

Jennifer Patri—A Tragedy in 32 Years

Doris T. Wight†

Her mother finally ran away from hard fists,
taking her ten young children, including Jennie,
four years old. One night in summer, Uncle
poked a stick-like thing inside Jen's panties.
Uncle hissed at her as she resisted:
"You'll be punished, Jennie, if you tell!"
Jennie cried the most when their Ma left them.
"Did Mama go away because of me?"

Nineteen, entranced with Robert Patri, twenty,
Jen was happy!—Though blond, handsome Rob
would strike her, once so hard she had to have
a rib surgically removed. Still, Jen wed Robert.
"It's surely your own fault if your man hurts you.
All men hit women. I'll be true to Rob
no matter what. And I'd never leave my children
like my ma did. You've got to protect your kids!"

She'd bought a new black shotgun yesterday
after Robert phoned, demanding to see them,
their daughters she'd learned he'd molested. Thirteen years
of welts, bruised eyes, cuts, broken limbs, her jaw,
long years of lying to people in town when she
drove in from Rob's and her farm to teach the Bible,
had ended. Robert was living with someone new,
but wanted their daughters, now hidden at her sister's.

Drink stank on Robert's breath as he entered the farmhouse,
shaking his fist as those old good looks approached her.
"This place has gone to hell!" he hissed—though it hadn't.
"And so have you, Jen!—Now where did you hide my girls?"
"The girls are safe: you'll never touch them again!"
"You're really asking for it, aren't you, bitch?"

† Doris T. Wight has lectured at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and published poetry and fiction after earning her Ph.D. in comparative literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She currently teaches English at a Federal prison.

Slick as a snake he snatched his knife, while she,
as quick, picked up her shotgun. Robert froze.

“God damn!” Rob grinned. “I’ll *get* you for buying that!”
Furious, oh furious! “I’ll *kill* you—you hear me, Jen?”
Shot flew: Rob’s shoulder. “*Jen!*” Again. . . . Rob’s head.
Rob sank where he stood, amazement in red-veined eyeballs,
while Jennifer stared beyond Robert—far far off.

Jennifer dragged a weight down steps, then cleaned
the blood upstairs . . . drove Robert’s truck a ways off . . .
walked back, still in a trance . . . then went to haul
something back up from the basement. “The woodshed? . . . field? . . .”
Shovel burying something, she still gazed off. . . .

Back inside the farmhouse at last, she gasped . . .
wound herself in thin curtains . . . and lit a match.