

Richard Houff

In Our Town

During the day, we'd gather at Billy's.
He ran this no-name gas station sitting above a sandpit
where we played an occasional game of baseball.

It was cool hanging out with him
because he treated us as equal in a world
governed by suits with too many rules.

He was a drifter from East Texas, who
came to our town by way of Greyhound,
and landed at the St. Francis Hotel.

The place was a one dollar per night
flophouse located near the railroad tracks,
a real dump lacking in all amenities.

We didn't see Billy as a guy down
on his luck, but viewed him as a friend
that let us smoke cigarettes and bullshit.

He referred to us as carpetbaggers or pissants,
and was always telling us stories about naked
women and you'd swear that he got laid all the time.

And then one day, it all ended
with the pumps turned off, and
a sign announcing the place had closed.

When they hauled us into the police station
for questioning, it came to light, how Billy liked
touching young boys and they needed to escort
him back to Texas, where he was wanted.

We all agreed, that he never did anything
bad or out of line in regards to ourselves,
but after the commotion settled down,
rock-solid friendships suddenly dissolved,
and everybody just slipped away
feeling a whole lot older.

The Gift

I met her at the Salvation Army store
while waiting to use the fitting room.
She asked to be next, and I said, “sure
no problem,” noticing the armful
of mismatched shit she was cradling.
I’ve grown more patient with age
(while putting down the corduroy
sport coat which people now call retro,
but in my day we called it being broke).
Further shopping produced a Peterson
pipe with the bit half chewed off and
real cheap, so I bought it.
There’s a tobacco shop on the same block
and I thought maybe they could replace
the stem, and after getting the runaround
on unavailable parts while being led
to the new pipe rack, I said, “no thanks.”
Out in front of the place, I fired it up
and blew a few smoke rings for them.
I think they wanted to tell me to get lost
but changed their minds in knowing
that the neighborhood was a powder keg.
About the time this was all coming down;
the woman from the Salvation Army
walked up and asked me to buy her
a cup of coffee and I said, “alright.”
We went to a corner café, operated by
a bunch of crusading dry-drunks
where the waitresses are known for being
cranky bitches, and the whole atmosphere
had “for squares” written all over the place.
When she finished with the refills
we left together, and I walked her home.
She lived above an auto parts store
three blocks straight ahead on the same street.
When we got to her place, she asked if I would
like to come in for a bowl of Cheerios,
and I said, “that would be fine.”
She was wearing the cord sport jacket
underneath her coat with a load of trinkets.
And with a big smile, she said, “Merry Christmas.”
It was a perfect fit.

Homecoming

It had been thirty-years
of travel and over six-thousand miles
since his eye's had graced the landscape.

All the familiar trees were gone
—plowed under with the farms;
there were new terms and phrases to contemplate.

Pure desolation said the old-timers;
plain and simple: government contracted,
the lending institutions and slick lawyers.

Everybody getting rich except us farmers,
we should've never listened to their schemes
of buy more land and pay later.

The foreclosures that followed
were brutal, some chose suicide from the loss,
generations of farm families destroyed.

The land, unfit and befouled with toxins
and chemicals, all in the name of a better yield,
open sores that'll never heal and to think we bought it.

Well, I guess its payback time
for all that chose the lie of better days ahead.

“So tell me, how's it been with you?”

Richard D. Houff was the editor of *Heeltap Magazine* and *Pariah Press*, from 1986 to 2010. He has had twenty-three books published thus far in both poetry and prose. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and periodicals, both nationally, and throughout Europe. His most recent poetry collection is *Night Watch and Other Hometown Favorites*, from *Black Cat Moon Press*.