

pulse



pulse

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AWARDS

Eleanor Poetry Award Given to the best poem overall.

Diane Lehmiller "The Newark Train Station on New Year's Eve"

de Schweinitz Poetry Award Given to the best poem written in open form.

Diane Lehmiller "A Few Mementos of My Grandmother's Life"

Barnes Poetry Award Given to the best poem written in traditional form.

Donna Buesing "Silence"

Rowe Poetry Award Chosen by the Pulse editors (limited to undergraduates).

Catherine M. Furry "Cloistered"

Pulse Essay Award Given to the best essay.

Beverly Sanders "Melodyisms"

Pulse Fiction Award Given to the best short story.

Mark Bankston "Blackout"

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Pulse Essay Award

Melodyisms

Melody was adopted by my mother when she was three years old. When my mother died, my husband and I raised her with my two children, so she is more like my child. I used to refer to her as one of my kids, but she has always referred to me as a sister, and to my husband, Robert, as Dad. We never realized how this sounded to other people until one brave friend asked why her sister slept with her dad. Now I call her my sister, but her son is always my grandson, and her husband is my son-in-law. My children are her brother and sister. This sounds perfect to us, but confusing to other people.

Things sounding confusing around Melody is nothing unusual. Melody has a unique way of forming a sentence. In fact, sometimes she does not actually form it; she tosses it together like a salad. We call her verbal salads "Melodyisms."

Sometimes she splices two thoughts together, like the time she was apprehensively "waiting for the shoe to drop in the bucket," and "scared as a bird in the bush." It takes me a minute or two to figure out what she means. Sometimes she puts two thoughts together backwards, which might take me days to figure out. A man she dated, but did not like, was "happy as a snake in the grass." Her dog was "happy as a clam in the rug." Then there are the times she blends them together so thoroughly I can't ever figure out what she means: "Can't see your left foot in front of your face." I can only sit there opening and closing my mouth like a fish.

One busy day she informed me she had "been like a chicken cutting off his head." During a fruitless day she felt as if she was "hitting my head with a brick wall." She would come home upset that her boss would often "fly off at the handle." Anyone could see he was as "immature as a goat." She was deeply concerned about a couple she knows having marital problems. She confided to me, "I just know they are going to get a divorce. They get along about everything."

"Melody," I ventured, "do you mean they fight a lot?"

"All the time," she worried.

Melodyisms are fun most of the time, and we try to remember them, but we can never say them the way she does. Some people can toss a sentence and some people cannot.

Sometimes Melodyisms are more embarrassing than fun, or at least, they are embarrassing to the person with her and fun to everyone else. She absolutely adores my daughter, Cathi. One day she was picking Cathi up at the mall. As Cathi walked out of the mall entrance, Melody stepped out of the car and loudly sang, "There she is, Miss America...." I thought this was hysterically funny; Cathi did not.

Not long ago, one of her Melodyisms embarrassed me beyond belief. We were sitting in her doctor's waiting room with several other

people. I was holding and feeding her three-day-old baby. She was on the opposite side of the room phoning her husband, who was at home. A neighbor answered the phone and said she had just dropped by to see the baby. She also said that Leonard was in the shower. Melody had mentioned this woman to me earlier, telling me how scandalized she was because the woman was having an affair with a married man. She was shocked that this woman would come into her home when her husband was there alone.

Melody is not a show-off, and her next actions were not meant to call attention to herself. She also has a hearing problem, causing her to speak with a loud voice. Covering the mouth of the phone and turning to me she matter-of-factly stated, "CAN YOU BELIEVE THIS WOMAN WOULD COME IN MY HOUSE WHEN MY HUSBAND IS IN THE SHOWER? I TOLD HER NOT TO GO GET HIM BUT SHE DID ANYWAY." The room got very quiet. I could not think of a response. Realizing she may have said something amiss, she tried to fix it by saying (with a touch of anxiety), "I REALLY DON'T THINK THEY ARE DOING IT, OR ANYTHING, BUT STILL...." I was struck dumb. I couldn't get up and walk out of the room because I was holding and feeding the baby. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. The room was very, very quiet. "I REALLY DON'T THINK THEY ARE DOING IT, EVEN IF HE IS IN THE SHOWER. BUT I THINK SHE SHOULD LEAVE, DON'T YOU?" I tried again to answer, to soothe her, to SHUT HER UP. I couldn't think of a single thing to say. She turned back to the phone, and I could tell she was talking to Leonard. No one in the room looked at anyone else. I do not know how I know, because I certainly was not looking at anyone, but I know that no one was looking at anyone else.

When the call ended, I said a premature prayer of thanks to God that this episode was finished. As Melody walked across the room she said with relief, "WELL THEY AREN'T DOING IT. I TALKED TO LEONARD AND I COULD TELL BY HIS VOICE THEY DIDN'T DO IT."

I had been mortified by a Melodyism.

Later, I found that my legs still worked, and that I could still get up and walk calmly out of a room. Later we talked about the fact that she had just had a baby and that causes women to sometimes overreact. Later we would discuss the fact that, of course, Leonard can be trusted, even with a woman who commits adultery with a married man. One thing we did not discuss was Melodyisms. Somehow I didn't think it would do any good.

Beverly Sanders

Francoise Grenier Langlois (d 1665) to her Priest: 1665

The Saint Lawrence moves on as I watch.
When my children were little we dreamed
ice-splintered ships of magic
so that even shivering we could travel over waters
to find warm people to speak to us in French.

My Noel loves Paris and tells of a cathedral there
that looks to heaven through rose windows
that tint the rains
warm as snows where I kneel in the sun.

But Noel tells also of fighting in France
against those who do not fear God as we do.
But here we fear only the English and the Iroquois
who do not know to fear our God.

And so few are we
that we can hide like stars
within large white spaces of sunshine
on this land where men make single drops on the rivers.

When Noel came with Captain Giffard
he could scratch a silly N for his name.
Now he signs and marks the void and
in 1643 he made for Fort Saint Louis
two hundred good boards of ten feet and ten inches long
and one sure inch in thickness.

I knew Noel two weeks when Father Lallemant married us
when Noel could not trace his letters
like a child in a new school.
But now I read the name that Noel can spell
and I make the words in my Missal
meet the old sounds
so I can see the ancient prayers.

Do you remember our Anne
 was betrothed so young to Jean Pelletier
 that she loves him like her own blood.

Altogether I bore six babies in this green and silver place
 but I buried the boy called Noel for his father
 among roses clawing like fire
 in the cemetery Coté de La Montagne.
 And I cannot hide my pain in that still hillside.

I know the foam-tossed journey to this place
 where I taste an ocean like salty wine.
 Yet I feel no exile when I touch water
 because my womb seals the sea.

Still I see so few women
 in this world of men.
 I ask of the Good Lord
 that He let me talk sometime
 about this Quebec of blanket skies
 with some friend like His own good Mother.

Diane Lehmiller

A Voyage

Someday, somehow
 You said one April morning
 You would walk into the painting
 Row upstream, to search for
 A sound beyond the mountains
 Leaving all silence to me

Years later
 Pacing outside
 One cicada-mad evening
 I heard you call my name
 From within the wall
 I peeped in:
 The boat was still there
 Moored in blurring mist
 Against a background of rippling cliffs

Xinmin Fan

Rowe Poetry Award

Cloistered

If she had been able
to think, it would have seemed
a travesty proportional to the
sinking of the Titanic.

If she had been able
to feel, it would have felt
like an eruption of the
magnitude of Vesuvius.

But, alas, she was a mere muscle
one who had spent years
meticulously adding layers
to her protective shell
Nestling in the mud of her world
covered with a quilt of
fine sediment and silt
Far beneath the going's on of ships
sailing to exotic places
she could not dream of
And above the molten rumblings
of exotic islands yet to be.
Paradise, not lost not found.

It began, simply enough,
an exercise in survival
a nutrient/waste exchange
But something happened,
perhaps she had yawned
become too careless
But something happened,
something foreign entered
and did not leave.

It settled in the folds of her lacrimal flesh,
irritating at first
uncomfortable.
But it became a reminder of life,
a point of focus
enigmatic.

The outpouring of her lacteal cream
came with renewed passion.
And it came ceaselessly. And within
(or without) a measure of time
(or timelessness) the invader had
become a thing of beauty.
And she caressed it within her labial
being, smooth
and hot
and pulsing life.

Far away, a love story was transpiring
where a pearl-less princess needed proof of her prince.

And so it came in a turmoil
of bubbles and the cold,
sharp steel of reality
that even the strongest
and most austere muscle
cannot withstand.

And fingers as heartless as she
stole from her the passion
and flung her aside for
the carrion crow
and the laughter of the world.

Catherine M. Furry

The Portrait

When he told her not to paint
 she knew she must do
 the useful thing.
 She took fine brushes of sable
 hair almost human
 whose cost she would not tell
 and asked him to sit for a portrait.
 But he would not
 and she had to work alone
 her viridian gropings
 toward a skeleton underneath.
 She marked bald places for bones
 and washed from dark to light
 the unvarnished alizarin turnings
 into an image.
 She stained the mouth
 cadmium red
 bleeding.
 She marked the body with black final strokes
 buried negative traces
 into pigment.
 And she made a portrait
 a good likeness
 and she left him
 her painting
 for a memory.

Diane Lehmillier

A Fresh Coat

Edna Longstreet's grandson was driving her nuts. He was in college so he knew everything. He had come over to paint her house, and he insisted on doing so even though the weather was threatening rain. He said if it rained he could paint the enclosed porch instead.

Edna didn't want her house painted. She wanted to put vinyl siding up. That would have been easier and cheaper. It was her son who decided to have the house painted.

"Don't worry, Mama." Steve had said. "It's no problem to paint it. Vinyl siding looks tacky. Jason has already said he would be happy to paint the house for you. All you have to do is pick out the color you want."

"Color?!" said Edna. "Why would I want to paint it any other color than what it is now? Don't you like it Steve?"

"I don't think there is anything wrong with the color." Edna detested when Steve started to patronize her. "I just thought you might want a change." She was sitting in her graying recliner that had rested across the living room from the T.V. for twenty years and Steve was standing, almost looming over her. Hung on the wall behind the T.V. were pictures of her five grandchildren.

"No, I don't want any change." Edna snapped back to Steve. "It's been this color for twenty years and there is not a damn thing wrong with it." She hadn't meant to talk so sharply to Steve but she couldn't help it. It seemed she couldn't help hardly anything these days. "Besides it's awful hot right now and I don't want Jason to have to put but one coat on."

"Aw Mama," Steve said. "Jason's young." He motioned toward the young man sitting under a framed bronze star from World War II. "He can stand a little heat." Edna didn't think Steve was overly concerned with his son's health.

Now her grandson was in the kitchen fixing himself a Coke. He had finished painting the porch and it was raining outside. He plopped down in the recliner next to hers, the recliner that had been his grandfather's.

Edna looked at a picture hanging on the wall of a five-year-old Jason riding a Big Wheel. "Are you finished with the porch already?"

Jason hardly looked up from the sports page he was reading. "Yes ma'am, there wasn't much to it."

"Well that was very quick." Edna said, "are you sure you did a good job?"

Now Jason looked up from the paper and fixed his brown eyes directly on his grandmother's blue ones. "Yes ma'am," he said quietly, "why don't you take a look at it." His tone wasn't quite cold but it wasn't as cheerful as it had been just a few moments earlier.

"No, no," Edna protested, "I trust your work." She tried to smile brightly at Jason, but she had the feeling she didn't. "If I find something wrong later I'll have you do it over." Jason's eyebrows lowered and the glint went out of his eyes. It was the same look her husband used to give her when he decided he didn't want to fight.

"Granma, I'll paint those kitchen cabinets if you want me to." Jason said in between potato chips. "I know how much you hate that color." Jason was right. She hated that color. She had hated it from the time they bought the house. Jesse hadn't painted them then because they had been freshly painted by the previous owner. When it came time to paint them, her husband painted them the same color because he said there was no sense in wasting a second coat of paint.

"No Jason," she said kindly, "your grandfather painted them just before he died, and they don't need to be painted yet."

"Yes ma'am." At least her grandson was more polite than most kids today. "I know they don't need painting, but I remember how disappointed you were when Grampa repainted them that god awful green. They don't match anything in the kitchen, and probably in the rest of the world. I could have them painted in an hour."

"No, that's okay son. You just sit and rest until the rain quits." Edna wanted to change the subject. "You're daddy is paying you for doing this isn't he?" Edna wished her grandson wasn't so nice sometimes; he just didn't know when to let up.

Jason looked over at her and grinned. "Well we haven't quite agreed on that yet. He thinks he is but I haven't cashed the check yet." With that he stood up. "I'm going outside to see if the rain is letting up any."

As Jason opened the screen door, Edna could hear the rain slapping against her driveway. It didn't look like the weather would ever let Jason finish painting. The door opened again and Jason stepped in, soaking wet. At least he was thorough in checking to see if it was raining.

It doesn't look like it's going to let up any time soon, Granma." Jason was dripping on the dingy linoleum as he walked to the dusty bookshelf and took a copy of Fire Next Time, "I'm going to knock off and go home. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Okay," this time Edna managed a more natural smile, "drive carefully."

Jason smiled back, "Yes ma'am." He slipped out the door and was gone.

After Edna was sure he was gone, she clicked the T.V. off and got up to walk to the back porch. Edna could smell the slight aroma of paint fumes that indicated the paint was still wet. She figured it would take a while to dry with this weather, so she didn't let that bother. She looked around the small screened porch. It seemed that Jason had done a good job after all.

She walked to the far wall, a distance of about ten feet, and glared closely at the wall. It looked good. She did see one slight drip, but she hadn't noticed it from farther back, so she decided to ignore it. She turned to inspect the screens which started at waist height and ran to the ceiling, about a foot and a half above her head. This was a very good job. There was no paint that she could see on the screens.

Edna looked at the ceiling next. There was some paint on the old brass light fixture, but that had probably been there before. It didn't look wet. The corners were well done, no big globs of paint in them.

Edna was almost satisfied when she turned to walk back into the house. She grabbed the doorknob. Then she froze. She felt her hand sticking to the knob. There was paint on it and it was still wet. Shaking her head, Edna went inside and grabbed a paper towel. First she wet it in the sink then returned to the doorknob of the still open porch door.

She managed to bend down without too much trouble, and clean the smudged paint off the knob. Before she went in she took one more look at the porch. The last thing she glanced at was the concrete floor.

There, suddenly, as if they had been waiting for her, were three... no, five spots of paint. She kicked at the nearest one with the Reebok on her right foot. The paint splotch didn't budge. It had dried. Edna let out an exasperated breath and turned back into the kitchen. This was going to take some work.

She rummaged through her utility drawer until she found the orange-handled, rusty-bladed, flat head screwdriver that had probably not been used since her husband died. She held it up by the blade and studied it for a moment, then marched back onto the porch.

Kneeling down, she began to scrape methodically away at the first blemish. Remaining on her knees she moved to each successive spot and carefully scraped until it disappeared. By the time she reached the third one, she was sweating profusely, and when she finished both her back and her knees throbbed as if to remind her that she was too old to be picking up after the children.

The next day grew warm early. It was apparent to Edna that it was going to be a brutally hot afternoon. She heard Jason's car rattling into the driveway at about ten o'clock. He started to paint immediately. Edna went into the yard and watched him for a few minutes and she realized that her grandson was almost an adult. She looked at the five o'clock shadow on his face for the first time. She remembered when the long, lean legs that now held him on the precarious perch of a ladder rung eight feet above the ground were short, stubby limbs that lurched zealously but awkwardly into her arms. She marvelled that the boy who had once played the organ in the middle of the priest's sermon on Easter was now about to graduate from college. Suddenly it didn't bother her that he had

been a bit sloppy yesterday. He was young and raring to go. His entire life was in front of him, and he knew it. Edna tried to think back to when she was twenty-two. She had been pregnant with Jason's father, and her husband had been in Europe fighting the Germans.

The day became oppressively hot and humid. Edna tried to bear the heat as if her staying outside would make it cooler for her grandson. The heat completely engulfed her body. Her clothes were sticking to her, and the sweat wouldn't evaporate because of the humidity. After only ten minutes, Edna was forced to grant the heat its victory and to retreat into the air-conditioning.

At noon, Edna went back outside to call Jason for lunch. When he came, he was soaked with sweat. The t-shirt he was wearing clung to his body and even the shorts were darkened with moisture. He took the red bandanna he was wearing off his head and Edna noticed it was literally dripping as he stuffed it into his pocket. His face was sunburned and the perspiration ran in little streaks from his hair line down his face and neck until they were absorbed in his t-shirt. He smiled as he sat down and began to eat the hamburger Edna brought him.

On the television was a replay of the gold medal ceremonies for the two-hundred yard dash in the 1968 Olympics. Two lean young black men in warmups stood on the medal stands reserved for the first and third place finishers. Both stood with heads bowed, and each had one blacked-gloved fist raised in the air.

"Cool," Jason said. "What year is this from, Granma?"

"1968," Edna replied, "this race took place about a month after you were born."

"I didn't think hotdogging it was in until Reggie Jackson came along."

"They weren't hotdogging it, that was the black power salute."

Jason scrunched his face into a funny look. "What," he asked, "is the black power salute?"

"It goes back to the Civil Rights Movement. It's a symbol of black empowerment."

"Why did they do it on the medal stand? To get endorsements?"

"If that was why, it backfired," said Edna, shaking her head painfully, "they were stripped of their medals." She saw Jason start slightly.

"Why?" He sounded the way he used to when he asked why the sky was blue.

"It was a very tense time in this country." She tried to sound as objective and rational as possible. "King and Bobby Kennedy had just been killed; it was becoming obvious that we were losing in Vietnam. The Civil Rights Movement seemed to grow away from non-violence. There were race riots in almost every major city." Jason shifted in his chair to face his grandmother. "When Smith and Carlos stuck their fists in the air, it was

taken as a slap in the face by a lot of people in the establishment. They struck back in the manner they were accustomed to."

Jason looked aggravated. "So they took the medals?" His voice climbed higher as he said this.

"Yes."

"That's stupid. What did that solve?"

"Absolutely nothing. It was meant to remind everyone who was in power."

"You sound like mom now."

"Your mother and I marched together several times." Edna smiled as she remembered the good old bad old days. "We were in Birmingham, Selma, and Washington. In Birmingham they sicked dogs on us"

"Why?"

"Because we marched. You see Jason, the people in power were threatened by the black vote. That's why blacks were not allowed to vote in the South for eighty years. If blacks were to get the vote it would totally change the balance of power."

"If they gave blacks the vote, wouldn't the blacks have voted for them out of gratitude?"

"We will never know."

"So my grandmother was a hippie." Jason couldn't repress a small chuckle.

"Not exactly," said Edna, "I was more like a hippie den mother. I never qualified for true hippie status, because I couldn't stand the music."

When she had run out of answers to his questions, he got up to resume painting.

"I think I should be finished in about two hours, Granma," Jason said taking his plate to the kitchen sink. "All I've got left is the trim."

Edna was secretly thrilled that the job would soon be over, but she was also worried that Jason would over-exert himself in the heat. "That's good," she said in a flat voice, "but don't rush it. I don't want you to have to go back and do the same work twice."

"Don't worry," Jason in a reassuring tone that contained none of his father's patronizing quality, "I'm very good at this."

Edna smiled in reply to her grandson's confidence. "How is Shelby?" she asked, referring to Jason's latest girlfriend.

Jason looked up at her and rolled his eyes skyward, and plopped back into the recliner. "She's just like the rest of y'all, Granma," he blew out a quick breath, "totally and completely insane."

"How long have y'all been dating?"

"About a year."

"Don't you think it's time you made an honest woman out of her?"

Jason jerked up with his eyes wide open. Edna liked to tease him about getting married. "Now you sound just like her mother."

"Well you said we were all insane," Edna flashed a grin, then continued in a more serious tone. "Don't y'all talk about it at all?"

Jason began to redden. "Why, uh, sometimes. I mean once we, uh. . . well, I can't afford to get married until I get out of grad school."

"That will be before you know it."

"Well, she graduates the same time I do so maybe she can support us."

"Jason Daniel Longstreet! Don't you dare make that poor little girl work to support your lazy butt while you use grad school to avoid getting a real job!"

Jason was grinning like a comedian telling a Dan Quayle joke. "Thanks for lunch, Granma. I'm going to finish now." Before Edna could say a word he was out the door.

As she waited for Jason to finish, Edna picked up a crossword puzzle and began to work it in ink.

Jason called Edna outside to inspect the finished work about five that afternoon. She got up and went outside, and managed to fight her way through the thickness of the heat to the front yard where Jason was standing.

She could not say she was displeased with the paint job. Jason was right. He was very good at this. She looked at the gleaming paint and thought the house looked as it did the day she had bought it. Then she looked at her grandson. He was soaked with sweat. He took the bandanna off his head and twisted it. Sweat fell out of it in streams. His clothes were splotted with the cream colored paint. His brown arms and legs also had patches of paint decorating them. Edna thought that he had worked very hard. She was very proud of him.

"Well Granma," Jason said, "what do you think?"

"You've done a fine job Jason." She looked at her grandson's nose and inwardly laughed at the dot of paint on the end of it. "You've done a real fine job."

"I'll still paint those cabinets if you say so."

"No, that's okay. They can wait for the time being."

They went inside. Jason sat in the recliner and Edna went to the kitchen to get her purse. When she came back, she stuck a twenty-dollar bill at Jason. He just looked at her without moving.

"Well," Edna said sternly, "do I have to lift you up and put it in your wallet, too."

"Don't even think about it."

"Oh Jason," she hissed, "just take it. You've done a good job."

"I'm not taking it. I don't need it."

"Yes you do."

"I don't, and what's more, I'm insulted by the offer."

"Would you be more insulted if I turn you over my knee and spank you?"

"Well if you're going to be that way, what choice do I have?"

"None."

As Jason finally took the money his grandmother proffered him, Steve walked in. Unlike his son, Steve walked in without knocking. "Are you finished son?" asked Steve.

"Yes sir. Been finished about thirty minutes."

"Mama, are you happy with the job he's done?"

"Yes, I sure am."

Steve went to the kitchen and poured himself a coke. He came back and sat in the recliner Jason had just deserted for the couch.

"Jason," Steve began, "tomorrow morning I want you to go to the paint store and pick up two gallons they will have in my name." Steve sounded as if he were reading off a list. "Then come over here and paint your grandmother's kitchen."

Edna started, "Steve, I don't want my kitchen painted."

Steve looked at his mother with an eyebrow raised in annoyance. Apparently he had not expected an old lady to object. "Now Mama, you've been wanting that kitchen painted ever since you moved into this house. Now is the time to do it." Steve turned back to Jason. "Son, I've already chosen the color. All you have to do is pick the paint up. Do you know where the store is?"

Jason looked confused. "Uh, yes sir, but I don't think Granma wants her kitchen painted right now." He looked down at his shoes. Edna saw Steve narrow his eyes at her grandson.

"Jason, stay out of this." Steve turned to Edna, "Mama, I think now is the right time to paint the kitchen," he repeated. "We've already got the tools here. Jason will be able to finish in one day. It won't inconvenience you at all. You won't even have to go to the paint store."

"Steve you lay off that boy. He's worked hard all day getting this house painted on the outside."

"You're right Mama, but all he needs is a good night's rest and he will be fresh in the morning."

"Uh, Dad, I've already offered to paint Granma's cabinets, and she said she didn't want them painted."

Steve glared at his son for a moment. Then Edna saw his face relax and his shoulders drop as if a great burden had been lifted off of them. He turned to Edna looking just a little sad.

"Mama, you've always wanted those cabinets painted. There is never going to be an easier time." His voice was slightly higher than usual.

Edna still felt patronized, but the look on her son's face had softened her somewhat. "Well Steve, if it's that important to you we'll paint them."

Steve did not return her smile. He drained his coke and walked toward the door.

"Well Mama, I'm going to leave," Steve said. "Jason, are you coming home soon?"

"Yes sir," Jason said coldly, "I'll be a few minutes behind you."

When Steve left, Edna looked over at her grandson. His face was still darkened with anger. He looked like his grandfather when he was mad.

"Jason," Edna said, "come by tomorrow morning, and we'll go to the paint store and pick out a color ourselves."

Jason looked up at her and the right side of mouth curved slightly upward. "Yes ma'am. I'll be here about ten, if that's okay."

"That will be fine. It will take all day to pick out a decent color, so you don't need to wash your work clothes tonight." Edna looked at her grandson and smiled.

Michael Wright

The Student Radical

There you go--dressed like Rothko--
A moody penumbra of purple, loden, black.
Slinking in the shadows, wire-spectacled,
The eternal radical,
reflecting the dark earth from which
you spring. . .
The sight of you,
tight-fisted, wrings my heart.

For five and twenty pages previous
in this Book of Life
I crept along the ivied Halls
of Learning, dressed in somber
black. . .
Drinking deep the dark draught
of the nether side of thought--
And thought thereby my life significant.

I was wrong.
Life may be a shadow, but
at this point
I prefer the Sun instead.

Cheryl Epperson

Eleanor Poetry Award

The Newark Train Station on New Year's Eve

It is grey and blank above the ceiling on New Year's Eve
when fog holds my plane
and I must go from Newark to Washington.
I move with the taxi over a cold-glass highway
marked by dots of lighted cotton
toward the train station.

The driver shifts through the skyline of knives
that cut away all whitened spaces until
he leaves me where the ground shakes
like a prehistoric monster.

Across the river in Times Square
the crowds dream fire and shout down the minutes.
But here the driver tells me to hide my purse.

Last week I saw skulls from Melanesia,
visions from a museum in Houston
like ones I see
here in this place in Newark
at one hour before the new year.
I can catalogue native masks
and silver hats with orange streamers.
Rubbery men make noises from rattles
meant for infants or warriors.

I see few women
and no children.

I breathe in tobacco air
like black incense
from ancient buildings
where I have waited
under the image of a bearded god
to get permission to stand in line.

This night is a celebration of dead paper.
Cups, stubs, and cigarettes mesh into smoke
and confetti under my boots.
This is a collection of noisemakers
like the costumed men of my childhood church
who kept the altars and pulpits
away from girls and old ladies in black coats--
back when I dreamed I could fly
in my child's dress on wings of lace
above the stopping places of boys.

Tonight no one can fly.
I fit into space between the steaming words
of men who talk of fog and fear of planes.
The earth quakes while I buy my way out of here.
A skulled face whistles at me
and I add up the cost of my ticket.

So I wait on a stone bench
rigid for the beginning of the new year
in this place where my face is the color of sky
and I must guard my wallet
like a baby under my coat.

Diane Lehmillier

The Last Bubble

I was thirteen,
called him Nandad.
He died bringin in the cows.
Gottem all in the pen
n just sat down n died.
Some said it was a broken heart.
I figgered it just busted,
too full, ya know.
Too much love.
But maybe it was fragile,
like a bubble.

The money tree that dropped coins
like mesquite beans,
it died with him.

I cried at the funeral,
but only cause I was sposed to.
I always knew the right thing to do.
But I didn feel,
n I didn feel like cryin.
I already knew good things aren't real.
Not really.

Not the moneytree
not the toothfairy
not Santa Claus
n not Nandad.

Not much good left
cept Mammon.
Wonder when she'll...

Oh well.

Catherine M. Furry

A Passing Scene

"Leaning back in a rocking chair, a porch sitter often
stares right through you. He's been watching birds or
squirrels for a while, or the different shades of green
in the leaves, maybe bees or butterflies working the flowers."

Rodney Hill

Patio, veranda, breezeway, lanai, piazza, gallery, and dogtrot are all names used for a porch by various ethnic and social groups. Portico is the classical name for porch. One of the earliest references in art history to a porch appears in 1700 B.C., at the Palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. Romans used the porch for public teachers to give lessons as well as a place to exercise in bad weather. Climate adaption is the basic idea of a porch. Social "comings and goings" and customs came later. Tracing the porch from Colonial America, and surveying the multiple "happenings" connected with porches, rekindle memories of my experiences on the porch.

Porches have played a major role in American history. Arcaded porches appeared in 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida. These early examples were architectural adaptations from Spain and provided a basic way to adapt to the weather. Heat and rain seemed somehow friendlier when standing on a porch. The "Old South" attached great importance to the porch. This vital part of the house became an outside parlor. The raised open area was the place where one could get outside, feel the fresh air, and be neighborly all at once. The pioneer settlers of the American West adapted the porch from the "Old South." The pioneer's home faced a porch to the southeast where it trapped the prevailing breeze and offered shade from the scorching sun. The most famous courtroom in the American West was the front porch of Judge Roy Bean. History was recorded recently in the annals of lawsuits when the judge who presided over the case between Texaco and Pennzoil gave notice to the attorneys that he could be found, if needed, on his porch.

Porches have played an uncommonly important role in the lives of past generations, especially in the matter of romance. The porch was a private place. It was a place where a young lothario took his best girl. A swing on the porch was where you talked, courted, and fell in love. This sanctuary prompted wishes that these nights and days would go on forever. Relaxation is a natural occurrence for porch sitters. Porches are friendly places. Two or three rocking chairs and glasses of cool lemonade served on a shaded porch offer the perfect setting for friendly conversation with friends and neighbors.

The porch has been more than just a friendly place for me--it has been my lifeline. In my early childhood, my family and I lived in a large white farmhouse remotely situated on the Ouachita River in Louisiana. Huge oak and sycamore trees framed the house and shaded the front and

back screened porches. The back porch was a workroom, and it was treated differently from the front porch. The back porch was small and void of any permanent furnishings, except for one shelf with a mirror hanging above it. The shelf held a bucket full of fresh rain water and a pan used to wash our face and hands before we entered the house. Two pegs on the left side of the shelf held the dipper for drinking water and a clean white towel for drying our face and hands. Messy tasks were performed on the wide-planked, wooden porch. Here I often bathed my dolls and played with clay. Permanents were given, and shoes were polished. Peas were shelled, and beans were snapped. Fresh pork and beef were cut and wrapped annually on the porch. Work stopped, and all of us ran to the back porch when we heard the whistle of a tugboat pushing barges on the river. Late in the afternoon when chores were done, the blacks gathered on the back porch in old wooden chairs and talked of life. They let me sit with them. Their language, their music, their humor, their fears, and their sorrows were an education for me. This special privilege was an unforgettable life experience.

Relaxation, conversation, daydreaming, and deep thinking were saved for the front porch. The four large, green, wooden rocking chairs with their thick cane seats and wide arms seemed to welcome and encourage time to stand still. Ancient oak trees cooperated by providing continuous shade, making the front porch the coolest spot in the farmhouse on those hot, humid, summer days in North Louisiana. I recall spending many an afternoon stretched across one of the old painted rockers with my head resting on one arm and my legs dangling over the other arm--a perfect fit, as if the chairs, with their arms for boundaries, were created as a special and secure place just for me. Juggling my book to just the right position for reading as I ate my moon pie was an acquired skill. I never could master drinking a glass of milk in my molded position, but the cool slim-bottled Grapette, slowly being sipped through the white paper straw, seemed a natural. The sounds of nature could, and frequently would, interrupt my reading. Nature provided entertainment. Locating a singing bird became a game of hide and seek. Watching the red squirrels play chase made me laugh. The visits of the bumble bee to different flowers sparked my curiosity. Nature also provided me with a preferred amusement which came from the trees. Intriguing shadows formed by the branches, the leaves, and the hanging moss on the trees created wonderful patterns on the freshly painted walls and floor of the front porch. These patterns, like a kaleidoscope, were constantly changing. Watching the shadows change patterns was like watching a magic show--a thing of beauty suddenly becomes a monster and then is somehow friendly once again. Countless hours were spent in the world of fantasy and magic that the shadows had created. Once engaged in the magical movement of pattern and light, I was captivated until the shadows vanished completely from the walls and the floor of the front porch. I knew they would be back tomorrow, different, but the shadows would return. The ritual of my simple and uncomplicated life on the front porch continued until I heard my name being called, "Come wash your face and hands, supper is almost

ready." My movement out of the comfortable spot in the rocking chair was almost always tempered by the most recent journey my senses had embarked upon. I left the front porch a different and wiser child than when I had entered it earlier in the day. On summer evenings after my bath, I returned to the front porch. Watching the sun go down and the stars appear was a daily ritual I enjoyed with my family. After sundown, we often listened to the radio from our rocking chairs on the porch, unless a neighbor came for a visit. A visit meant that hot coffee with fresh cow's cream and homemade chocolate cake with real butter icing were served. Neighbors' visits were important. These visits helped link folks to life outside themselves. News of babies being born and weddings being planned was always welcome. Talk of war and failure of crops were conversations of a more serious nature. Heavy rains during the year prompted conversation about the Ouachita River flooding the area, and the necessary preparations that must be made to protect one's livelihood. News of someone dying was a subject that united the entire community. Funerals were a solemn affair, but social as well. When tragedy occurred, folks shared at a level not always evident at any other time. Happenings on the front porch affected me at a deep level. My being was molded, somehow, through events I thought natural in my daily life.

The porch--big or small, front or back, built long ago or yesterday--is a passing scene of nature and humanity recorded in the history of my life.

Sylvia L. Tucker

Good-bye to Texas

This train scratches the underside of this sky
and screams against our dumb good-byes
as you leave me hard on the ground.
Steeled above me with your heart inside
you hold your paper truths beside you.
Some are stories of old-time heroines
in the boots and hats of bad movies
where you laugh at the old clichés
like my very tears.

Will you teach students in your classes
what you take from here
in your black robe
signifying all things necessary.
Will New York girls comb their heavy hair
under neon signs
and wave before they come to you each day.

Black wheels spin your face into dust
like hallucinations in older windows
and promised meeting places I can't find
in books or maps near here.

Diane Lehmiller

Barnes Poetry Award

Silence

Gold shimmers upon
turquoise wavelets as we skim
across the big lake

they call Hopatcong.
No one sees the breeze, but each
knows that sails billow

from blustery winds that
force the catamaran through
darkening water,

not from the skilled hand
of our helmsman. The sun sinks
behind willow fringed

ridges of dark pines
rising to meet pink-edged clouds.
The wind puffs us close

to weathered planking
bleached pale by sun and water.
Silence is shattered

by gunwales scraping
against pier pilings. Ropes fly
out to clasp the rings

which hold us tightly
against the creaking white boards.
Silently we walk

away to join those
who never sail out beyond
their own horizons.

Donna Buesing

Observing a Mall

Window by window they glide in bubble-soled shoes
and tight-assed Levis
past penny-scattered baubles
beyond the Marine recruiter who looks to a few good men
and Little Miss America in tangerine lipstick
toward the sounds of Guns and Roses.

From noplac they come to trust
mirrors and big-screen televisions
returning silver-plated pictures of selves
gilded like fish in diamond-lined bowls.

Some surface toward creamy fudge and yogurt
selected by the ladies near Victoria's Secret.
For free these will tell the pressure of your blood
while the Grey Panthers perch in twos like cats
trusting nine lives
at fountains dreaming circles
by Disney.

Some pay for lemonade at Corn-Dog Seven
before looping again
past the pet shop
where domestic animals keep to cages.

Diane Lehmiller

Laundry

Fresh-brewed coffee stirs
sleeping forms.
Bodies slip apart,
retrieve steaming cups.
Early morning haze drifts into
Saturday. Chores. Laundry,
mowing, dishes. I still
remember the sweet smells
of clothes dried on the line.

Donna Buesing

Harvest

The Indians place seed in hollowed soil
bless it with ash
feed it fish
and cover the dwelling with airy loam.

Wind-walker of earth
the grain hides in graves
while affectionate gods
pour life in warm rains

Such is
the gypsy dancer
the Aztecs knew since time.
Spiraling Demeter
waltzing a tipsy line
from Oaxaca northward
to the Great Slave lake
she holds golden coins
under emerald skirts.

Such is
the magnificent youth
the Ojibwa send
into onyx earth--
a hero sailing
in coats of green and yellow
a tassled plume of waving feathers
every motion spinning
into the underworld.

Great Spirits
with bright silken hair
they come
spilling gifts of gold.

Diane Lehmiller

Pear Tree: An Awakening in Three Seasons

I watch its naked branches
Dance in icy wind.
Snow outlines it against dark clouds.
Its ice laden branches click
As cold breath whistles through empty boughs.
It makes shadows that scratch against my window.

I inhale the sweet heaviness
Of pollen swollen blossoms.
Tangy green rests in soft breezes
Carrying a warm golden smell
That makes me hungry.
I leave the window open.

I lean out to touch bark
That morning mist has made smooth.
Wet leaves kiss my hand and caress my face
As I reach for the ripened fruit.
My mouth waters as I pull the pear
in through the window.
I tremble when I bite
And let the juice of the warm fruit
Run down my face and stick to my chin.

Jakob Franzen

Changeling

The house was battered. Bare.
 Boards showed along naked
 eaves. Once it had been
 painted blue, then covered with
 white. In winter, it looked lonesome.
 Skeletal azalea bush fingers
 scratched and dug into its ribs,
 peeling back two layers of skin.
 The walk was overgrown with a
 border of monkey grass. Brown dirt
 with some sticks kept back the pale
 grass and chickweed. Porch swings
 were still, slat-backed chairs dusty.

In March there was a transformation.
 The boards were still bare, the paint
 still chipped, but the fuchsia azaleas
 gave it a festive touch. Wild,
 untrimmed shrubs caressed columns.
 Wisteria curled tendrills into
 the air, seeking support from oaks
 near the corner. Pansies appeared
 behind the monkey grass and the walk
 seemed more inviting. On the porch
 an old couple were swinging, holding hands.

Donna Buesing

In Green Leaves

I remember a place, not too far from my house.
 I would sit there, hidden by the green leaves
 Of trees that would dance in the summer breeze.
 I would climb out to the highest limb and hang
 By only one hand so that I could feel my heart
 Beat hard and taste the dryness in my mouth.

I threw china berries at small rodents
 As they scurried beneath fallen brush.
 My treehouse was above it all, a place to watch.
 I propped my feet on the side and counted ants
 As they marched in single file down the trunk of the tree.

The road doesn't go there any more and the trees have
 Taken what once was mine and hidden it within green leaves.

Jakob Franzen

Apples

Here is a basket of apples
like the fluorescent mirage of my fifteenth autumn
when the New England wind cut my eyes
and whipped petticoats into confections of net--
when I trusted the ends of avenues
and silos of secret food.

In a laddered room I warmed myself with words of Browning
and sweaters of angora wool
like silken hair of old women combed for eternity.
Late night dreamed schools of males
in blue Fords humming like oak violins
and day-yellow sun turned me from my student's lamp
to a hundred dazzling surprises that burned
when I licked ice cream on Sunday afternoon
and worshipped my algebra teacher.

Wanting more than rainwater to drink
I learned to drive my father's car
from a city street to gilded orchards
in the hills near Salem.
I left streaks in hard roads
where boys filled jugs with cider
and baskets with cold red apples
like some I eat today.

Diane Lehmiller

Saint Anne's School

I always picture Saint Anne's when the air is filled with smoke like incense. Hartford had no ordinances against burning in the 50s, and the smoldering leaves always signalled to us kids another beginning. Colder air also covered newer things in a season of orange and red. Each September, I owned one new dress, red plaid with pleats in the skirt, an extravagance in my mother's household of five children. My brothers and I also babied our clean red notebook--the kind with the Chief on the cover. I thought the Indian was a Connecticut god. We also cherished the not-yet-rusty glossy black lunch kits with mom's very good tuna sandwiches inside, portable love on Catholic Fridays. Never would I trade my lunch--even with Huguette Ducharme, my best friend.

At school each morning, my brothers and their lunch kits would disappear into the boys' schoolyard and not surface again until four in the afternoon. My sister Laurie and I would keep to the girls'. There were separate boys and girls lunchrooms also. Both playgrounds were stern, hard-topped affairs with no grass, tough-surfaced for jump-ropes and scratched knees. An entire brick school building separated the two yards. Confined to a female world, then, I would attach myself, always the runt in the litter, to a group of silly girls hovering about Madeleine Coté, a saccharine girl with pipe curls and pink ribbons and lace dresses. The sisters were crazy about Madeleine, and I knew one reason was that Madeleine's mother (who was not having babies all the time) was always taking the nuns places in her car. In the yard, we girls would occasionally circle the less-forbidding sisters on patrol and talk to them.

The good sisters, Les Filles du Saint Esprit, which translated as "The Daughters of the Holy Ghost," would patrol the schoolyard to make sure we kids behaved. I began to suspect that this meant we would not talk about boys. These women looked like Sally Field in The Flying Nun except that their wimples (the things on their heads) were not starched outward like wings but rather hung down like rigid white planks that curved inward to their shoulders. The rest of their outfits consisted of long skirts, (layers of them), and long-sleeved tunics. These women wore white habits because, as the sisters explained, they were "Brides of Christ." They also wore wedding rings like our mothers' to symbolize this mystically bigamistic arrangement.

Most of the sisters took the names of saints--usually men's names--like Joseph and Mark and Luke and John and Peter and Andrew. I wondered why Christ would want a male spouse. Some sisters, however, did claim female names, like Sister Lucy, a newcomer from France.

I loved Sister Lucy. At the time, I could not analyze why she appealed to me but I know now that what I saw was a human being under the wimple. The only sister in my child's world who defied abstractions, like the one about loving all enemies. First, Sister Lucy actually loved men and second Sister Lucy openly hated Adolph Hitler. I still hear her curse "les pois," and I still translate "pois" first to mean German soldiers instead

of "peas," which is what the word really means. Sister Lucy wanted to tear real pea-green men limb from limb. Nevertheless, I remember most of our sisters to be of an other-worldly ilk. Whenever I had to pass before each one of these good sisters, I was taught to bow my head and say in French: "Excusez-moi ma soeur." I was learning my place.

Phyllis Chagnon told me the sisters had purchased our school, an officially-condemned building, for a single dollar from the city, but I knew better. I was sure Father Routhier had paid for the place and had hired the women to work for him. Saint Anne's was old even then. The school took up a city block in an area of stores and houses around Park Street--an urban setting not at all uncomfortable to descendants of residents of Paris and Montreal. Unlike the citizens of Paris, however, most of our families had tons of kids.

The building was yellow brick and the windows gleamed like blue sky. The nuns corralled us to wash them each Friday with a soap called "Bon Ami." Some weeks the boys washed; some weeks the girls washed. We never worked together. In fact, the sisters tactically exploited "extra credit" for coercion. We earned rewards (glue-on stars) for scrubbing, reciting poetry, going to Mass (a biggie), memorizing times tables, singing at funerals and other activities. By the time I had reached the eighth grade, I knew the *Dies Irae* Latin funeral chant by heart, I could wash windows, I knew math by rote, and I mixed it all up together. The bulletin boards inside the classes displayed our names in alphabetical order with glorious red, gold, and silver stars assigned to names in proportion to our good deeds--somewhat like indulgences.

The inside of our building, cave-like, held dark-wooded and enormous rooms. The place had a mystical edge. The "cloak rooms," alcoves with hooks on the walls to put our coats, were wonderful hiding places. On one occasion when it must have been -20 outside, Sister Edmund ordered me to one of these rooms to put on my leggings so the boys in the classroom would have no chance of seeing me lift my skirt. (When it was bitter, we girls were allowed to wear pants--but only under our dresses!)

The Sisters of the Holy Ghost instructed us well in all disciplines. Teaching English to us as our second language, they made us diagram what appeared to be the entire English language. And they monitored what we learned. Our books were censored with a mark of "imprimatur" on the front. I remember this, incorrectly I am certain, as the "imprimatur protest." Our history books resounded with allusions to great Catholic heroes like Saint Isaac Jogues and Father Louis Joliet, Jesuit explorers of the New World. These same books gracefully omitted Galileo and the Borgias. I absorbed the curriculum and learned how to please. I always got "A"s on essays because I wrote about how much I wanted to be a Sister of the Holy Ghost, an idea I thought looked great on paper for Sister Edmund who was the champion recruiter. These were my first exercises in writing fiction.

But what I remember most is the unreal aura of the place combined with no-nonsense discipline. When I was about thirteen, I

committed an awful crime. Sister Saint-John cornered me when I was talking in the hallway to Thomas Boucher. Thomas and I were queued up in separate lines for our separate lunch rooms with our separate tuna fish sandwiches. Her comment to me was, "Talking in line! How dare you! and to a BOY!" It is my understanding that dangerous Thomas is now a Franciscan father. These tactics left only the most virtuous students--me among them, of course. The nuns banished all other "discipline problems" into the nether-nether world of public school. The kids who left Saint Anne's in disgrace went to Domenic F. Burns public school, a modern, airy, glassy structure located in a large green park.

In class, we survivors listened to endless lives of saints (in French); I learned the Baltimore Catechism (in French); I prayed (in French); I spoke mentally to an angel on my shoulder, otherwise known as my guardian angel, (in French). I thought he was a male angel who looked like Maurice Chevalier. I wasn't sure what was real, or in English, or on Earth. The regular lessons like geography and math were taught in English. Every thirty minutes or so an appointed and favored student like Madeleine Cote would ring a little bell and we would pause to utter something (in French) like "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, pray for us!" These repetitive and intrusive devotions were called ejaculations. (I am not kidding.)

The most fearful occasions were our encounters with Father Routhier, an ascetic, elderly priest. Once a month, the sisters herded us into the church next-door where we would confess our sins to him. All we kids were terrified by having to reveal our major transgressions, like wishing (as bad as actually doing the deed) to see a movie banned by the legion of decency. Father would sometimes lecture us on the threat of film to our morals when he came to instruct us (in French) for Confirmation or when he came to give out report cards. The sisters fluttered at us for hours before he appeared, somber, stern, and exuding my conception of Yaweh. I was in awe. So were the good sisters. But Father Routhier always held his alter boys in his absolutely top esteem, all males sharing God's inner sanctum.

During my years from age five to thirteen in this paradoxical place, I learned some real things, and I also learned that God spoke French, that He was (is) most probably male (all males being somewhat difficult to approach) and that He was most likely hanging out in the boys' schoolyard. I also suspected that I was wasting my new red dress each year in the girls' schoolyard, and I wasn't sure whether I really should care.

Diane Lehmillier

Carneval

Debunk
 Debunk
 Debunk the myth of the monk!
 One celibate would celebrate,
 Then, loads of vermicelli ate
 With Parmesan, the old paesan
 Would soon proceed to tie one on
 And, in his quest for funnery,
 Shout "Get me to a nunnery!"

"For Bacchus was raucous, but I'm sublime."

Beth Nelson

de Schweinitz Poetry Award

A Few Mementos of My Grandmother's Life

Here is a trunk of old things, a sturdy corset,
 fabric confections and a picture,
 likely an ad for the perfect coiffure
 of the turn of the century.
 All come straight from the brown time of Victoria
 when my grandfather could look to hell
 hiding gaily in photos like this one
 of a girl with wondrous bottom
 unfit for flimsy seams.
 The photo-image, a tintype, faces me like Godiva
 behind curtains of hair
 spilling light over flesh
 never seen in my grandmother's Canadian town.
 This feminine guise might have tempted such
 boys as my father
 away from church or from Trollope
 into Victorian boudoirs.

I suspect this paper world beyond my grandmother's
 girdling like a human whale in stolen bones.
 She kept baptismal gowns,
 miniature wedding dresses
 for babies who would never live to marry.
 She bore twelve children and my father
 who tells of her red hair and making of garments
 for eternity
 like her wedding dress.
 She tried the fit six times
 after each season of a living child
 to hold still her past
 --just as she expected her copper hair
 would never grey.
 As so she guards her treasures
 and the image beneath the lace.

Diane Lehmillier

When the sun is down
 The Buddha sits, cross-legged, on an outspread lotus
 In the light of the oil-lamp
 The vespers go on
 Wafting to a strange shining island
 Where everything is cool and transparent:
 Rocks, women, and skeletons
 Where even lotuses, you think, must be made of silence

The crickets keep chirping still
 For a moment you feel
 If nobody comes to talk about ghosts with you tonight
 You would just explode
 And blow everything, the Buddha and all
 Into a shining island

Xinmin Fan

On Broadway

Tourists from just outside the city do not look
 at the women who keep 42nd Street in bags
 like Pandoran boxes
 of orange marquees and yellow-seamed signs
 proclaiming Buddy Holly and opera's phantoms--

--in bags
 like closets of electronic lights
 coaxing chorus girls from Queens into pastel portraits.

These mad hag-satchels scare grey New Yorkers
 into taxis
 while porn queens, preachers, and guys in drag prance Broadway
 like young girls in Vegas.

Inside their homing sacks
 the crazy ones brush away the smokes from nomad fires
 struck by bellowing vendors in fat voices
 and doomcasting preachers--
 multiple Oliviers turned red and black
 at the edges of the Wintergarten Theater

where matrons from blue front lawns in tight-laced boots
 pry coins from purses for cheesecake from Lindsey's
 and tickets to shows.

Diane Lehmler

Chrystal Shards

Noah's wife to Terah, son of Shem

These clouds now hurl God's wrath upon His earth
and see our band drift out with beasts and birds
to where we might find rest. A home. To live,
to multiply. Crystal shards falling fast,
without regard for man or beast. Crushing

heads of daffodils, slicing gentle
violets, ripping dandelion
pods. Still it cascades down upon
the land. First sludge, then puddles, cascading
rivers, seas, then oceans full of wetness.

First Hamm then Japheth, finally Shem stand by
and watch as friends cry out begging mercy.
The fragile breath of life is choked away
by crystal shards never ceasing, falling
down and down until the floodgates close,

then slowly it recedes. We see
shards pooled together near the spot
the Lord has given us to live. Each species
wobbles from the ark to step upon
firm land. A covenant is struck to prove

God's word is true until eternity.
Clouds appear, a bow of promise follows.
Terah, remember what you see and hear
for your descendants will bear fruit and spread
across these desert lands until time ends.

Donna Buesing

Pulse Fiction Award

Blackout

Camille admitted it; she was in love with the idea of marriage, always had been. When she vowed herself to Shane Melanson--that was two years ago this June--Camille had taken more pleasure in seeing the wedding, planned since age eleven, come off without a glitch than the sliding and pounding of her first night together with her husband. Shane's pickup, a compact white Toyota that smelled of Whataburgers and tobacco spittle, only reminded her of this truth. So did their trailer, parked on a muddy plot next to a marsh on the outskirts of town, and all the gadgets Shane put around himself like a great bubble of static. But two years ago, Shane had a ring, a full-time job at a tire store and a cute butt, so she married him.

Certainly, other boys had been sweet on her, boys who drove drop-top Mustangs and big Chevy pickups, who wore oxford shirts and Duckhead slacks, but all of them had gone off to college. Camille had never wanted to go to college; it scared her. Her fear wasn't that she didn't have the brains, but that she would have to rely on more than her looks, and Camille's beauty had always taken care of her. More than anything, she valued security.

The brakes on Shane's pickup whined and squealed in damp weather, and tonight there was a hellacious thunderstorm lashing the town. Camille wouldn't have been out in the storm on the slick and treacherous streets except that she had to get something to cook for supper. Shopping took 45 minutes because the grocery store was swollen with people, all of whom were like her, wondering why everyone didn't stay the hell home with it bad outside, and that threw her late picking up Shane from work.

He was standing in his coveralls under the awning by the garage, squinting against the wind and rain, when she arrived. Sometimes Camille almost didn't recognize Shane from a distance. He was 30 pounds heavier than when they'd first met, and although he carried the weight well, it made him look so much different, so solid, like a firmly rooted tree that has all the branches it will ever have.

Camille parked in front of him, and he opened the passenger door.

"What took so damn long?" he complained. When Shane got irritated, his voice sounded like the brakes of his truck, and Shane was irritated most of the time.

Camille motioned to the three bags of groceries on the floorboard. "I had to stop by the store."

"Shit," he spat and slammed the passenger door. He dashed around to the driver's side and told Camille to push over. She obliged him, sitting sideways on the seat, one foot tucked under her, the other dangling by the stick shift, and with polkadots of rain spotting his coveralls, Shane slid under the wheel.

"How'd it go?" Camille asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Same old shit, different day," he replied and turned on the CD player she had given him for Christmas last year. Country twang filled the small cab.

"My day was fine; thanks for asking," Camille said.

"Don't start with me tonight."

"What's your deal?"

"My deal is I'm tired and I don't feel like getting into it with you."

"Then stop hollering at me."

"I ain't hollering."

"You're raising your voice."

"Camille, drop it right now."

"I don't want to drop it."

"This conversation is ending right now, do you understand me?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm a child."

"Stop acting like one."

Camille clenched her fists and a burn spread across her cheeks, so hot it made her eyes itch. Turning on her seat, she faced forward and put her feet on the floorboard, around the bags full of groceries. She was letting Shane do it to her again, drag her into a fight and then cut it off before she could say what was on her mind. It was his way of letting off pressure, she realized; but knowing that didn't make it hurt any less. For the rest of the trip home, Camille watched the skies darken.

The trailer was plain enough to be trashy, but clean and well-kept. Camille had laid down a soil border around it and planted shrubs in the ground and put curtains in the windows to give the place dignity. She sank most of the money she earned as a receptionist at a Ford dealership into furnishing the trailer. She tried to counter the drabness with colorful things all around--throw pillows in soft shades of blue and yellow, afghans she knitted herself, pictures of bluebonnets and tulips and butterflies. Camille wished she had more brass things other than Shane's spittoon and a pair of lamps, but finances were keeping her from getting the telephone stand, baker's rack and other things she wanted.

Shane spent his throw-away money on electronic entertainment. He had a 27-inch television with a picture-in-picture insert, so he could watch more than one sporting event at once, a stereo system complete with CD player, a VCR and a Nintendo. On the endtable closest to his chair sat a 16-channel scanner and a CB radio. He was currently saving up for a satellite dish, which he hoped to get some time in the next year.

Enclosed in his haven of airwaves, Shane stretched out on his vinyl recliner wearing only boxer shorts. There were two basketball games on TV, a Garth Brooks CD playing on the stereo and police calls on the scanner. Shane lay motionless, arms folded behind his head, three remote controls on his chest. Camille looked at him from the kitchen where she was frying tortillas for chicken enchiladas and watched his belly rise and fall, just to assure herself that he was still breathing.

"Why don't you take a shower before we eat?" Camille called to him.

"I'm alright," he said.

"You're liable to catch cold as wet as you got."

"I ain't gonna get sick."

"You will if you don't take a warm shower and put on some clothes."

Shane popped the footrest of his chair down, reached to the couch for an afghan and covered himself from the waist down. Without another word he tilted the recliner back and aimed the remote at the stereo to turn up the volume.

Camille stole a dip of Shane's Skoal every now and then, whenever Shane was listening to the police channel and the calls for ambulances or helicopters to whisk away accident victims were aired. Just the tone of the officer's voice made Camille worry and say a silent prayer, but when the details were given, if they were horrible enough, she got a pinch from Shane's can. The tobacco never agreed with her, but it usually settled her down.

Storms always meant bad wrecks, and tonight the reports coming over the police frequency were of a three-car pile up on Cardinal Drive. The officer on the scene requested the jaws of life to cut a woman out of her van, then asked for the rescue helicopter from the hospital.

After that, Camille stopped grating cheese for the enchiladas and left the kitchen. She went into the bedroom, found Shane's can of Skoal in his still damp coveralls and stuffed the wintergreen-flavored tobacco in the pocket of her mouth, between the cheek and gum.

It was on her way back to the kitchen that the power blinked off, just like that, no juice. Shane groaned and cursed and the sound of the rain whipping against the trailer filled the quiet that followed.

Camille waited for her eyes to adjust before she retreated to the bathroom to find a candle.

"Did you get batteries when you went to the store?" Shane called out.

Not answering him, she groped around on the dresser for the votive cup she kept on it. There was a book of matches in her nightstand; she got them and lit the wick.

"Did you hear me? Did you get batteries when you went to the store?"

Holding the votive cup in front of her, Camille walked into the living room. "No, I didn't think of it."

"Wonderful. It didn't occur to you that the lights might go out?"

Camille found Shane's spittoon and spat all of the tobacco into it. Then she set the votive cup on the coffee table and took a seat on the couch. She said, "My mind was on getting out of the store, so I could pick you up from work."

"I told you I don't like you dipping."

"Maybe if you'd stop, I'd stop."

"Now we can't listen to the radio to see what the weather's gonna do," he said, his voice taking on that piss-and-moan quality that made her skin crawl.

"There aren't batteries in the jambox already?" she asked.

"No, you used em all up when you went to the beach last summer."

"I used them?"

"That's right."

"I don't recall seeing you plug your ears while the thing was playing your CDs."

"I'll have to run to the store and get some batteries," Shane said, pulling the afghan off his legs and lowering the chair's footrest.

"You're going out in this rain?" Camille asked.

"There's no telling how long the lights are gonna be out." Shane got to his feet and started for the bedroom. Camille followed.

"It's too dangerous to drive, Shane."

"I can drive myself into town just fine, thank you."

"You're just gonna leave me here by myself?"

"You can come if you want to."

"I don't want to get out in this weather. It's too dangerous."

"Fine then, stay home."

They were in the bedroom now and Shane was searching through the chest of drawers. He stepped into a pair of sweat pants, slipped on a t-shirt and found his wallet on the dresser.

He jangled his keys and Camille sighed. She knew better than to try to talk Shane out of something once his mind was made up, and he was dead-set now. The only choices were to stay by herself or go with him, but the rain was falling harder, crashing down against the hull of the trailer; she could sense the storm thick in the air. Camille didn't want to go out. All she wanted was someone to hold her and talk softly to her, tell her it was going to be alright, that the storm would pass and the lights would come back on and connect them with the rest of the world.

But Shane didn't say anything as he left the bedroom. Camille fell into step behind him on the way to the back door.

"What do you want to do about supper?"

Shane opened the door and turned toward her. "When the power comes back on, it'll finish cooking."

"What if the power doesn't come back on for a while?"

"For crying out loud, Camille!"

Shane pointed the key out in front of him, ready to stick it in the hole it fit, and dashed to his truck, the rain pummeling him. Camille went to the doorway and watched him get into the cab. The engine started and he backed out the gravel driveway. Bad thoughts leaped and spun in her mind, and she scolded herself for thinking them. Shane would make it back alright; the cold front would continue east into Louisiana, or better yet, head south into the warm air of the Gulf and break apart over the ocean.

Camille shut the door and went to search for the can of Skoal.

The lights were still out when Shane returned from the store, but the rain was easing and the sound of it dripping from the roof of the trailer

made Camille languid. She rested on the couch, twisting her hair around her fingers.

Shane came inside holding a plastic bag and wiped his feet on the mat. "Power ain't back on yet?"

Camille replied, "Isn't that obvious?"

Shane muttered something under his breath, then went into the bedroom and came back with his jambox tuned to the weather station. He sat on his recliner.

The radio reported that the storm was moving out of the area, east toward Lake Charles, and that temperatures would be cooler in the morning. After the five day forecast, Shane changed the station.

"The power wouldn't go out as much if we lived in an apartment," Camille said.

"I ain't throwin' away money on rent."

"A townhouse, then."

"Are you kidding? I couldn't crank up my stereo because of the neighbors."

"A small house?"

"I can't afford a house anywhere but the bad part of town. It's not safe there."

"I just hate this trailer. I hate living out in the sticks."

"Well, it's all we have."

"Then we don't have much."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Shane got that tone in his voice again.

"It means you're right. This is all we have and we'll never have more."

"Are you trying to say that this isn't enough for you?"

Camille sat up and tied her hair in a ponytail with her hand, then let it fall back in place. "I'm just saying that if two people don't get closer, then they get further apart."

"And you think moving out of this trailer will bring us closer together?"

"No, I think if you knew me better, if we were closer, you'd understand how much I hate this freaking place."

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I believe we picked out this trailer before the wedding. Did you hate this 'freaking place' then?"

"I figured it was just temporary until we could save up for a down payment on a house. But we haven't saved anything. I just feel like we're stuck here."

"That's why they call it settling down, Camille."

"Well, I'm still a young woman. I'm not done growing yet and we're not growing together."

Shane asked, "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop treating our marriage like you do your truck."

"Do what?"

"When you first bought it, you washed it twice a week. You checked the oil; you vacuumed it. Now the thing gets a ding in it and you don't

even notice."

"I don't even know what the hell you're talking about."

"Yeah, and that's just the problem, Shane. You and I don't speak the same language."

There was a lilt in her voice from the buoyancy of her words, the truth in them. Shane sighed and threw up his hands. She wished he would say something and that it would be something hateful, to make her feel better for admitting the truth to herself.

But in that moment, the lights came back on, rushing into the trailer like air into a bubble, the television screen a gray curtain of static, the clock on the VCR blinking, the stereo blaring music, the scanner reporting a hold up of a convenience store.

Shane reached for his remote controls and began adjusting clocks and volumes and channels.

Camille went to the door and opened it, breathed deeply of the stormy air, folded her arms and waited for the rain to stop.

Mark Bankston