

David Lee

A Hymn for Pearl

A day none of us who were there  
will ever forget was when  
they buried Pearl Nance  
who wanted more than any woman  
ever lived not to be one

from the time she was 12  
she was God's experiment in gravity  
any part you would of thought  
could stick out got too big  
pointed straight down  
even her neck was a broke swivel  
where her head studied only sidewalk

worn men's britches and boots  
snap-up front shirts with W. B. Garrett brown  
and fingernailfile snuffmop in the pockets  
she could hork and spit and curse and lean into a pickup fender  
never did get the rhythm  
to make it seem recreational  
wasn't nobody to fault her  
for not making the effort

it was a Thursday oncet  
she went behind the cafe counter  
late for evening coffee with this pint  
she brought down from Johnston still  
poured half a filled cup brimful  
sed Here Brother Coy  
let me buy you coffee this one time

him setting in his booth alone  
like the cormorant in the tree  
in the garden of life  
with a harpoon to shove into any words  
he heard and thought fit to drag up  
for one of his sermons he brooded on  
as a responsible affliction for the Lord  
to visit on each and all of his many enemies  
him and the Lord shared  
in their enthusiasm for the gospel  
only thing he could think of to say was

Why thank you ma'am  
us struck as dumb as Zacharias  
our meditation on the wish for his death  
interrupted for the moment  
and then: Why this here coffee has some bite to it  
and then: Is it any possibility of a refill?  
to which:

Pearl sed Let me bring you  
a fresh cup Brother Coy  
and then a third  
and lo  
him who we known as so filled with hate  
he'd rot fast when he died  
so E. U. always had a hole dug and ready for  
ahead of time just in case  
began to smile  
began he to even laugh  
for the 1<sup>st</sup> time we known of ever

no one there could have predicted  
the Lord's hand would reach out  
and touch that one  
it was a terrible mystery to us all  
but when he stood and embraced Pearl  
with a Christian's brotherly kiss  
when she brought the 4<sup>th</sup>  
it was a lesson  
to never underestimate the power of the Lord  
or the goodness of fine whiskey

and then she sed  
Brother Coy I am become singful  
and he sed Let us make a joyful noise  
before the Lord  
and began a spate of hymns  
that tested the endurance of all the gods

14 times B. L. Wayburn had to unlock

the café door so half the town  
and all the regulars could come in  
until 4 in the morning from page one  
“Trust and Obey” of Christian Hymnal #2  
to “How Great thou Art” pasted on the backside cover  
memorized by heart in 4 part harmony  
plus 2 others unknown to music  
so R. B. and Ollie could join  
all together singing flatout

even old George Albany come in  
the front door for oncet with his tray  
and perfect pitch tenor we never known of  
did the solo in “Lead Shining Light”  
Pearl rising to the occasion with her obligato  
“Out of the Ivory Palace” Coy bawled on  
and admitted for the 1<sup>st</sup> time  
she thought in a previous life  
maybe she’d been one of those eunuchs  
in the Viennie boy’s choir  
and how much she must of loved it  
as something to look forward to

Coy leading “I come to the Garden Alone”  
from the top of the counter  
in between every stanza saying One more time  
to tell the Lord you really mean it  
so hot in the café by then  
Baby Jesus was wilting off the inside cover  
of the hymnals in their racks  
in their pews in their respective churchhouses  
scattered across the dark streets of our town  
joined together for the first time in song  
the only time any of us who knew him  
professed any love for that sad man  
and then she died

took three days to decide  
she’d never been inside a churchhouse oncet  
since she was ond enough to choose  
it wouldn’t be right to inflict  
the ceremony on her then  
we all came to the graveyard instead

so many people they had to stand on chairs

and almost all the preachers including Coy  
to see B. L. Wayburn speak the words  
we all sed as testimony  
over coffee he wrote down  
how when he come to the part  
she was the founder of the Thursday Night Choir  
which only met that one time  
it must of been the inspiration of the Lord  
us all breaking out together at oncet  
with "Just as I Am" flatout

every one of us there who known  
could see with our eyes closed  
her big chest swell up  
knowing she wasn't no longer alone  
till all them pearl snaps on her cowboy shirt  
popped open one by one