think he could support his own family anymore. Well, he would prove her wrong. The drought would shoot up corn prices and what crops he could salvage would allow him to maybe break even. And next year Jason would be in the Marines, and there would be just the three of them. No way this drought would be as bad as last year, Ray told himself. God wasn't that cruel.

He glanced at Connie again. God he hated it when she swelled up. Now she probably wouldn't talk to him for the rest of the day.

Accordingly, they ate the rest of their lunch in an obvious and uncomfortable silence.

That evening, Ray sat on the front porch, smoking a pipe. The sun hung over the horizon, swollen and red, and the sky bled from azure to purple to orange around a thin line of clouds. A car passed by on Route 4, and Ray watched it disappear behind the crest of a hill. Then he stared back out at the prairie. It was all faded yellow. The corn, the Johnson grass, the mace, the wheat. Ray puffed on his pipe, tasting the tobacco and the lickory, and breathed deeply of the smoke. Then he exhaled in a dejected sigh.

The front door opened and Ray's oldest boy Jason walked out. Jason took after his mother and was quite handsome, clean-cut and sharp features. Tonight his jeans and white shirt were starched and pressed, and he had on snakeskin boots, matching belt, and an oversized buckle. Ray could smell the boy's aftershave the moment he stepped out onto the porch.

"Can I take the truck?" he asked.

"Take the truck where?" Ray answered.

"Into town. There's a party tonight. End of the summer party."

"Where's this party at?" Ray asked and lowered the pipe he held with his left hand.

"Bobby Struther's house," Jason answered.

"Well, you can go to the party, but you ain't gonna waste gas running the roads. Call one of your friends to come pick you up."

"Ah, Dad," Jason complained.

Just then the phone rang in the living room and Clint picked it up. Ray heard him say "hold on," and then he came out on the porch. "Some girl wants you," Clint told his brother.

"I'll be there in a minute."

"You stink," Clint said.

"Go on, roach!"

"You don't look like George Strait either," he chipped in as he disappeared back into the house.

Jason ignored the comment and said, "C'mon, Dad, I promised Laurie a ride."

"Laurie, who's Laurie?"

"A girl I'm talking to."

"Well, you shouldn't have done that. That ain't your truck."

"Yessir, I know."

"JAAASSON!" Clint yelled from inside.

"I'll be right there!"

Ray stared at his son. For a long moment there was silence between them. Ray thinking, and Jason waiting for his final decision. Finally, Ray dug into his pants pocket and got his keys. He tossed them at Jason, hitting the boy in the chest. Jason smiled and caught the keys.

"You be home by midnight. You're gonna get up early in the morning and do some work around here."

"Yessir!" Jason said and then went back into the house.

Ray listened as Jason said, "Hello? Oh, hey, Laurie." The boy was barely able to disguise the excitement thick in his voice.

Presently Connie stepped out onto the porch and sat beside Ray on the steel glider.

"Red skies," she said.

"Yep. Gonna be lots of sunshine again tomorrow."

"I can't believe you're letting Jason take the truck."

"Well, I know what he's going through. I don't want him to be embarrassed."

"He has nothing to be embarrassed about," Connie said.

Ray didn't say anything. He put his heels against the wood, pulled them forward, then pushed off with his toes, and they began to rock back and forth.

"I've been out here thinking all evening," he said, "Maybe you oughtta go ahead--take that teaching job."

"I think I should," Connie agreed.

"I ain't saying that like you need my approval. I know you were planning on taking it anyway."

"Really? How'd you know that?"

"I ain't as dumb as I look," he said.

"No, you're not," Connie said and leaned over to kiss his neck. She rested her head on his right shoulder, and he hugged her closer to him.

"Clint told me what you said about not believing in miracles," she said.

"Did he? I swear that boy's a parrot. You can't say anything

around him he don't repeat."

"Do you really think that?"

"Honey it's just that everytime we've needed a miracle, we ain't got one. We've always had to rely on ourselves."

"What're you gonna do about the crops?"

Ray sighed and leaned his check against her hair. "The only thing left to do," he said.

The next morning Ray manned the stalk-cutter and set about mowing down row after row of corn. All it was good for now was livestock feed. He did several acres, leaving the stalks strewn across the fields like soldiers after a battle. He would strip the ears for the grains and bury the stalks under the soil to serve as fertilizer for next year's crop.

He left the mace alone. If only it would rain within the next week, the mace would be salvagable. He could use those profits to dig a well and set up an irrigation system, something he had promised himself he would do after the 1980 heat wave and drought.

Then at sundown he took a box of matches out into the fields of Johnson grass, fields he'd retired after last year's dry spell. Next season would be better, he told himself.

He kneeled down, struck a match, dropped it, and watched as smoke rose in a plume, and the flame kindled and spread to consume the grass.

Mark Bankston

Conjugation

1 a.m. It was warm enough in the Empire Diner. We were consuming salad and beer.

"So, what did you think of the play?" I asked. The play was Andrew Lloyd Webber's Aspects of Love. It seemed to be about a lot of people falling in and out of love to good music. I knew it had unfavorable reviews, but I loved it. Anyway, I am not always discriminating.

SaraLee's contribution was "I guess it shows that screwing around screws everything up."

So much for literary theory.

Marla thought a minute. "Love is only truly romantic when it isn't realized."

I was amused. They hadn't changed at all. Marla discreet. SaraLee direct. Although sometimes we had lost touch over the years, I never forgot Marla and SaraLee. At the very beginning, we were learning together. Anyway, they always remind me that each of us performs in this crazy world the best way we can. All the world really is a stage. This play brought to my mind a young girl whose acquaintance we had made once upon a time when we were as young as she. She had chosen a ridiculously theatrical name, and she was playing a role of her own. Marla was kind to her; SaraLee avoided her, and I learned from her. But I think I was a slow learner. I was sophomore.

The year was 1961. I do remember I wore a bright red dress to Latin class that April day. I knew I would get called on (I always got called on when I wore red), and anyway I was a Latin whiz. That day belonged to adolescence. Spring was hitting hard. It poked at us with its crazy sun and wind-blasted energy. Promise. A light was playing through the dark windows of our own very old school building (founded in 1776).

Maybe it was because I was fifteen. It was tricky to be sane, but one thing I knew for sure that day was that no one burned to concentrate on Latin (except maybe me). Weird class. They stick twelve of us up front in this huge room to make a class, and they put all those creeps in the back, and they pretend we can learn Latin verbs up here, and they can study back there. No way. Especially on a day like this.

I knew the kids in the back were hoods. I never paid close attention to them because I needed to put on my glasses to see far. But there seemed to be a couple of girls who wore an awful lot of makeup and a bunch of guys who were dark-eyed hunks. I could tell that Gertrude Vandallen--Miss Gertrude Vandallen, Latin teacher and Radcliffe graduate, did not like sharing her classroom with those kids--slippery types who reminded me of Elvis. They liked to bug SaraLee and me after class with their loud words, in Italian no less. We didn't know any Italian, and we pretended to ignore those greasers.

Marla, who said she was going to be a nun and who was my best friend, claimed Italian was close to Latin, and she was going to translate Italian pretty soon. Marla was Irish and pious. She even worked for the nuns on Saturdays. I supposed she could talk to the Pope someday, but I figured she was better off not understanding those sexy guys because she probably would meet up with instant mortal sin. I didn't think Latin would help much anyway. Nobody spoke it. SaraLee knew Hebrew. That wasn't much help either.

SaraLee was my other best friend. She was Jewish, and she said she was and atheist. I didn't believe her because she was afraid to eat bacon. But SaraLee was O.K., even though her mom always looked at me funny and was scared to let me into their apartment. Anyway, SaraLee said she didn't need to know Italian to pick up on what those guys had in mind.

We all got to that class late because there had been a fire drill, and crazy Crowley (in my mind a seventy-five year old dyke P.E. teacher) made us line up in the middle of Main Street to take roll (I kid you not!). To make the drill even crazier, a girl I didn't know from our gym class fainted right in the street. Anyway, I kind of liked the break in the routine. One more story for crazy Crowley's book I thought.

Classical Public High was downtown. Thirty miles from Boston in Southbridge. It was modeled on Boston Latin, Vandallen explained. That was why many of us on the college track got into Ivy League schools. We were getting such a "good background." Last year, Michael Rosankowsky won scholarships to Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. No kidding! He was a nerd, but he came back once and gave us a pep talk on Latin. Recruited by Vandallen herself.

Vandallen was her usual blue-dyed self. She had a blue suit, blue shoes, blue eyes, and blue hair. Her hair grew blue, and I wondered about her blood. She always told us how we were special students, the chosen few who will go on to represent Classical High in the higher realms of academia (to private schools, too, not just any old state university). She called us the "cream of the crop," and I believed her. Not one of us balked. We were good subjects.

"Today, students, we will proceed with the review for the State Latin Contest. We have two weeks. I will call on each of you without warning, and you will answer orally. For each error, I will deduct ten points from your daily grade." She threatened each day like this.

There were only twelve of us in our class. Everyone was prepared anyway because Vandallen always gave the same speech. I was thinking too that she must have had a funny view from the front. First, there was that wild tribe in the back. They looked like they belonged in Front Street Bowling Alley. Then we, her real class came across like the United Nations--worldly-wise. We were the sophisticated ones.

The were three Russian kids in class--all like Ihor--from families chased out of Europe by the last war. Ihor knew Classical stuff better than the rest of us, and he spoke Russian. Ihor was really nice, too. He told me his name came from mythology. Then there were one Hungarian kid, two French kids (from Canada), and four Polish kids. Marla was the Irish one. SaraLee was Jewish. Her parents barely got out of Germany. SaraLee's aunt had one of those awful tattoos. Then there was me, half American and half Canadian. I had the only really American name in the class. Everybody except Vandallen and SaraLee was Catholic or Russian Orthodox. Anyway, the Russian church was a whole lot like Catholic.

Vandallen's nose was out of joint because we were late, and I was right. She called on me right away after her opening speech. "Rachel," she ordered, "conjugate portare."

To carry, I translated. The easiest verb in the book. She really is going back to the beginning for this silly contest. "Porto, I carry, portas, you carry, por---."

Vandallen suddenly interrupted: "There is entirely too much communication going on back there. You, young lady, what is your name?"

She was talking to the back. I put on my glasses and stared at the words penciled in Ihor's book: Latin is a dead language / As dead as it can be."

They must be telling jokes I thought. I dared to look back. The girl Vandallen was cornering looked familiar--like that girl who fainted. Vandallen's victim froze. All the boys were gaping at her. Vandallen commanded: "What is your name?"

The girl, dark-haired and dark-eyed, was wearing a shirt a size too small. I thought she probably wanted attention. A male nearby snickered. When she answered, I could hardly hear. "Dido McCauly."

Queer name. I remembered that Rosankowsky mentioned old Dido in his pep talk. A queen. Vandallen was annoyed. "Young lady," she said, "I expect the truth. Is your given name actually Dido?"

Ihor looked disturbed, and I was wondering about the rest of portare. Suddenly, one of the macho types in the back hollered at Vandallen. "Nopce, her name is really dildo!" Ihor turned red. I had no idea what it meant. Italian, I thought.

Vandallen was upset. She called macho-man and Dido to the front. She let us go, Latin contest and all. As we were leaving, SaraLee pointed out that Dido looked pregnant and better hope Vandallen wouldn't notice. I wondered whether Dido's mouthy friend was the father.

The next day when SaraLee and I went into the cafeteria, we noticed Dido. She looked like she was crying, and she stared a long time at us. Dido made me really nervous. I never wore my glasses, but even faraway I could tell she wanted to call to us. I mean, she kept looking and looking at us from way across the room. SaraLee paid no attention her. SaraLee had

years of practice. Anyway, I didn't know what to do. What do you say to a pregnant girl named Dido? And how could anybody be stupid enough to get pregnant anyway? Not us.

Much later and sooner than I expected, summer arrived--mature, wonderful, sweet, and green. That Latin contest was long gone. But one lazy Sunday turned wild because I really thought I was alone in the park. I was just finishing up my fifth reading or so of Mademoiselle, and I was ready to get into Marjorie Morningstar. I looked up and there was Dido. She sure was pregnant. And standing in bright sunlight! This was the first time I could really see her up close. She was already talking to me. "Did your friend tell about me?"

I didn't think Dido would actually remember me. I never even talked to her. But I did wear an awful lot of red to class. Anyway, I figured she meant Marla--not SaraLee.

I was suprised to see her, but the nuns must have let her out to go shopping or something. It was a glorious day, and Dido was carrying some bags from Woolworth's. Anyway, I knew that Dido lived with the nuns. Marla found out because she worked at The House of Good Shepherd all the time in the summer. She told me that Dido was there and that she talked at the time--that Dido never-ever stopped talking. But that's all. I knew that, anyway. That's how Dido got into hot water with Vandallen. Anyway, Marla would never say anything else--no matter what--about Dido or anybody else in the place. Marla was mostly quiet because we all knew that Catholics without husbands weren't supposed to have babies.

For once, I was really looking at this person Dido. A kid. Why did I expect she would look like a vamp or something? I was finally catching on that she was same as me, fifteen. And she wanted to make friends. She was really pretty too--what the guys would call a knock-out--except for that fat pregnancy.

My brain must have been in reverse gear because at that moment I asked Dido the dumbest question. My mouth ran. "Who is the father, anyway? That big guy who called you a weird name?"

Dido answered, "I have a real name besides Dido." Relief.

"What is it?"

"Mary. But I like Dido best. I picked it 'cause Mary don't fit me too good. I got Dido out of a classy book. I heard your teacher tell it, too. And the father ain't Vito, neither. It's my mother's husband. He's in jail."

I could not speak another word. Grasping, I reached far--far inside my mind, and I played out the rest of that simple verb: portat--she carries. . .

Diane Lehmilller

Pentecostal on Waterskis

That last Sunday, I stood on the steps of Greater Good Apostolic Church and felt reasonably certain about the hereafter. Not because of anything I'd heard inside, you understand. This feeling was purely the result of coming out of that frigid, smelly church and being blinded by the oppressive relief of a white-hot August afternoon. The drones of the churchgoers became converted into those spontaneous sounds of traffic and lawnmowers; the earthiness of cut grass rose and united with the fabricated smells of fast-food restaurants; even the letters on Burger King's sign appeared brighter and more significant. I felt fully aware of some amorphous something, some entity more complex yet infinitely simpler than what those pitiful parishioners sought inside. And if the truth were told, what they were seeking was simply a way to avoid divine retribution, which we really don't need God for. We do a good enough job punishing ourselves for what we perceive as sinful, don't you agree? I only wished as I gratefully turned my frozen face toward the sun that I'd had the balls to protect it with translucent powder at least.

Of course, at Greater Good the only one wearing makeup was runty Brother Lowell, the self-important, self-ordained minister. I'd been told this was due to the camcorder he set up on a tripod right in front so that he could record his sermons, and I use the term loosely. His tongue simply rambled along and over words, never really ending one thought before beginning another. Supposedly he sent the tapes to underdeveloped villages in Africa. Now, I ask you, what did these Pentecostals believe poor African natives were going to do with them? What in the hell would natives even think a Scotchbrand magnetic tape was? A useless black mask with opaque white eyes? A new kind of idol that spun and spit shiny brown entrails? I hate to tell you this, but I've entertained myself before in church by imagining a huge, naked tribe of mostly males, their dongs dragging the ground as they squat under a central thatched pavilion of sorts. Wide-eyed, they all stare at a VCR (no TV) plugged into a heavy-duty, bright-orange extension cord, which stretches endlessly into the jungle like some horrible, gaudy snake. Then they dance.

Someone knocked me down a step, and I turned to try to smile at whoever-the-hell that was with the pursed lips and magnificent starched beehive who'd bumped into me. I had a hard time distinguishing one Pentecostal woman from another because they all look alike, if you know what I mean.

"Excuse me, Sister Sissy Sue," she stuttered.

"Well, hey there," I said, smacking my gum. That sent her scurrying for safety, and as I made my way down the rest of the steps, hoping to avoid attracting Brother Lowell's attention, I watched the little lech. He was shaking hands with his semi-literate flock, his foundation already streaked with sweat, and I swore to myself that this was the last Sunday I'd be in attendance at their trained bird show. If you've ever seen those chickens that peck at pianos for feed, you'll understand what Greater Good was like.

Unfortunately, the randy brother spotted me and simultaneously started bobbing his head toward me and stroking his hairpiece.

"Sister Sissy Sue, you're looking good," he chirped, "real good, how are you?"

"Just fine, Brother Lowell. That certainly was a powerful sermon today," I lied. "I can't tell you when I've been more moved." Moved to wring that scrawny neck for preying on these half-wits, I added to myself. I was having an unpleasant sense of *deja-vu*, for hadn't I said something about powerful sermons that first day last April when I'd shown up at Greater Good? the brother had preened then and practically drooled over my hand that he'd clutched in a death grip.

"Thank you so much, Sister," he'd cooed. "We always have room for one more in our fold." Then, his beady eyes firmly and devoutly perched on my breasts, he had reluctantly stretched his neck toward the gawking, washed-out crone next to him. "Have you met Sister Rowena?"

And after Sister Rowena there was Sister Gloria and Sister Juanelle and Brother Dave and Sister May, and they were asking me all sorts of questions and inviting me to the covered dish supper on Wednesday and positively gathering me under their wing. You see, I was looking for anonymity, and there among the women with their beehives and pale faces, I was sure I had found it. I thought I'd be able to hide the disbelief and disgust that I felt. Don't judge me for this; I am a relatively honest person, I think, but I'd been driven by extremes into the arms of Brother Lowell and his misguided congregation: I thought I was killing off all my ex-lovers.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you this afternoon at the river service," Brother Lowell was rambling on now.

"Yes, well, I'm in charge of the food, you know. I'll be there." I didn't bother adding that once I fulfilled this obligation, I was leaving the Pentecostal nest.

"Listen, Sissy Sue." The hairpiece grazed my nose as he tried to whisper in my ear. "Don't you worry, you know about the prayer list, I'm taking steps to have you removed."

"Isn't that kind of you."

"It amazes me that you came to get on it in the first place, a terrible mistake, I don't know how it could ever have happened."

I knew. One Saturday Sister Rowena had spotted me wearing a bikini in the local 7-11. My son Jason and I had stopped in for a coke and a wine cooler after waterskiing. And then the very next day at the mall (why is it Pentecostals spend so much time in malls?), I'd run into Sister Whatever-the-hell's her name, the one who wears the same possessed pink gabardine every Sunday, and, God forgive me, I'd been wearing makeup. Up until then things had been going fairly well. They had me selling peanut brittle and organizing bazaars and baking every damned kind of Duncan Hines cake there is. But once I made the prayer list, everyone began calling and ardently offering to help me pray for release from these demons. For some reason, they seemed especially worried about the Waterskiing Demon.

"I'd really like to talk to you about all this, Sister Sissy Sue," Brother Lowell said. "Maybe this afternoon, we could do some praying together

about this misunderstanding, just the two of us-- all those pines, very inspiring, Sister."

Praying, hell. He wanted to bury that little beak of a nose in my chest. I managed to mutter at him that I was looking forward to it, but all that I was looking forward to was meeting the Waterskiing Demon with Jason and Hank as soon as this hellish river service was over. And then, goodbye Greater Good. I had had enough, dead lovers or not.

* * *

Not that I am some kind of sex goddess, you understand, but back in high school I managed to put quite a few notches in the dashboard of my '60 Chevrolet Impala. In the small Southeast Texas town where I was raised, smack in the middle of rice fields, there wasn't anything else to do but have sex. The bowling alley had burned when I was still in junior high, the movie theater showed only Spanish movies, and the drive-in closed up the year before I graduated from high school. So we cruised all five blocks of the drag and had sex. Everybody did it. Naturally, there were a few girls that were regarded as "easy," but they were the ugly ones, like Betsy Hargrave. Then after graduating I'd left town for college, where I met my husband Cy, to whom I was relatively faithful throughout our marriage. I say relatively because there were a handful of short-term affairs that occurred the last five years when it became obvious to both of us that what happened to most marriages had happened to ours. This sounds nonchalant, I realize, but I was also aware at the time that Cy was involved with his very young secretary Tootie, whom he married three days after our divorce became final in March. It was all very civil and agreeable. I got our son and the boat, he got a chance to renew his youth.

Our marriage was like this mahogany wardrobe we once bought. It was a solid piece to look at, late-nineteenth century, with a beveled mirror on the door and two jade-green pieces of leaded glass on either side. The finish on it was absolutely flawless. But the damned thing stunk. I have no idea what had caused such an odor, although possibly at one time a dead body had been stored inside, but the wardrobe was useless for storing anything. We wiped it out with ammonia and bleach and set it in the sun. We put bags of charcoal inside it. We replaced the lining. We sprayed it with an assortment of air fresheners and deodorizers. Then we stripped out the new lining and set the wardrobe outside to air again. Finally we gave up and moved it to the garage and eventually sold it for half of what we'd paid for it. Well, that wardrobe was us. We sprayed it and stripped it and set it outside to air but we just couldn't get the smell out, so we finally gave it up.

I don't know why I'm telling you this. I guess so that you will understand my frame of mind when I first met Brother Lowell. And you have to keep in mind, too, that I was worried about my former lovers. So worried, in fact, that I was influenced by a group of Pentecostal women at the mall. Incidentally, what the hell kind of name is Tootie?

On that particular day last April, I'd been wandering around from store

to store, not really shopping for anything but just trying to distract myself, when a group of these beehived women accosted me. Well, that's not actually true. One of them stepped in front of me, blocking my way, while two others came up on either side of me. For a moment I feared they were trying to rob me, but the stocky one simply thrust a pamphlet at me and hissed something about Jezebel and sin while the other two glared at me. As irrational as I was at the time, I took them to know about my being a murderer, as I'd come to think of myself. I glanced down at the pamphlet and into the smiling eyes of their leader, who I thought for a moment was winking at me until I realized that this was just because my hands were shaking so badly. Inching backwards to escape this religious gang, I thanked them as politely as I could.

"Brother Lowell can help you with your burden," the stocky one told me.

"Hell is eternal," another said. "Repent now and save your soul."

"Yes, well, thank you," I said again, and I turned and literally ran to the nearest exit and halfway around the parking lot until I found my car. I locked the doors and lit a cigarette, trying to laugh at myself for panicking so. Those faceless women posed no threat to me. I picked up the pamphlet from the seat where I'd tossed it and studied the photo of "Brother Willard Lowell, minister of Greater Good Apostolic Church, the last of the holy roller churches." The brother had a thin face, his cheekbones more than just prominent, and rather puckered lips frozen in what I took to be a smile. The photographer had caught him just about to blink, making him look like he was closing his eyes for a kiss. What made the picture even more ludicrous was the toupee perched on his small head. There was enough hair there for three brothers. I smoked and studied the picture, wondering what might happen if I called him up to unburden myself, so to speak. Maybe what I needed was a man-of-God's opinion. After all, I wasn't dealing with it all any too successfully by myself. What did I have to lose anyway? By the time I drove out of the parking lot, I'd decided to call him up. That was as far as I intended on going with these Pentecostals.

But Brother Lowell somehow convinced me to go farther. For one thing, he insisted on meeting with me instead of just talking on the phone. So two days later I found myself searching for Greater Good, a rather large brick church instead of the white clapboard building I'd expected. The minute I walked through the side door I felt smothered by that church smell. I don't know how to describe it, but strangely enough every church I've ever been in has had it. It's disinfectant mixed with grape juice and invisible mold up high in the ceiling that they can't reach to clean. I would have left right then, but Brother Lowell had heard me come in and was standing at the door to his office. I recognized him from his picture, although he was much smaller than I'd expected, a good five or six inches shorter than I. With all that hair and dressed as he was in a turquoise leisure suit, he reminded me of a parakeet.

"Sissy Sue?" he asked.

Right away I pegged him as one of those men who talk to women's

breasts rather than to their faces. I nodded and held out my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Brother Lowell."

"Same here, come on in my office, I've been looking forward to talking with you since you called, you sounded so troubled on the phone."

I decided what the hell, I'd be honest. "I don't know if I'm doing the right thing."

"The Lord moves us in strange ways, if you know what I mean, I think you do, here you are, whatever I can do to lessen this burden, I'd be grateful to try."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid it's quite a long story."

The brother sat down on a black naugahyde sofa and motioned me to sit next to him. "Just think of me as a friend, a good friend, you have nothing to worry about."

I found myself across from a painting of Jesus on the cross done on black velvet. The brother obviously had no taste at all, and I could only hope that I wasn't wasting my time. His voice, however, with its rambling, droning quality was almost hypnotic.

"I really don't know where to start," I said. "You see, I'm responsible for some deaths. Actually, quite a few deaths."

Brother Lowell's hairpiece twitched. "Deaths, you say?"

I nodded. "Deaths. Almost everyone I've slept with is dead."

"Dead?"

"As doornails," I told him. "You see, Larry Sparks was the first to go, and then shortly after that Carl White. That was when I was still in high school. Gary Jenkins was next, I think. Then I was still in college when Henry Polaski died, and I remember I'd just graduated when I found out about Joe Jenkins, Gary's younger brother. Oh, I forgot Kyle Henner in there somewhere. And then after I married my husband, ex-husband really, we divorced last month, there was Teddy Humphrey, Bud Frazier, Jack Grover, Bruce Harvey, Kenny Davis -"

"Excuse me, but you did all this?" The hairpiece was twitching like crazy now.

"There are more," I told him. "The only ones still alive are my ex-husband and Mark Lister, someone I had an affair with a couple of years ago. Of course, there may be others that I don't know about. I haven't kept track of all of them, but this just seems too coincidental, if you know what I mean."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, trying not to look at each other. I finally asked if I could smoke, and, twitching all over now, he said he'd join me, so I lit cigarettes for us both. I'd already told him this much, I decided I might as well go the whole nine yards. "I'm seeing someone now, Brother Lowell," I explained. "And that's why this is really bothering me. I'm afraid to get really involved with Hank, that's his name, because I might kill him."

"I see what you mean, I think, but, excuse me, how did you, ah, do all this?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know how you, ah, murdered them?"

"Oh. There was a hunting accident, a couple of cancers, car wrecks -"

"Then what you're saying, you didn't actually shoot then or anything like that?"

"No, but what's the difference?" I asked the velvet Jesus. "For some reason the men I sleep with are punished for it."

"God does work in mysterious ways, of course, mere man can't begin to understand His will." Brother Lowell moved closer to me.

"Getting closer to God, humbling yourself, coming forward like this and taking the first step, you're doing the right thing."

I forced myself to look away from the velvet Jesus and caught Brother Lowell staring at my legs. "Do you have an ashtray?" I asked him coolly.

He flitted around and finally found an empty Coke can. When Brother Lowell sat back down, he planted his thigh against mine, and I moved away as far as I could without endangering myself of falling off the couch. If the minister had no taste, what did this say about me, I wondered.

"Sister, I know God's ways seem puzzling at times, but we must have faith, repent, lead righteous lives, so we will have eternal life."

"You don't think I'm imagining all this? Hank says it's just coincidental and I'm transferring guilt. Hank's a psychologist."

"The path to Hell is short, but the road to Heaven is long and trying, very trying, but don't give up, let the Lord save you."

"I'm trying here, Brother Lowell, but what about Hank?"

"Who?"

Wasn't he listening? "Hank, the guy I'm seeing. I met him waterskiing on the river one day. What do I do about him?"

"You're asking me, I think, you want to know, should you sleep with him?"

"Yes, I guess I am."

"Oh, no, whatever you do, don't do that, remember God works miracles, but his wrath is merciless."

"But -"

"You must be strong, Sissy Sue, to save your soul, and those other souls, too, you don't want to lead him to sin, as well as everlasting Hell, now, do you?"

"No, I guess not, but -"

"Shh." The brother closed his eyes and began humming. After a few minutes, he nodded. "Yes, Lord. Now Sissy Sue, this is what you need to do, this Sunday you come to church here, and free your soul from sin, and I'll help you, we'll all help you, but you must be strong now, ignore Satan's call, heed the Lord."

I reluctantly agreed after twenty minutes or so of more listening to Brother Lowell's simplistic but hypnotic catechism. The idea of attending Greater Good or any other church made me slightly nauseous, but on the way home another idea struck me. Maybe Brother Lowell didn't usually hit on women, if that's what he'd been doing, maybe I just brought it out in

men, although God only knows why or how. I had to ask myself: Was I an instrument of Satan?

When I pulled up in my driveway, Tootie and Cy were just backing out, having brought Jason home from dinner out. They both waved and smiled blithely. I went inside to practice my beehive.

* * *

Beehives are not easy, especially when your hair is bobbed and bleached. As I watched Hank and Jason back the Baja toward the boat ramp, I could feel bobby pins coming loose, but my hands held forty dollars' worth of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Besides, there was enough Final Net in my hair to caulk a bathtub.

There they all were, hunkered piously under those pungent, lofty pines, which made these cloned Pentecostals seem even more stooped and pitiful. Was this guilt sneaking into my still-superstitious being? Where was that gospel music coming from? I gritted my teeth. Fifteen minutes and I'd be saved.

"Sister Sissy Sue! Sister Sissy Sue!" Brother Lowell cooed, jumping up from his perch on one of the benches. He was wearing a canary-yellow polyester jacket over a T-shirt printed with the words "God Saves!" "Over here, smell that chicken, will you, uhmm, where have you been?"

As he drew nearer, I noticed a greenish, curly noodle dangling precariously from the corner of his mouth. "I see the pasta salad made it here," I said. "Well, here's the chicken. I'll set it out and then I've really got to get going."

"You're not staying?" The bit of pasta fell from his lips and onto his jacket. "But the baptismal, you'll miss the service, you can't leave before that."

"I'm sorry, Brother Lowell. To be honest -"

"But your soul, Sissy Sue, save your soul, let me help you."

"My soul is just fine," I assured him.

The music stopped. Looking around I spotted, propped against a pine tree, a portable stereo plugged into one of those heavy-duty bright-orange extension cords, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out where the cord led. It seemed to snake around and between the pine needles indefinitely.

"Some demon has possessed you, Sister, don't turn your back on the Lord, cast Satan out, now, today, forever, let me wash sin away, put your life in the hands of the Lord!"

I saw that Brother Lowell was beginning to twitch. I also saw that he was attracting attention. I feared someone was going to have a religious seizure and start dancing around or talking in tongues if I wasn't careful. Bending down and almost whispering in his ear, I asked, "Don't you mean put myself in your hands?"

"What could make you say such a thing, what do you mean, do you think -"

"Brother Lowell, let me tell you. The spirit moved me last Sunday afternoon, right after church, as a matter of fact, and, well, Hank's still breathing. And to tell you the truth, I just don't belong here, you know what I mean?"

"The devil is in you -"

"Yes, several, " I told him, out of patience. What the hell? "The Waterskiing Demon is calling right now, and I'm going to join his evil gang. We're going to ski across America, corrupting idiots and Pentecostals everywhere. All of ya'll, watch me now," I said loudly.

I kicked off my shoes and started toward the water, where I could see the Baja idling just off the bank, Jason and Hank moving around the boat. I stopped to yank off the skirt of my two-piece Pentecostal uniform (purchased several months ago at the mall for functions such as these), revealing a green-and-white polka dot bikini bottom. I threw the matching shirt at Sister Rowena, I think, and waded into the river. "Throw me the skis," I yelled to Jason, and when my feet were fastened into the rubber boots, Hank threw me the tow line. I held on and leaned back into the water as one of them cranked the boat motor, and I started off, rising slowly as we picked up speed, bobby pins flying from my hair. I glanced back over my shoulder once at the wide eyes and open mouths of the covey, and I waved blithely, royally, finally.

Annette Sullivan