



PULSE

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Awards

Eleanor Poetry Award for best poem overall
Beverly Williams "Paper Trail"

Barnes Poetry Award for best poem in traditional form
Beverly Williams "It was Sufficient"

de Schweinitz Poetry Award for best poem in open form
Brian Herrington "For a Long-haired Singer"

Rowe Poetry Award chosen by *Pulse* staff
Gayla Chaney "Lillie's Mayhaw Jelly"

Pulse Fiction Award for best short fiction
Mike Dunklin "Wings and Wheels"

Pulse Essay Award for best essay
A. June Metreyeon "Help! My Daughter Has a
Phone Growing Out of Her Ear."

Honorable Mention - Short Fiction
Daniel Bartlett "Closure"

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Eleanor Poetry Award

Paper Trail

Upon this page lies a dangerous poem.
How do I know? I am Detective Quill,
Papyrucide, Pen and Ink Division.
It started years ago. You know the story—
middle-aged woman, grown kids, bored with life.
She wakes up one morning with this wild notion,
decides she wants a degree in English,
enrolls at Lamar, studies lit., then takes
a creative writing class in poetry.
Why? Who knows her motive? Well, anyway,
she killed reams of clean, white paper, depleted
half the forest of southeast Texas, wasted
miles of typewriter ribbon and correctape.
At least she didn't insult her computer.
I've seen better work by second graders.
All the muses on Helicon couldn't
help this one. It took some work, but we finally
got a line on her. She gave it away
with "Spring Patchwork," and with Sergeant Nib's help
(he's a sharp one) we caught her lead-handed.
She wasn't surprised, just amazed that it
took us so long. The evidence was all there—
typed, dated, and filed in the order written.
It was an open and shut case wrapped up
in a neat package. She didn't protest
but seemed relieved that it was all over.
Her lawyer, Bic Sheaffer, will plead her case
in Waterman's court, guilty I understand.
His Honor is lenient with first offenders.
Well, I guess that about wraps it up. Hey, Nib!
How about a nightcap? A shot of thick,
inky black stuff might smooth a ruffled feather.
It's been a long, hard day. Close up and let's go.

Beverly Williams

Barnes Poetry Award

It Was Sufficient

A fresh-plowed field raked clean of rock and weed
Lay waiting for the one who tilled its rows
To fill its emptiness with vine and seed
For reaping in the fall before the snows.
His crops of previous years had bloomed and borne
Abundantly, attesting to his skill.
He worked in hot, still air from early morn,
A testimony to his strength of will.
But no rain came to moisten sun-dried ground.
With water buckets full, he slowly trod
The rows and gently showered every mound
With life-sustaining nectar made by God.
When meager harvest straitened winter living
And snows were deep, his voice conveyed thanksgiving.

Beverly Williams

de Schweinitz Poetry Award

For a Long-haired Singer
(For L. Demons)

A long-haired singer I know
Has countless words
In the lining of his coat-
Words about last summer,
About loving a cruel girl,
About a relationship that racked
And tortured the calendar's count,
About his father teaching him always
To admire a chesty woman,
About books he'll read
When time is kinder to him,
Words that he assumes
No one else will be interested in,
Words that slap migraines
Right through the epicenter
Of his mental state.
Words that
Words that
Words that he never says.
But I think
Sometimes
He sings them.

Brian Herrington

Rowe Poetry Award

Lillie's Mayhaw Jelly

Lillie sells mayhaw jelly at a roadside stand, because everybody needs a little extra cash now and then.

Still, the highway's not as safe as it once was, which makes selling jelly less fun and more work. Nowadays, it requires

wariness and suspicion, and the added skills of noting license plates from other states, or strangers stopping to buy.

They pick up a jar or two, eyeballing the glass like gemstone inspectors. It causes Lillie's heart to beat a little

faster than she thinks it should. What a world when just selling jelly could cause a cardiac arrest! She thinks

maybe next year she won't pick the berries. No reason to be here without jelly to sell. Who needs the danger

of sitting on the roadside, under a worn tarp with all those cars whizzing by? And her handpainted sign, spelling

Mayhaw Jelly, with its big red letters, can be kindling in winter, for all that she cares... but the berries grow wild,

and when they're in season, her fingers itch to pick them for free. Add sugar and cook, and they turn into money.

Lillie thinks there might be some other solution. Surely God wouldn't want her to leave fruit unpicked,

to ripen and rot, just due to fear. It seems like a sin, like flushing good money down the commode.

Lillie remembers her dead husband's shotgun. It's loaded and hidden, under her bed. She'll ask one of the twins to

saw off the barrel so aiming the thing won't be all that hard for a grandma whose vision has weakened with age.

Cover it up with one of her afghans or rig it with string to pull on the trigger, should the cash box be moved

from its regular place. God forbid, she should need it, but it's best to prepare for the worst, just in case....

Lillie smiles to herself as she thinks of her jelly. Best in the country, most folks agree.

No telling how many jars she could put up if the grandkids would help with the picking next summer.

There's money to make off of folks passing through. Perhaps, she should move her sign nearer

the freeway, where traffic is heavy, and she's sure to be seen. Lillie knows, if the weather is good

and her health keeps on holding, she could sell lots more jelly and make a real killing.

Gayla Chaney

Wings and Wheels

Bobbi Jo Mullins checked her face in the mirror one last time before her last flight from Dallas to Tyler. Though she felt haggard and wrung out like a used dish rag, the face in the mirror looked tanned and confident, younger than it's late thirty-something actual mileage. She said aloud her own personal mantra of things to do and ways to act, as she reapplied lipstick and just a hint of make-up.

"Smile," she said, watching the red lipstick appear on the full lips of her image in the mirror. "Be calm even if a wing falls off," she puckered and added, "listen actively to your passenger, even if you're in the process of throwing the drunken son-of-a-bitch off the plane."

She smiled. She liked what she saw. Even though being a flight attendant on a commuter feeder was a definite demotion, if she could hang in there three more years she'd have some kind of a pension. There were other pluses. The plane dead-ended at Tyler's Pounds Field, which was home. There was also no drinking or smoking on the flight, which was fine with her, because the Lockheed 220's cabin was so small one cigarette would probably asphyxiate both passengers and crew. Her personal weight requirements were a little more relaxed, though her normal eating habits still consisted of one long diet occasionally broken by pigging out at a fancy restaurant with whatever passing male had managed to attract her attention. Bobbi straightened her red, white and blue scarf as she looked critically in the mirror.

"Damn!" she muttered looking down, there was a smudge on her navy blue pant leg. She moistened a paper towel and repaired the damage. She studied the shine on her expensive black loafers. Stupid, she thought, how something so mundane as shoes could change the course of your life.

She remembered old Doctor Morrow sadly shaking his head and agreeing with the company doctor. "You've got hammer toes so bad, it's a wonder you can walk. How high a heel do you wear?" He had asked, his grey eyes looking sad and only a little condescending behind his black framed

glasses, still treating her like she was a twelve-year-old. He had rolled his eyes when she told him and sadly said, "That's why you're having the back pain too. My advice is take the demotion and hang onto your pension. That's what they really want to do, dump you and hang onto your money till you're age sixty-five."

"Sixty-two." She had smiled, politely corrected him.

"Whatever." He had griped. He had paused for a second and pushed the glasses up on his head and carefully read all the rest of her chart, his mouth moving as he read. He then looked into her eyes, not bothering to lower his glasses.

"You gonna come see this old man, once all this H.M.O nonsense goes into effect?" Doc asked.

He's being crowded out too, Bobbi suddenly thought. Bobbi didn't know what to say, so she said nothing and made a sort of non-committal nod. Then Doc had looked at Bobbi squarely and snapped, "And stay the hell off of those tanning beds."

Now everytime she looked at her round toed, flat loafers, she thought of old Dr. Morrow and hoped she could hang on just three more years. She bolted out of the bathroom, down the narrow aisle, down the ramp and onto the Dallas tarmac. She could see the shuttle bus on the way, winding its way through parked aircraft like a serpent in a henhouse. Bobbi Jo felt a steady breeze blowing, throwing minute amounts of dust in her face. Bobbi felt grateful she had her long, brown hair pulled back and fastened with a ribbon, behind the nape of her neck. She suddenly remembered the longer overseas flights, when every hour or two she had had to dash into a restroom and touch up her makeup. Bobbi had always arrived haggard, worn-out, but painted up just fine, beaming at the cabin door, "Thank you, come fly with us again..."

The bus snorted to an pneumatic stop. Passengers began disembarking. Bobbi went into the same spiel she had blathered out a zillion times, smiling so hard she thought her face would crack. She scanned the sparse commuter crowd, mostly composed of returning business-

men going back home to Tyler. Bobbi always looked for three things; first for obvious nut cases, which spelled trouble, secondly for drunks which were trouble of a different sort, and finally for fun-loving, free-spending men which sometimes were a trouble worth attracting. She no longer looked for Mr. Right to show up on board. She had three times chosen Mr. Wrong, big time. Her last husband had flown the coop with a secretary half his age and left her with a whopping mortgage payment and a collection of spike heels that Imelda Marcos would have envied but which Bobbi could no longer even wear.

Except when my feet are in the air, Bobbi thought glumly.

Bobbi surveyed the manifest one last time. She was one off. She was about to board and close the door when a tall, blonde-headed guy wearing khaki pants and a denim work-shirt under an expensive leather jacket bolted down the steps of the bus, swinging an equally expensive brief case. An oilman or builder returning from overseas, Bobbi guessed.

"Not so fast, we're not leaving without you," Bobbi lied and gave the man her best million dollar smile. He mumbled an apology, not looking up, but she felt an uneasy sense of familiarity. This didn't upset her too much. In her line of work, people popped back through her life with the regularity of subway riders.

She checked the manifest one last time, closed the door and reported to the pilot. Then she launched into her pre-takeoff mime. The airlines had thoughtfully tape recorded the safety messages so Bobbi only pointed, gracefully mimicking Vanna White. The recording seemed to allow the passengers to pay even less attention to the fact that soon they would be traveling at high speeds in a high-tech egg shell, strapped into their seats, but still potential projectiles.

The warning chore done, Bobbi walked down the aisle, back to her jump seat, checking seat belts as she went. She dutifully checked all but the last three rows of seats when she noticed the blonde guy at the rear of the plane look out the window and into the evening sun. As the plane turned, reddish light flooded into the window, washing his face.

"Oh my God," Bobbi gasped, stepping past a tall, auburn-haired woman and an Indian girl seated side by side

in the next-to-last row. The woman looked up from kicking her boots off and smiled as Bobbi went past, though Bobbi didn't see.

"Al?" Bobbi said aloud. The man continued staring out the window. "Alvin," Bobbi said a bit louder.

The man turned as if his head were on a swivel. A surprised look came over his face. Bobbi stepped up to him. She looked down as he looked up.

"Bobbi?" He asked.

"It's the hair," Bobbi said, "I got tired of having it short."

He nodded. She stood there, rooted till the brakes jammed, and she almost fell in his lap. Though she wasn't supposed to, Bobbi sat in the empty seat beside Alvin and took his hand. As the engines shook and the brakes screeched then released and the plane began its take-off roll all she could think of was how hard and calloused his hands had become. She could feel her heart rolling with almost the frequency of the turboprops. She felt her spirit soar as the wheels lifted. All these years, she thought.

"Married?" She asked, hoping she didn't sound too anxious but not caring if she did.

"Not anymore," he replied without any bitterness, but a hint of faulted injury in his tone. He looked at her, measuring her with his eyes. His face had browned, but his hair seemed the same yellow cast she remembered. The same good-natured, easy smile spread across his face. He seemed exactly as she remembered him, the same since high school. She had loved him then, at least she thought she had. Almost twenty years had come and gone since she had gone to college, and he had been drafted and gone to war.

"You?" He asked, a slight shy smile, curling the corners of his mouth.

"What?" She felt blank; she knew what he asked but stalled for a second.

"Married?"

"Not anymore," she smiled, freely giving the essential information, holding back the hard facts of three marriages and three divorces, her own bitter lessons in how NOT to

chose a spouse. An electronic bell "bonged," simultaneously the little white seatbelt light popped off. Bobbi grasped Al's hand in both of hers.

"I gotta go do my duty to God and company," she said quickly, "I'll meet you at the baggage carousel. My flight ends here too."

He playfully patted her bottom as she got up. Bobbi wasn't offended at all, feeling grateful at any quick sign from him that her affection was still mutual. She whirled around, and yanked a pack of peanuts from her pocket and threw it at him. He caught the blue mylar packet, though he bobbed it up and down two times and almost dropped it.

"Still have the magic hands." She quipped, not referring to his skill as a tight end, but to his fumbling in the backseat when they made out twenty years ago. He grinned sheepishly. Bobbi turned to the auburn-haired woman, sitting beside a plumpish but cute Indian girl. In the cabin light Bobbi could see the white woman had a ton of freckles to go with her reddish cast of hair.

"Soft drink, peanuts?" Bobbi asked. The woman looked at the young girl, who must have been in her late teens. The girl shook her head. The woman looked back and shook her head as well, smiling a grin that almost cracked her freckled face.

I guess she approves of love, Bobbi thought. I hope it's not that transparent, she thought again. Doubt suddenly flooded in on her sense of well-being, putting the brakes on the soaring feeling of happiness. Suddenly Bobbi began to make out her game plan, playing the game she had learned from her mother, the not-so-subtle art of husband hunting. I want him, Bobbi thought suddenly, I'll do anything to get him. Bobbi silently made her plans as she handed out drinks and bags of peanuts, moving gracefully down the aisle as the plane traveled southeast from Dallas towards Tyler in the growing darkness of the Texas skies.

Tyler got an airport when the Army Air Force closed it's nearby B-17 training base following World War II. The place had barely been modified since the fifties. It remained one of the few airports in the country without any kind of approach radar. Still, Bobbi thought, it's home. Bobbi

stood at the cabin door and went through the motions of the smile and nod and "come fly with us again" P.R. spiel to a haggard and uncaring departing plane full of mostly business passengers. Only the freckle-faced woman had smiled knowingly at her, raising Bobbi's hackles a bit; for Bobbi got as edgy about overly friendly women on board as she did overly touchy men. But Bobbi nodded politely in return. The young Indian girl smiled at her too, nodding shyly. Bobbi wondered about that duo. Bobbi's instincts told her they were more than just traveling companions.

Bobbi raced to complete the end-of-trip chores. She took her checklist to the cabin. The bored, youngish captain of the flight released her. She dashed to what passed in Tyler for a baggage area--two small carousels.

The baggage had already started its circuit as Bobbi arrived. The auburn-haired woman stood between both Alvin and the Indian girl, carrying on a running conversation with both. She had a loud, East Texas voice that both grated on Bobbi and reminded her of her own mother.

"He'll be here soon, I promise, sweetie," the woman said to the girl. "Your Dad knows how to make an entrance." She winked as Bobbi walked up behind Alvin. "So how long you been out?" she asked Al, barely skipping a beat. She smiled as Al took Bobbi's hand and kissed Bobbi on the cheek. Bobbi had hoped for more, but later in private. Bobbi wasn't sure she liked public affection in the terminal. Public affection with a passenger was against company policy. But then everything short of breathing was against company policy.

"Six months." Alvin said, reaching over and grabbing a big green duffel stenciled Sgt. A. Y. Anderson. The woman began to reach for a tan bag of her own. Alvin quickly dropped his duffel at his feet and reached to help the freckle-faced woman. The woman lightly slapped Alvin's hand and grabbed the bag herself.

"Put those hands where they'll do some good, honey. I can handle this." The woman smiled.

"Daddy!" the young Indian girl screamed and bolted into the arms of a brown-faced obviously Indian looking

man that appeared from the eastern glass door of the tiny terminal. The chubby, young girl almost bowled her father over.

Bobbi could tell the girl was crying. I was dead wrong, Bobbi thought, they're a family. She was seeing a family reunion.

"Nice catch," the auburn-haired woman said, studying Al's good looks. "What bait did you use?"

"HUH?" Bobbi sputtered, not really sure she was being addressed and totally clueless at what the freckle-faced woman meant.

"Purple worms," Alvin answered for her, a humorous grin covering his face. He said goodbye to the woman and pulled Bobbi with him, his old service duffel looped over his left shoulder. Bobbi turned to say goodbye as well, thinking that, after all she had totally misread the woman. But the three of them, father, daughter and wife were now clenched in a three-way hug.

"Damn, I missed you, Molly," the man said, hugging the freckle-faced, auburn haired woman tightly.

God, if I can only have that, Bobbi half-prayed and half-talked to herself, I'll never ask for another thing. She knew that was a lie. But she comforted herself with that thought as she walked hand in hand with Al out of the terminal and into the darkness, toward her waiting car.

Mike Dunklin

Pulse Essay Award

Help! My Daughter Has a Phone Growing out of Her Ear!

Alexander Graham Bell: everyone had heard this name, but just in case you're from another planet, he invented the telephone. His name may be mentioned reverently in several textbooks but, as a mother, if I could travel back in time, I would wring his respected neck!

At the time of his invention, the world was a smaller and quieter place. How could Mr. Bell have possibly known that the telephone would become a new appendage for pre-teen and teenage girls?

My daughter, Sarah, is ten years old and has just entered her first year of middle school. Gone are the wonderfully innocent little girl days when her main concern was which cartoon to watch or whom to invite to her daily tea party. Now her main concern is whom she should call first and how much gossip she should tell her.

Just the other day, her father and I were sitting in the living room, patiently waiting for the school bus to bring her home. The new softball glove her father had ordered had finally arrived, and he was anxious to play catch with her. Finally the bus came! All of a sudden, the door burst open and a small streak of color zoomed through the living room, up the stairs, and landed with a loud whoosh on the upstairs sofa. The wind sheer from this strange phenomenon nearly tore the eyelashes off our faces! When we finally recovered, Sarah's father and I could hear a loud, incessant buzz, as if a thousand mosquitos were hovering over our heads. This drone was interrupted periodically by loud squeals and silly giggles. Could this possibly have been our sweet little girl?

As I was walking upstairs to investigate, Sarah's father suddenly yelled up the stairway and roared at her to hang up the phone! For him, the surprise was ruined.

What is it about the telephone that fascinates young girls? What could they possibly have left to say after spending the past several hours at school together?

I look back on the awkward days of my own youth, and I realize the fascination lied in finding out who I really was. As I talked to a friend on the telephone, I was sharing my life with someone who understood my fears, knew my dreams, and liked me for just being myself.

My daughter's conversations may seem trivial and their frequency may be very annoying, but I understand why she feels they are necessary. Seeking other's opinions, about such things as which outfit to wear, what to buy at lunchtime, or which boy in the class is the best-looking, is just another way to reassure herself that she is not the only one experiencing the startling changes that are taking place in her life.

As a mother, all I can do is give her love and guidance through this phase of her life, and try not to become annoyed when the family is ignored and our own friends are unable to get a call through. For you other mothers, don't despair; you can always get call-waiting, or do as I did and have a new line installed tomorrow!

A. June Metreyeon

Conversation

As I watch your mouth curving,
forming your primitive sounds,
I wait for the syllables
that spring from your new voice box
past tiny quivering lips
to float between us briefly
and disappear like vapor.

I try to distinguish words
you might accidentally
stumble upon in your quest
to express whatever thoughts
are budding in the fertile
crest that is your infant mind.
But you only speak in code.

I repeat your utterance
and as you throw back your head
laughing hysterically,
I quickly scrape off remnants
of lunch nestled in your neck.
You continue to banter
in your secretive language.

Your dad speculates on it.
He compares it to Chinese,
about which he knows nothing.
So I picture a mother
and a baby in China,
whose sounds come out like our words,
"More macaroni and cheese."

Tess Anderson

Musicality

He pounds the piano composing
passages for his first masterpiece
BOASTFUL BASS VOICES and *treble tremolos*
form dissonant tones.

Random notes and five-fingered chords
mingle with vocals from his tiny throat.
He attains his goal
by using the noisy registers
which yield to his limited reach.

Music wears a variety of masks.
The rhapsody performed today
sounds harmonious to youthful ears.
The sweeping glissandos filling the air
may have graced one of Beethoven's concertos.
Tomorrow he will master music's rudiments,
and, with knowledge gained through practice,
arrange his own unique melodies.
But few can appreciate or tolerate
a three-year old's expertise.

Beverly Williams

Angel Band

Waiting in the cabinet
Each holding an instrument
Posed to play with elbows bent
The angel band is silent.

Cello, flute, and clarinet
Tambourine and gold trumpet
Guitar, violin all set
The angel band is silent.

Feathered wings and long, waved hair
Smiles that never knew a care
Expectations everywhere
The angel band is silent.

Beverly Williams

Divine

Heaven smiled as i drank my breakfast
and the wavering image that was not me
leered up wryly from my coffee
leaves of bad news rustled beneath my fingers
the sensational decadence i tuned out
as i read
and angel tapped on my window pane
in sly guise of the wind
borrowing rays from the sun, she peered in
to find me slumped and stooped
in the body that occupies my space
bemused, Providence kissed my head
shining curls sliding forward
the overhead fan groaned uninspired
(i felt it too was tired)
together we ignored the sunrise
unaware of our heavenly company
as another day began.

Jennifer Lynn Baldwin

Intersection

hard slate gray of asphalt
it blocked out the sun
but the afternoon was bright
and hot
cracks and lines and painted stripes
black patches and we all ignored it
waiting for the light to turn
I watched the wind brush the first fall leaves
through the intersection
like a crossing guard leading the children
to the other side.
One business' feeble attempt at landscape
on the corner caught the passing litter
and everyone in their individual thoughts,
and agendas, everyone in their own little
world. And the worlds each passing
but for a brief moment;
the angry Cutlass, cigarette smoke and exhaust,
the sad Tempo who was slow and looking down
the impatient Mustang, too good to be waiting
and some lowrider whose thumping bass faded away
with the impersonal grayness of the day
and more, each dissolving into the asphalt, faceless extras...
and the only thing we had in common,
[that I could tell]
was that we shared that intersection
when the first fall leaves skittered into view.

Jennifer Lynn Baldwin

All I See
(I Do Not Know)

he sits slumped in his invalid-chair
nothing more to me than a turned head
a slurred hello, he must be such a burden
(I think)
and what joy and what pleasure, but nothing
tiresome travail, insupportable cost
so quickly lost life in its beauteous normalcy
to nothing left; person locked inside
(who I never knew)
not the same- and yet they cling to what's left
the defective shell, damaged
first by the ravenous disease, then the decisive slice
of the scalpel carrying him further down
into abysmal decline
and so they feed him and bathe him and clothe him
(let it end)
and nod and smile, all the while
waiting for him to die

Jennifer Lynn Baldwin

Echoing Noah

I imagine Noah wept
as the waters rose and covered the earth,
swallowing those whose taunts had followed
Noah like a shadow for years
as he and his sons swung their axes,
laboring under a clear-sky umbrella,
slowly, methodically, building his ark
in preparation for the day
that the prophecy of a terrible flood
would be fulfilled.

A monument to madness
his neighbors said. Every board
increased the mockery. "Can it sail
in mud, eh, Noah?" Their jeers,
as familiar to him as his dreams of rain,
would haunt him long after their voices
fell silent. And the sounds of pounding,
pleading, begging for their children's lives,
if not their own to spare, could not
be washed away.

Did their howls and shrieks crescendo
before the D.C. al Fine of "Noah!"?
Did the rocking and knocking from outstretched arms
against the hull, day and night,
in staccato beats and bumps,
magnify the memory
of their pitiful petitions,
heard despite the attention he tried to focus
on the frightened livestock
in his care?

The shipbuilding, the collecting,
navigating the ark at sea,
all of those combined were the easy part.
A child's toy, a torn garment waving like a flag
from the highest branch of a tree, floating pottery,

baskets and bowls, bones caught in brambles,
forever reminders poking out
from all the empty spaces where
his neighbors' faces
used to be.

In his dreams, did Noah laugh and joke
with childhood friends, distant cousins,
new acquaintances? Did he linger
in the marketplace with the sights
and smells and sounds of life?
Did he hunger for fellowship
beyond his own family? Did sleep
offer him a partial reprieve
from the reality
of loneliness?

And when Noah saw a cavern
deeper than the one inside his soul,
did he cry out his own name
with imaginary anticipation
just to hear the echo?

Gayla Chaney

The Ark of the Covenant

I could not have kept the Ark
For anyone or you or Moses.
I surely would have pried open
Its encasement with the clenched bite
Of wise incisors
And brooding bicuspid.
Yes, Father,
Like a dog I would have feigned
Innocence before my priestly master.
But in their absence, my fingers
Ravenous would part the Veil
Like a panting lover's button-up shirt,
Endocrine glands and taste buds opening
To the sun of curiosity.
I would have opened it and found
Maybe peace, maybe dust or cool mud,
Maybe the tip-tip sand of stories
Or Senor Jesus in knickerbockers
Or
Maybe
I would just find
Blindness.

Brian Herrington

Their Eyes Were Closed

The stained-green awning
Traps humidity and contradictions
On the steamed patio.
She flicks a precise, hot cigarette.
He spills
Brown stained java
In his lap and says how
So many former occasions
Turned wrong-side-round
Must have been her fault;
How he sees no other explanation
For the backyard's death,
The wilted tulips,
Black-eyed flowers that
No more project
Yellowed statements.
She realizes that the humidity
Will not be leaving
Any time soon.
So she progresses the
What if maybe not
And also conversation.
In her defense she claims
No knowledge of when
Their lives slumped
At the dinner table-
Down through spiced dark
Gravy and slices
Of turkey roast,
Humble buttered rolls
And curiously piled beans.
She must have been sleeping
When the grass screamed up
Through Infertility,
Thin vines groped
The baked brick house,
Crumpled cans and tin foil
Multiplied with quiet scrapes.

In fact, neither of them
Can recall
How a deer head
Came to be nailed
To a far, fenceline tree.
If he thinks hard,
He can envision the eyeless
Crusty sockets,
The dry solitary tongue
Lolling from its jaw.
Apologizing,
He reaches for her small hand
And says neither of them
Are to blame.
The backyard must have died
When their eyes were closed.

Brian Herrington

The Ninth Revelation: A quartet of poems.

I. Do You?

Do you struggle slightly
With the politics
Of never offending
Sensitive guests?
Do you apologize for
The broken bottles
Upon your window sill
(Trophies of what
The Grand Old States
Produced, packaged,
Mechanically poured
Into a million glasses
For general consumption?)
Do you linger
By the ever present
Dusty roads?
The sun calls the dusty roads
By name—
Biskamp,
Brownlee.
Do you walk like caution,
Dragging your bare feet
Primitive and sensitive
In the unstirred dust?

“oh, i want to see
 je-zus
how i want to look
 upon his face.
oh i want to sing
 forever
of his saving grace!”

Do you secretly yell
Loud and plastic,
“This one thing I know-
That Heaven is beautiful,

Beautiful, beautiful!
And the Lord shall save me,
Save me, save me!”?
Does that great lot of shouting
Pay your bills?

Notice:
The Wrigley City Bank
Informs you of your debts.
The following statement
Shall be hereafter considered
Proof of your notification.
Does that heat make your face
Stretch long and
Watery like the creek?
Do you think to
Your hopeful self,
“Oh, if only the creek
were nearer. If only.”?
Do you pause
And lay aside the
Deluded songbooks that
Say with clear deceit--
“All will be better.
All will come to good.”?
Do you ever decide
To leave the musty front porch
And suppose that
Maybe
He is never
Coming again?

II. They Will Live

My grandmother's knees
Will someday bend.
The cloud of her eyes
Will disappear.
Her country tone will shine
A goat milk white.
She'll discard her dentures

With righteous pride.
She'll retire to her mansion-
A grassy estate
Of pure-bred cattle,
A thousand or so
Roving horned and uddered beast.
My uncle will someday
End his crying for want of money.
He'll furrow his land
With new steel plows.
His daughters seven will dance
In new silk dresses
And speak in tongues.
My brother and so many
Like him
Will eternally fish
In deepdown endless lakes.
My father will pluck
A cedar guitar
And sing like syrup.
My mother's stove
Shall never break nor burn.
My cousins will run
On unlame legs.
And all of my kindred
Will live unbroken,
They say.
They will live and live,
They will live and live
In Heaven.

III. O Caroline Amanda

A street evangelist
Walks these roads--
Sweating, unhurried,
Sustained by Job,
The well-intentioned prophet's
Scrambled verses.
A child offers him just enough

Lemonade
In the olde-tyme way
To wash away
The salivary choke.
The heat index
Was a hundred and nine
Today.
O Caroline.
O Caroline Amanda.
I am old and full.
Am full of Christ and dying.
O Father
O Transubstantiation
This dust is my body
And my blood is
Lemonade, lemonade.
O Caroline
O Caroline Amanda
You will visit someday
My wayside grave,
Stand tearful in the longish
Tombstone shade.
You will cry for my versatile
Stubborn hands,
Will sing for the singing
Unstirred sands.
And I will call you by name.
O Caroline
O Caroline Amanda

IV. Locust

Long hungry faces
Cast down
In the desolate rusty town
Ask apocalyptic cryptic questions
About locust hordes and trumpet sounds.
But no man prays for the mountains
To fall on him.
No man.

They came trampling out
Upon the stage.
Enter LEONATO, HERO
And BEATRICE, with
A MESSENGER.
Next they slobbered
About this and that
At the Good King's
Supper table.
AEGEON-
Proceed, Solinus, to procure my fall
And by the doom of death end woes and all.

Stage directions?
Our exit?
Hey Preacherman!
Brother willy brother billy!
What the hell happens next?
Will she be riding
Six white horses
When she comes?
Or
Will we ride her
Six times
And come?
(Adolescent laughter
Prickling like cactus)
You said Jesus Jesus
Would pull the curtains
And make us walk
Like primrose virgins and
Talk smooth like car-
Salesmen or prophets,
Whichever talks
Smootherest.
Reverend Soothsayer,
A doomsday shouter
Unlike the street evangelist,
Leans harsh on the pulpit
Saying,
The signs of the times are

All around. Cain't you see it,
My beloved church? They's wicked
Thangs an' fires an' storms and oh
I'ma ready to go to that land in the
Sky
Where angels sing an' there ain't no
Fear nor death nor sickness nor
Troubles an' trials nor cancer! Amen!
Brother Noah, you ain't gonna limp
Over there an' Sister Sarah you ain't
Gonna be sick no more. Hallelujah!
Won't you join me in the ole chorus
One more time?
"This one thing I know-
That Heaven is beautiful,
Beautiful, beautiful!
And the Lord shall save me,
Save me, save me!"
And on the seventh day
I awoke and unto me was given
A sign from the Lord.
And I answered saying,
"Yea it is I, your cheappolyester
Loudnecktie prophet."
And verily the Lord straightway
Said-
"darkened revelation earth
earth of of
and was power and
Angel the earth and saw
there heaven bottomless
and out have to fall
the pit scorpions given
sounded power arose star
the pit where the sun
into the great of him
bottomless the air as nine
the upon furnace smoke
the reason by opened as
given fifth from the and
was of key he and

and smoke and
the out of smoke pit
locusts smoke came there
unto the them pit
the of i saw these things.”

Caroline Amanda cries.
The street evangelist
Returns and tries to explain—
“No, sweet one.
Only fools watch
The Eastern skies for locusts.
The broken wait
For Christ and restoration.”
But I ask you—
What Christ?
What restoration?
Heaven is the faint strumming
Of Chopin in the parlor.
Restoration will emerge
From Shakespeare’s
Tongue tumble words.
O Caroline Amanda.
There is no Hell for you.
One day Father Haughty
Tripped on his holiness
And the Lie of Hell
Fell out of his devious
Waistpockets.

Your eternal hope,
My child,
Is the rest of silence.
So embrace your noble heart
Until the final cue.
(Exit)

Brian Herrington

The Big Funeral

The best funeral I could
Ever
Hope to attend would be
The funeral of
Hip Coolness.
If Coolness died
All the young people would
Fall on their faces
In the mud.
And their sadly sung dirge
Would gurgle:

“Coolness, Oh Coolness—
Do not go Gentle into that Good Night.”
 (“Oh that’s go-o-o-od. Where’d you get that?”
 “You know. That poet. Dylan. Dylan somebody.”)
Coolness, how we need thy
Suave guidance.
What shall we do?
Answer us,
O divine guide of youth.
What color should our hair be?
Where should the next rip
In our clothing be?
How much longer are we
To enjoy the chicness
Of hard,
Twelve inch long...
Sneakers.”

The death of Coolness
Would crush the informational
Slangbang of music videos,
Slide Lalapaloodownthedrainsa,
Along with chop-haired chummy
Sitcoms and clothes that are to be
Worn like a new resurrection.
But perhaps most startling

Would be the death of
Cappuccino-Espresso Coffee shops.
Then where would the chic abide?

So many of the young are
Prophets
Of Coolness
And evangelists
Of Coolness
And whores
Of Coolness,
Even.

So many are whores
And would be dissatisfied
Lying face down in the mud
Until-
One young person says to the others
"I think lying face down in the mud
Might possibly be
Fashionable."

And suddenly,
Mud
Would be all the rage.

Brian Herrington

Obscure

I could be something special
but, for now, I stumble through existence
playing the fool, the misfit, the clown.
I'm here for your amusement, so say what you will
(my shell's too thick for your words.)
Continue to think you know me.
Continue to think I'm so funny and so clever.
Continue to think my personality and sense of humor will
get me far in life.
Call me Bottom or Feste or Touchstone and laugh.
Invite me out just to lift your own spirits.
Give me dirty looks because I won't fit your mold.
Scoff at me because I'm no lady
But never underestimate what I won't let you see.

Amy Pousson

The Distinction of Woman from Girl

Mother raises you to be different from others,
and when you become so different, she wonders what went
wrong.

No, I never said I was a young lady—
that's part of being different.

No alpha hydroxy or Sea Breeze or lip liner for me
So, they say Barbie's measurements are impossible—
Should I give them Nikki Taylor's phone number?
(if they want a doll, I know where the toy department is)
I refuse to wear bubbling berry or mushy mauve nail polish
I refuse to believe life is all sunshine and roses
I refuse to believe that males really consider females to be
equal
I refuse to wear mascara so thick my eyelashes look like
sticks
I refuse to watch *Friends* or *Melrose Place*
I refuse to pay a salon to give me skin cancer
I refuse to lose fifty pounds so that I can look anorexic
I refuse to act stupid to make a man feel superior
I refuse to pay \$250 on a purse just because it has a duck on
it
I refuse to be upstaged
but - most of all -
I refuse to be ordinary.

Amy Pousson

Euphemism

I expected so much—
but ended up so disappointed and alone.
Small, round, full of possibilities
yet wasted like a half-brown banana
or that frostbitten ice cream in the freezer.
"You'd be so pretty if..."
But why *if*? Aren't I pretty now?
Can't I love and nurture like a real woman?
I know I have the right parts under all this—
All this what? Baby fat... like Momma used to call it.
But are you still a baby at 12, 14, 17... 21?

Amy Pousson

Learn Me Good

I think I got off track somewhere.
So, just how can I remember words that were never said?
(I guess my femininity gets in the way
of everything I need to do.)
Can I surpass the standard?
Well, should I produce the glittering magnetism
or will total submission be sufficient?
Or how about I play the docile uncovered treasure
or be truthful and lash out with all the ferocity of a man?
Yes sir, I think I understand.
I guess false purity would be much
more desirable than anything genuine.
(heaven forbid the truth)
I had the impression...
Oh, I didn't know thinking was also prohibited.
(Sorry about that)
Anything you say Daddy.

Amy Pousson

Puppet Shows and Pretending

Shoe box puppet shows and plastic dinosaur wars
fought on faded blue carpet

Skip to my Lou engulfs me
as I twirl, giggling in circles

Red velvet cake with creamy homemade icing
every year on my birthday

A Rainbow Brite doll
the only thing I didn't want for Christmas

A silver mineral rock bracelet
sent in the mail with a vague post card

A clammy hospital room
mom feeding you, while my prom dress crumples-
unfinished- in the corner at home

Pretending to sleep
as my father hugs me
and cries

Stacey Norwood

Whatever Happened To

Magic-skin dolls
Were our toys
Thrown aside.
Whatever happened
to the one with brown eyes
that was as big as me?

Our cat Chee Chee
came home with
one eye missing
and a broken tail.
He lived, but how he died
I don't recall.

Daddy tied an old
broomstick to the
end of a rope. We
straddled it and
swung high enough to
kick the Indian cigars.

Mrs. Black sat on
her porch swing smelling
like shortcake in the
afternoons. Whatever
happened to the violets
that grew beside her steps?

Draperies replaced shades,
windows closed, and neighbors
became silent. Lawn mowers
grew motors and scents were
shut out. Whatever happened
to smells of the seasons?

June Gregory

Receptivity

Wonderful things grow around the mail box. Where
petunias had braved ice and wind, lilies grew naked and
tender. When they had reached their most fragile and
fragrant state, the Giver said to me, "I have a gift for you."
The Giver picked the lily, placed it in my hand and smiled.

I had never seen such a beautiful thing before. It was
soft and cool to touch. I cherished the lily and wanted to
keep it forever.

"What do you think of your gift?" said the Giver.

"I love it! It is so beautiful." I said.

With that the lily began, as all lilies do, to fade and
wither. Soft and tender became dry and brittle. It
crumbled in my hand.

"Cruel!" I said, "How very cruel, to give a gift so
moving and then to turn it into dust."

"I have another gift for you," said the Giver. There in
my hands was a kitten, soft and warm. The lily was soon
forgotten with something warm and fuzzy in its place. We
played and cuddled for hours. Hours turned to days. Days
turned to months. Months turned to years and the kitten
turned into a cat.

"How do you like this gift?" asked the Giver.

"This gift is full of affection and play. This is the best
of all. I love this gift." I said with the cat softly purring in
my arms. As the years passed, the love for play dimin-
ished, and the love of affection, sleep, and purring grew.
And then when it had purred its last, it fell asleep.

"Why?" I demanded. "Why would you give a gift so
friendly, a gift so endearing, only to turn it into dust?" I
remembered the lily, and I felt very dark.

The Giver was silent and listened to my grief. The
Giver waited, and then the Giver spoke. "I have another
gift for you."

"What do you have for me?" I was suspicious and
convinced that this was a strange and cruel Giver, using
gifts to touch the heart only to take them away.

"Someone very special," said the Giver. "Let me
introduce you to her."

She was beautiful -- more tender and fragrant than the lily -- more playful and affectionate than the kitten. I found myself looking again and again at her eyes and hair, her face, lips, and hands. As I noticed her, I hoped that she would notice me. She looked again and again at my eyes and hair, my face, lips, and hands. She smiled. I smiled. Our bodies smiled. Our beings smiled.

"Such a wonderful gift," I said to the Giver as I attended my gift.

"You are welcome," the Giver said to me.

This gift was more than a gift. This gift was a person, like me. I told her of the lily and the kitten. She listened and cared about my grief. She told me about the things the giver had given to her. I listened, and she grieved. Sharing and caring, playing and tenderness, we spent each day together. The days became weeks. The weeks became months. The months became years. The gift was a relationship, full of joy and hope. I did not know where I stopped and she started. We became one.

And then I missed "me." So I pulled back. I had to get away. I could not breathe. I needed a place to hide. To my surprise, she let me go.

Alone, I wondered what had happened to the joy and hope of our relationship. I loathed it. She waited. The minutes turned to hours. The hours turned to days. And she waited.

As she waited, I found "me" again. As I found "me" something began to change. I began to think about us. I smiled. I longed for us. And then it happened. I needed our relationship more than solitude. And then I thought about her. She will be hurt. I have rejected her. She will reject me.

When I found her she was busy with things that had nothing to do with me.

"Oh, there you are. I missed you." she said as she stretched out her hand.

She smiled. I smiled. Our bodies smiled. Our beings smiled. I reached out and took hold of her hand. I rejoiced in losing myself once again.

"How could I loathe something so wonderful?" I asked myself quietly.

Again, as I missed myself I withdrew. Again she let me go and waited, and welcomed me back again -- only to let me go and welcome me back. Each time my time away grew shorter and our time together grew longer. I listened and shared. I rejoiced in our beauty. "This is the most wonderful gift, ever," I thought to myself.

"I'm glad you feel that way," said the Giver to my surprise. "I have something else for you."

Then the relationship produced life. It was tender and delicate. It was fragile, yet overpowering. In our oneness, the Giver gave to us a gift, a child.

I had thought that the relationship with the woman could never be surpassed. Yet, it surpassed itself. More than beauty and wonder, more than sweet and warm, with the woman, the child, and I came fulfillment, contentment. I rejoiced in providing, protecting, supporting, and nurturing. I was privileged. This was more important to me than "me." It was a joy to deny "me" for them.

And then one day, after providing and protecting, after supporting and nurturing, I thought about the Giver and all the gifts. I remembered the lily and the kitten, tender and playful and long dead. At that moment, my memory and logic brought me great pain. I wished the logic and memory away, but it would not leave.

"As the lily and kitten have turned into dust, so it is with all gifts from the Giver." I shouted dark and troubling "NO! There must be another way," I panicked.

"Who would be so strange and cruel and sick?" I grieved in anticipation for the loss I knew would eventually come.

Embittered and depressed, I withdrew from the woman and child. There I stayed, hurt, bitter, and angry. The woman and child waited, but the change in me did not come. I waited for my longing for the woman and child to surpass my pain. But my pain and darkness only grew deeper and deeper.

In the distance, I heard the woman and child calling for me. Finding me she said, "I have been missing my precious gift."

"What gift has the cruel and strange Giver given to you?"

"You." She said.

That was the truth I was fighting so hard to avoid. I too, was a gift. And all gifts, all gifts, wither and turn into dust.

"You know that in time, we will wither and turn into dust." I said as I stretched out my hand.

"But that time is not yet." She said as she took my hand in hers.

"Let us love and hope and dream with the time we have left." I said, my arms stretching to embrace.

"Let us listen and care and give while we can." She said receiving my embrace and embracing in turn.

"What about me?" The child said as it found its way to the middle.

"You are indeed our precious gift." We said as we made room for one more.

So each moment and each day we received as a gift. With each gift we came to understand the Giver a little better. The Giver was deep and mysterious and generous. We came to long for the Giver even more than we longed for the gifts.

And then one day, the Giver spoke once again. "I have another gift for you."

"What wonderful and precious gift do you have for me?" I asked the Giver.

Then, I began to wither. I watched my loved one's eyes, full of horror and grief as I, full of hope and love, closed my eyes and longed for the dust.

"Cruel! How very cruel," the woman said to the Giver, "to give this gift to one of us and not to the other."

At that the Giver sighed, smiled, shook his head, and went out to the mail box to plant lilies.

Donald Dean Reeves

A Smile

With gentle patience,
you hold out your hand
and touch my eyes
with a steady smile,
offering a friendship
as tremulous as
the lone thread
of a spider's web,
and I accept
God's simplest gift
by placing my hand
in yours.

Sandy Soenning

A night blooming blossom
spreads its petals to the starlight
drinking moonbeams in its open throat
as it sighs its fragrance
into the velvet darkness.

Elise Loomis

Agriculture

Bundles of wheat wave in the uncut breeze.
No scavenger nor scythe has touched
The ripe bulb of spring
Nestled in her flaxen shell.

In a great bale she lies
Uprooted and unearthed.
Mounds of seeds collect beneath her cover of gold
Promising harvest.

Seeds burrow into her soiled womb
Waiting.
Golden sprigs burst through
Awaking the world around.

New bundles of wheat wave in the uncut breeze.
No scavenger nor scythe has touched
The ripe bulb of spring
Nestled in her flaxen shell.

Holly Bertrand

The Apprentice

Jack Allinder looks down at the toilet and studies the red blood. He tries to remember if bright red blood is good or bad. He can't remember. The rectal bleeding has steadily gotten worse over the years.

"Problems with both ends now," he mutters, remembering he has to go in for a dental visit the following Monday. Zipping up his jeans, he walks back to the kitchen.

He stretches his square-built forty-six-year-old frame. He sits down at the word processor. In three more weeks he has to go back to the ship. He isn't looking forward to it. At the same time, his vacation is driving him up the wall. The blank screen stares at Jack. Jack wants to be his generation's Eric Hoffer, another blue-collar thinker, a writer people will listen to. Instead, Jack seems to be collecting rejection slips quicker than the Camel coupons he used to get off the back of his cigarettes.

If I'm ever diagnosed with cancer, Jack thinks, the first stop I'm gonna make is the nearest cigarette machine.

Though Jack doesn't miss the hacking morning cough and spitting up grayish-yellow phlegm, he misses having something to do with his hands. He misses something to fill the idle time on his hands. He can't think of a thing to write. Nothing comes. He looks around the room. The off-white walls are bare. Jackie had stripped the house when she left. No furniture remains in the old farmhouse except an aluminum and Formica kitchen table. Besides an ancient gas range and an old GE refrigerator on its last legs, there's little in the way of creature comforts. Jackie confiscated all the other appliances. Jack figures it's his fault for letting her know he was going to file before he came home. So even the TV and air conditioner are long gone. A Packard Bell computer and printer are the only items Jack has seen fit to buy. The computer and printer sit on the kitchen table which has a red and white Formica top. Jack figures he has all he really needs. He thinks a real writer's supposed to suffer anyway. The red and white table top vaguely reminds Jack of a flag-draped coffin.

He's been sleeping at nights on a sleeping bag. Confidently Jack places the sleeping bag on a GI air mattress which like all government items doesn't work. The mattress loses its air before morning. Lack of sleep has not improved Jack's moods.

"Damn the bitch," Jack cusses and types like a madman. He lists all the things he hates about his soon-to-be-ex-wife.

NAGGING--COMPLAINING--GOSSIPY--Jack types with caps lock down, then suddenly takes a break after gossipy and reaches over and grabs his dictionary and looks up gossipy. Jack has never figured out how to use his spell-checker and isn't about to waste time learning. He figures he has only ten years to write before he's dead. The word checks out. Jack smiles, then he notices some of the other words on the page. Jack is always on the scout for new

words. He is naturally curious, never bored by new stuff, no matter how trivial. He is also a keen observer. It kept him alive in Vietnam, but kept him on point too long—long after his nerves had played out.

Gosoon is a word he sees. The word has an Irish origin. Jack is Scotch-Irish, so he takes note. Gosoon means either a boy or a servant boy. Jack doesn't see any possible way he can ever use the word, so he mentally tosses it in his imaginary trash can. A word further down comes to his attention--Gotham. According to his dictionary, Gotham is a village near Nottingham whose villagers were foolish to the point of legend. Jack laughs aloud. He hates New York and everything associated with the city.

"I digress." He says aloud giving his words an even heavier East Texas accent and goes back typing hateful things about the woman he has loved for twenty years. He stays at it while the sun begins to set. Yellow then reddish light comes in the shadeless windows and bathes the walls. Jack notices none of it. He has made his hate into a short story in which a martyred husband kills his ex-wife. He stays at it till finally the room is dark, and he grows exhausted. He sighs, prints out what he's written and saves what he has on the computer and turns off the machine.

He blows up the air mattress, thinking that if he still smoked the act would take all night and leave him breathless. He lays on top of the sleeping bag in the clothes he's worn all day and goes quickly to sleep.

Jack is getting the first good sleep he's had in days when a loud banging wakes him up. He looks across the kitchen floor and through the narrow living room to see Jackie standing on the porch just beyond the screen door. Jackie is banging on the door so hard that Jack hopes she'll break a nail.

"Jack get up." She's saying in an insistent voice. Her voice has a sort of whine to it. It grates on Jack. It reminds him that most of their married life she tried to treat him like a kid. The voice has the same tone as his mom used when he was in danger of missing the bus.

"What do you want?" Jack snarls.

"To be treated civilly would do for a start," Jackie says coldly.

"You take everything I ever worked for, and now you want to come over here and disturb my sleep," Jack snaps. He rolls over, but he makes no attempt to get up. He hears the screen door slam and hears Jackie's footsteps on the floor of the old house. He rolls back over and sees her walking toward him. She's wearing a sleeveless white blouse and what Jack thinks is the shortest skirt he's ever seen. Jackie's white flat sandals make sort of a clapping, popping sound on the dried and cracked ancient linoleum of the kitchen floor. As she walks up to him, Jack stares up at legs as long as Texas. He can see now what he thought was a skirt is actually shorts, just fashioned in the front so it looks like a skirt. The garment has a funny name, Jack bites his lip and tries to remember what it is. He can't.

"You know someone's gonna come in here one day and rob and murder you." Jackie says. Her voice sounds as East Texas country to Jack as barbed wire and long necks. "Things aren't like they were when we were kids. You can't leave your front door open no more."

"Before someone robs you they gotta think you HAVE something to rob." Jack sneers at her, sweeping his hand around the empty house. "Now what the hell do you want?"

"It's your mother, Jack." Jackie says softly.

"What's the matter with Mom?" Jack says, rubbing his hand over his face.

"Damn it, Jack." Jackie says in exasperation, "I told you that today she's going in for her cancer screening. She's half convinced they're gonna find something. We need to be there for her."

Jack gets up. As he stands close to Jackie she visibly flinches but doesn't back up. She's tanned as brown as an Indian, setting off her steel blue eyes. Her brown hair is pulled back behind her head. She stands almost as tall as Jack, and Jack is just a hair under six feet. Jack wonders how he ever snagged such a good looking woman as he goes over to the stove to make coffee. He wonders what he did wrong in the marriage, why it isn't working.

As Jack turns back around at the stove he sees Jackie has picked up the stack of papers on the table. He can see her lips moving silently as she reads. He smiles. He pulls the can of Maryland Club out of the cabinet and fills up the old dripolater coffee pot and sets it on the range and turns on the gas. He hears a satisfying light pop as the gas lights off.

"Is this what you think of me?" Jackie says, her voice cracking.

"What do you expect." Jack says, not directly answering the question. "You cheated on me."

"Just the one time." Jackie wails. She rolls her hand as she talks. Some whining catch in her voice reminds Jack of Laura going hysterical on the old "Dick Van Dyke Show." Jackie begins to cry. She turns and races from the house. Jack hears the clapping, slapping sound her sandals make on the old floor. The screen door screeches open and slams shut.

Jack doesn't go after her.

They sit in the waiting room, his mom separating the two of them. The waiting room is fairly small, with just four other chairs. Two other women are waiting. There is another waiting room down the hall. All the blacks wait there. Though desegregation has been the law for forty years, in East Texas things just seem to go on the same way they've always gone.

Jackie keeps up a light babbling conversation with Nadine, his mother. They talk about sewing and soap operas and all the things women prattle about. Jack keeps poking through the stack of magazines on the end table beside him. All he can find though are copies of *Redbook*, *Women's Day*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. He wonders why Jackie wants to maintain the fiction they are still together. The notion strikes him as stupid. Something a woman would do.

Nadine digs in her purse and gets out her cigarettes and fires one up. One of the other women, an apple-checked, chubby blonde in a pastel homemade dress looks at her.

"You're not supposed to smoke in here." The blonde says.

"Honey, if they didn't want me smoking they wouldn't have put in an ashtray." Nadine laughs and waves a cheap brass-colored ashtray at the woman. Jackie sniggers. Jack smiles, he knows Nadine brought the ashtray with her, concealed in her voluminous purse.

"What's the matter with you two?" Nadine says slowly, her gravel-sounding voice making the question almost a demand. I had drill instructors with more sensitivity, Jack thinks. Jackie doesn't say anything. Suddenly Jack realizes his mom is talking to him.

"We've split up." He says flatly. He thinks a minute why he chose those words, they sound like something a kid would say.

"You two have something special," Nadine says, "anyone could see it. I had total strangers remark on it. How ya'll could let it just go...."

She waves her hand up toward the ceiling in wonder and disgust. Her voice trails off. She blows out smoke and thumps her cigarette in the ashtray. Jack thinks she's about to say more when a cute, little dark-haired nurse comes and

gets Nadine. The slim little nurse chides Nadine about smoking. The blonde woman smiles in triumph as Nadine follows the nurse from the room.

"Did you tell her?" Jackie asked.

"No."

"Then how'd she know. I hadn't said nothing."

Neither of them moves to fill the empty chair. They talk straight ahead, not looking at one another, ignoring the two other patients waiting in the room.

"I don't want no divorce." Jackie says. She says it flat and on the square like she's just pronounced some food fit to eat. Jack flips open the copy of *Redbook* that sits on his lap. He flips open by chance to an article on how to fix a damaged relationship. He says nothing.

But he begins to read.

Mike Dunklin

Christening of My Quilt

At last the edges are hemmed
in green bias tape, made in hopes
that small tears will never be mended.

May many nights find it draped about
naked, shivering shoulders.

May thick, callused fingers be poked
through the holes and bad times remembered,
then laughed upon by less callused hearts.

May blue candle flames illuminate the love
in which it was pieced on nights after new lovers
are born.

In its warmth, may old loves be forgotten,
familiarities lost, bravery feigned.

May innocence be remembered and sought after.

May the patches be revered for having covered
thinner women during harsher times.

May we be blessed, and they, and all.

Tasha S. Harper

Scream "Greenpeace!"
as you throw your veggie
burger wrapper out the Saab
window.

Declare yourself vegetarian for the
health of it, and chain Lucky Strikes
until your lungs become an evil shade
of cancer. Healthy?
You make your own decisions.

Okay, so just be a hippie.
Smoke bowls of pot—experiment
with hash—while Bob Dylan whines
over a scratchy stereo.

Fight for free love.
Kill for peace.
But remember how clear your
eyes were just three weeks ago,
and... pray.

Tasha S. Harper

Closure

"Could we hurry this goddamn thing up, I gotta eat."

Stepping over a pool of caked blood in the center of the living room, Detective Wyatt Knox checked his watch and lit a cigarette, glaring as police investigators went through the standard procedures of searching and studying the crime.

Knox glanced at the young girl who lay curled up in the living room corner, knees folded into her chest and arms wrapped tightly around her bruised legs. A bloody steak knife lay at her feet. Long blond hair covered her small face, plastered to her cheeks by a mixture of tears and blood, and a blue and black glaze marked her left eye. He turned away and scanned the rest of the room.

The furniture, what little there was, had been tossed and broken. A food-stained couch held together mostly by patches of various out of place materials sagged to the floor, it's springs broken. The one chair in the room had been knocked over, the black vinyl peeling, ripped and soaking up a pool of spilled beer. Orange shag carpet lined the floor, stained with God only knew what, and desperately needing to be pulled out and burned.

A man's body lay propped against the far wall, slumped over and clutching his chest where the three bullets had hit him. An outline of blood detailed where he had been thrown against the wall as the three slugs exploded out of his back. His bruised knuckles were still clenched into tight fists.

Knox frowned at the man's body and then turned across the room where a woman lay rolled up and still clutching at the gaping knife wound in her stomach. Her face was disfigured with a black eye, splattered blood and a broken jaw while large bruises lined her neck and throat. Gripped in one hand was the .45 handgun.

"How late does that steakhouse on 39th stay open?"

Knox asked no one in particular and received no answer.

"Detective Knox?" A young officer approached the detective. "I got this guy's record."

"Yeah."

The officer cleared his throat. "Well, sir. It reads like a grocery list. This guy's done just about everything."

Detective Knox glared at the officer before him and blew a cloud of smoke in the young man's direction. "Well?"

The officer coughed into his fist, squinting through the smoke. "Name's Torrance Esch. He just got paroled two nights ago. He was serving time up at the Roger's Unit for a DWI. We've been dispatched here several times in the past to break up domestic disputes."

"Her?" Knox nodded toward the woman.

"Karen Esch. Typical battered wife. Looks like she'd finally taken enough."

"No shit. You think?"

"Yes, sir. Well, uh... not much on her, really. She worked two minimum wage jobs to support the kid since the old man was in and out of prison. That's it, sir."

Knox turned around slowly, running his eyes about the room. "There's got to be a goddamn ashtray somewhere around here." Finally settling on a nearby vase, probably a blue-light special at K-mart he grabbed it, dropped his ashes into it, and nodded toward the little girl who was being tended to by paramedics. "Her?"

"Teryn Esch, age ten."

Knox turned and faced the young officer. "That'll be all. Have Sergeant McKinley see me."

"Yes, sir." The officer wasted no time disappearing.

Knox exhaled another cloud of smoke and watched as it drifted up and swirled about in the slowly spinning ceiling fan. Splattered blood had dried on the blades above and had been slung into the far corners of the room in tiny individual splotches. A hand-made 'Home Sweet Home' banner hung above the fireplace mantle, one side of it ripped and sagging and sprinkled with blood. Beneath it was a family picture which was obviously years old. In it the man gripped the girl, still a baby then, with one tight arm while squeezing the woman close to him with the other. The young child was crying and pushing away from her father while reaching for her mother. Moving toward it, Knox both felt and heard the crunching of glass beneath his shoes... broken beer bottles. The pieces of glass lay hidden in the long orange strands of dingy carpet.

"God dammit," he grumbled, stepping back to kneel down and pull some shards from his shoe.

"You wanted to see me." The voice belonged to Sergeant McKinley.

"Yeah, I'm getting out of here. You're in charge." Knox stood up, dropped his cigarette into the vase and was halfway to the door when McKinley spoke.

"It's a shame," he said. "She's so sweet, so beautiful."

Knox paused and turned to find McKinley watching the young girl. She was standing up now, arms tight across her chest, gripping her night-gown which was decorated with Bugs Bunny characters. A pink ribbon still held a tuft of her hair while the rest was wildly strewn about her face. Her eyes were wide, but seemed to focus on nothing at all.

"My Mommy's dead," she said in a dull whisper. "My Daddy. . . Tears drew lines in the dried blood on her face, and she rubbed at her eyes with little blood-stained fingers. "My Mommy. . . I. . ."

"Yeah," Knox said, and strode out.

A thirty foot tall blue neon cow stood in front of Rita's Steakhouse, and the flashing sign underneath advertised that the restaurant stayed open until midnight. Knox stepped through the entrance door. It was ten minutes after eleven P.M., and there were only three other guests. A man sat at the bar, nursing an almost full glass of beer, and a man and woman sat at a table against the far wall speaking softly to each other. They paid him no attention, and he didn't care. He strolled across the room to a secluded corner booth where he could watch the room and door. Slumping down into the vinyl seat, he lit a cigarette and slowly drew the smoke into his lungs. A tattered old pool table sat off in a far corner with a flickering and fading fluorescent light above it. It didn't appear to have been used in years. Across from the pool table was a derelict jukebox left over from sometime in the 1950's. Like the pool table, it too seemed not to have been played in years.

"What can I get you?"

Knox looked up at the forced smile of a wrinkled old waitress. Her white hair was pulled into a tight bun on her

head, and she watched him with uninterested dull eyes.

"Sirloin, rare," he demanded. "Sweet tea."

"Be right back with it."

Knox finished his cigarette, rubbed it out in an ashtray, and unfolded a paper napkin from around his silverware. A fork, spoon, and steak knife clattered onto the table. He looked at the utensils. . . the steak knife was like the one that had been at the girl's feet, jagged teeth and a thin wooden handle. Something about it held him. He thought of the girl, that knife at her feet, and tried to figure how the scene had gone. It just didn't work out. The positioning was all wrong. The girl in the corner, the man across the room against the wall, and the woman rolled up on the other side of the room, gun in hand. He couldn't quite place it, but something didn't settle right about it.

"Here you go, get you anything else?" The waitress dumped a plate on the table.

"No."

He watched her go back behind the bar and then doused the steak in A-1. The meat was still red, running with blood that mixed with the sauce. He stabbed the steak with his fork and watched more blood ooze from the red slab of meat. Knox chewed and looked at the thick mixture on his plate and on his knife.

He swallowed but didn't take another bite. He wasn't hungry anymore. He thought of the girl, the knife, those little pink and blood-stained fingers. As clear-cut as it all seemed, it just didn't add up. Knox stood up, dropped a bill on the table and left.

With the car's seat pushed back as far as it would go, Knox rested his arm on the rolled down window and watched the group of teenagers hanging out on the far street corner. The liquor store behind them looked like a cage with its iron bars across the entire front window section. Gang symbols and slogans were spray-painted across the brick walls on either side of the store. Knox had been sitting there long enough to see members of the teenage group make several trips into the store, each time coming out with a few packs of cigarettes and a brown

sack of something none of them were old enough to have. But that didn't much matter to him. He wasn't out to bust up their little party. Knox was only interested in one particular member of the group.

He squinted harder and found her in the middle of the bunch. Teryn Esch, now age fifteen. She had grown up a lot more than she should have in the past five years, and Knox had made a point to find out as much as he could about her. As she grabbed the paper sack from one of the boys and tipped it to her lips, Knox turned back and scribbled on a clipboard.

Her name had crossed his desk several times recently. Over the last few months she'd repeatedly tried to run away from Parker House, the children's home in which the courts had placed her; an apparent taste for liquor had gotten her several Minor in Possession charges; once she'd tried to commit suicide by breaking into the school nurse's office and swallowing a bottle of pills; and several times a representative of Parker House had called the police expressing desperation about her extremely rebellious tendencies.

The resurgence of Teryn's name had sent Knox back into her files. The Esch family murder case had been closed for five years, open-and-shut, but Knox remembered being unsatisfied with it. He had wanted to talk to Teryn, to get answers from her, to get the truth. But she had been too young to question when it happened, and she was being shuffled about by the courts, so he'd just let it go. However, seeing her again brought back a sense of bitter skepticism. He didn't like anyone putting anything over on him, especially some little ten year old girl. But she was older now, old enough to deal with.

Knox glanced back over at the group, at Teryn. Her long legs looked just about ready to pop out of the tight shorts, and a white tank-top shirt clung so tightly to her chest that from a distance it was hard to tell if she even had a shirt on at all. Her blond hair was braided into almost dreadlock-like tendrils that desperately needed washing, and the thick make-up around her eyes and lips stood out from across the street. As a car rumbled past, stereo blaring at an illegal decibel level, Teryn started grinding up against one of the

boys in her group. With her legs spread wide apart and her arms waving in the air, she slid up and down his body.

Knox turned back to his clipboard and scribbled again, smiling contemptuously to himself. By the end of the week he would have his time with her, get his answers from her.

Squinting at the girl through fatigued, bloodshot eyes Detective Knox slapped down the file and started pacing the length of the table once again. Fumbling with his lighter, he lit another cigarette which he clenched between tight lips.

Wafting up into the ceiling of the bleak questioning room, the smoke mixed with the lingering haze from previous packs and circled the flickering track lighting above. In the desolate grey-walled room, the smoke seemed to drain away all of the breathable oxygen, and the cold cinder-block walls could almost be seen closing in.

Knox rubbed his eyes and then looked down at the girl. He glared as Teryn leaned back into her chair, crossing one leg over the other so that her skirt rode high up on her thigh. Black hose outlined her sleek legs.

"Look," he finally muttered, "I'm tired of playing games with you."

"I'm not playing, Detective."

"We've been here for damn near three hours, and you've just danced around the friggin' questions!"

"I don't even dance."

Knox spun and leaned over the table. "I'd think you'd take this a little more seriously."

"You've drug me in here five years after the fact. It's over, Detective. Deal with it." She tilted her head, swaying her blond hair off of her shoulder and around behind her back. "Anyway, I really never like to take things too serious. I'd rather worry about getting what I want. Maybe you should too."

Knox whirled around, turning his back to her, and cursed under his breath. He wiped his face with a napkin, turned back, and looked down to find himself staring at brilliant green eyes and perfect white teeth. But the eyes were covered in dark and overly exaggerated eye-shadow,

and the teeth were surrounded by bold lipstick so red that it was almost black. "What I want is for you to stop screwing with me!"

"Oh, aren't you a little old? But maybe we could work something out."

"Why don't you cut out the little street-corner-whore act and just talk to me."

"We've been talking for three hours. I'm tired."

"Well then you better start answering my questions! I'll leave your tight little ass in here and forget about you!" His voice had faded into a hoarse holler.

She stared back at him. "You can't hold me. I'm too young."

"Try me."

"Anyway, I haven't done anything." She folded her arms across her chest, holding her head indignantly.

"Bullshit. We both know what really happened."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, oh."

Knox studied the girl, this victim of such a horrible crime. Her short skirt was obviously an open invitation, and her white blouse was practically transparent.

"Are we almost finished?" she asked, spinning one of several rings around her fingers. Her nails were painted with some kind of glittery black.

"No!" He wanted to rip the silver nose-ring from her nostril. "Could we hurry this up, then? I've got things to do."

"Well that's just too damn bad!" He pounded the table with a tight fist. "We'll be here until I'm satisfied."

"Like I said, maybe we can work something out." Knox cursed under his breath again and returned to his pacing. When he lifted his gaze from the floor, he found the girl fanning herself with the loose collar of her blouse. The top buttons were undone. His eyes went to her chest.

"It's hot in here," she said, cocking him a sideways glance.

"If you don't start cooperating, it'll get a hell of a lot hotter!"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Promising."

She contorted her face, mocking his serious expression. "Oh, I see."

"Do you? Do you understand me now?"

"I understand that you're trying to scare me."

"I'm trying to serve justice. You're obstructing it with your little smart ass act. I don't like being jacked with." He glared down into her eyes, at her open blouse, then back up at her eyes.

She met his stare with her own and grinned wryly.

"Me either."

"Then answer my questions."

"I don't know anything."

"You know that your mother died because of you." His stress on the last word made it echo off of the hard walls.

She visibly flinched, her mouth dropping open slightly, her eyes fixed on his. "I . . . I don't remember anything." Her voice was soft, low.

Knox pulled a chair up to the table and sat down across from Teryn, determined to get what he wanted. "Yes you do. Your dad beat you. He beat your mother. So you shot him. You were scared, hurt. He was killing your mother, and you shot him."

"No."

"You were protecting your mother. And yourself. It was self defense, but you shot him nonetheless."

"No!" she shrieked, recoiling into her chair. "My mother. . ."

"Just say it! And this'll all be over."

"No! I . . ." Tears swelled in her eyes.

He jumped up, knocking the chair backwards with a loud echoing crash, and pounded the table again. He locked his eyes upon hers. "You will tell me!"

"Detective. . ."

"So help me God!"

She pleaded with him. "I . . . I can't. I don't know. . ."

"You do know!" He moved around the table until he towered over her, glowering down at her. "You want to tell me. Damn it, you will tell me!"

"I can't."

"It's eating you! Tell me."

"No. He. . ."

"He killed your mother, Teryn. He killed your mother, and you killed him."

"No."

"God dammit!" Knox raised a hand as if to slap her. She cringed back as far as her chair would allow. "Tell me and let's just put this behind us. It'll all be done. And then we can both move on. We can close this right here."

She remained still, silent, eyeing his uplifted hand. Her tears had already started to dry, and she straightened up in her seat.

"You little bitch! Why can't you just tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell."

Knox dropped his hand, shaking his head. "Yes, there is," he demanded. "The truth has to come out. You have to face it. It needs closure."

"No, it's over."

"It's over because you ended it five years ago. . . by killing your father."

"Why can't you just let this go? That bastard is dead. Leave it alone. He deserved it."

"That's how you justify killing him?" Knox leaned against the table, standing only inches from Teryn.

"No, I didn't."

"He killed your mother, Teryn. He beat her, stabbed her. Do you know how painful a stab wound is? It takes a long time to die from a wound to the stomach, Teryn. He made your mother suffer. He enjoyed it."

She closed her eyes, chewing on her quivering bottom lip. Knox could see that she was holding back the tears once again. "No," she whispered, barely loud enough for him to hear. "I. . . he would have. . ."

"He would have killed you. He killed your mother, Teryn. He choked her, beat her, stabbed her. He made her suffer. He made her hurt. He killed your mother, and he would have killed you. But you killed him. To protect yourself, Teryn, and your mother." Knox let his voice fall to a steady monotone. "You had to save yourself. You had to save your mother, Teryn. He was killing your mother, and you killed him."

"And I hope he rots in hell!" She shrieked, the words echoing off of the gray cinder walls.

Knox watched her chest rise and fall in deep pants and looked up into her face. Her eyes were wide, directed down at the broken floor tiles, but dull and focused on nothing. When she finally faced him, he turned and went back around the table. "You. . ."

"Yes. "

". . . shot him."

"He came into my room while I was asleep. He was drunk. He was going to. . ." she trailed off, lifted her eyes to Knox's level. Cold and detached, she recited the incident as if giving a history report. "My mother stopped him. So he started hitting her. I ran and got his gun. He kept it in a drawer in his dresser. He let me shoot it before at bottles. Usually when he was drunk. It almost knocked me over, but I knew how. I shot him."

Knox lit another cigarette, studied the broken tiles of the floor, watched the lights flicker. He felt her eyes on him, watching him like he was some kind of side-show freak.

"He would have killed me, too," she whispered. "He deserved it. He didn't deserve this world. He deserved to spend eternity in Hell."

"So now you're his judge?"

"Someone had to be."

Knox worked over each finger, cracking every knuckle. He furtively let his eyes drift to her. "Go. Go on. Get out of here."

She started to speak, then snapped her mouth shut. When she looked into his face, he turned away to pick up the overturned chair. "He didn't deserve this world," she finally said.

"Just go."

She stood, stepped toward the door and stopped. With a shaky hand, she refastened the top few buttons of her blouse. Knox turned and watched her. She was a little more under control now.

"You made me," she said. "I just wanted to forget, and you made me remember."

"The truth had to be known," he defended.

She shook her head slowly. "No."

"You killed your father."

"He deserved it."

Knox let his steady gaze fall. "Maybe."

"But that's not all." She was cool now, composed. She twiddled a strand of her hair while Knox lit another cigarette.

"I told you to go. Now do it before I change my mind."

"But you want the truth, don't you?"

"I know the truth." He collapsed into a chair, watching his smoke drift upwards.

"You know part of it," she insisted.

"I know what I need to know. Now go."

"My father, he didn't deserve this world."

"I know."

"But neither did my mother. Not in the same way. She was too good for this world. She's in a better place now."

"Sure."

"I sent her to a better place."

"You..."

"I used the knife. I didn't want her to suffer any more. I wanted her to be with God."

Knox sat still. The cigarette slowly dwindled in his fingers, ashes dropping to the floor. He stared absently at the girl. The black hose, the short skirt, the see-through blouse, black fingernails, and too much make-up and a nose ring--she disgusted him.

"Go," he said. "I don't want to see you again."

He watched her close the door behind herself, and then let his eyes settle upon the file on the table.

Daniel Bartlett

Chaos

Crawls in and out of cracks,

Chitters through walls,

Nests in the insulation.

Gray librarians rage

Against the death of light they cannot see

Through shuttered windows,

And the rest of us sit unafraid;

Unhappy, unsad, unliving, undying,

Until they melt away

Leaving roach-chewed wax

And empty candlesticks.

Roger Cline

I'm not extremely skilled at writing sonnets because my voice doesn't lilt in I-Amps. It dances akimbo, goes awry, Until meaning is sacrificed upon The bloody altar of enforced rhyme and Questionable meter. Faking Elizabethan speech patterns (tho' hip) worse is, And yet the solution eludes my hand. I've tried a stand at free and blank verses And though passable, aren't very fulfilling. Something seems missing; perhaps the will To write in form leads to a catharsis. And so my sonnet dwindles to a close; An end, a beginning, a purge; who knows?

Roger Cline

I don't believe in telepathy, but
In case it exists, this message is for
You, whoever you may turn out to be.
You sit alone, your shadow burrowing,
Sapping your buttresses from beneath as
You think not of me but of white princes
Glowing with rock-hard security and
Light from above, riding stallions and the
Whole paragon of wit, cash flow, and buns.
I e-mail my memo to your psychic
Web page. I AM FOR YOU: not your perfect
Dream sheik, but one who doesn't believe in
Telepathy, and just in case, is here,
Alone with my shadow, sending to you.

Roger Cline

Knots

Someone's asleepin' in my bed,
his left eye open, the other closed.
Somehow he looks familiar,
like a part-twisted image of myself in green.

(Beneath my feet the floor sighs;
the endless possibilities dance away on
tiptoe.)

From the corner (eye spy) lives fly away,
the lives of men never: nothing.
i stop one to ask and he laughs,

While against the wall a boy stands resolute,
his fingers tangled in the strands of a knot.
Today, alone in his room without a light,
he sets off to determine the end.

Mark Nesmith

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