Here are two of the nine poems that appear in both my *Blue Nib* chapbook contest winning selection and in *Mutt Spirituals.*

Johnny Walks To School With The Wrestler’s Kids

I walk to school with the wrestler’s kids.

They walk like grown-ups, smooth and spare.

They look at the world through hooded lids.

They look at me like I’m hardly there.

I wait for them by the EXXON sign.

*My dad’s a teacher. He calls me Jack.*

*We’re new in town, I like it fine.*

I talk to them but they don’t talk back.

Patrick is seven. I'm almost seven.

George is ten. He smells, a bit.

Kevin's thirteen. He's big, is Kevin.

He sets the pace. We keep to it.

But sometimes Thursday, sometimes Friday,

across the pedestrian overpass,

between the slip road and the highway,

Patrick topples me to the grass—

locking his elbow around my neck—

pinning me between earth and sky…

If I wiggle free, George turns me back.

Kevin stands watching the cars go by.

I walk to school with the wrestler’s boys.

I sing and kick tin-cans. They call me the Noise.

They say my name like they’re spitting phlegm.

Sometimes, I walk like I’m one of them.

We’re wrestler’s boys; we’re lean and cool;

we don’t need you and we don’t need school.

Sometimes I walk like I’m big and tough.

When my teacher winks, I start to laugh.

She winks at me, as if they don’t count.

They look at the world through their hooded lids.

Blankly ahead, as if maybe they don’t.

I walk to school with the wrestler’s kids.

Derek Kannemeyer,

from "Blue Nib Chapbook 1", available on Amazon or from Blue Nib,

and reprinted in MUTT SPIRITUALS, from San Francsico Bay Press.

*This poem was originally printed in The Richmond Quarterly, back in the 1980s. It's a genuine childhood memory, although I've changed all the names and invented several of the details. (I don't actually recall the names or ages of the wrestler's kids.) It was originally part of a series of childhood pieces playing with the rhythms of playground chants.*

Inside The A/C Ducts At American Tobacco

It’s light enough in here to read the label on the whiskey bottle

Buck swigs or seems to swig from and swings back to Leon;

light enough to read Buck’s face and know he’s being polite,

that at his age he’s a little scared of Leon; would rather do

the work we’re up here sweltering to get done—scraping from

the duct walls their crustcoats of tobacco smell—and haul ass

down; but thinking back, where can the light have come from?

Around us, the pipes are dull 0's going nowhere, and Leon

is kneeling on the one shut trapdoor out… I’m younger then,

fresh out of grad school and sightseeing the work world: office

temping, some light industrial, worse comes to worst, a visit to

the tip of the dark continent of retail. Industrial's best. Most alien,

most separate from who I am. Leon scrapes one-handed, drunk,

with more brisk, vigorous efficiency than me both-fisted sober,

like someone nonchalantly, fiercely masturbating, who hasn’t

noticed he’s been at it five hours straight. *The way I see it,* he’s

telling Buck, *I’m a king, I got a right to all them women. My wife,*

*though, I catch her messing around one time, that bitch is done,*

*my obligation’s over. Now you talking,* Buck chimes in sometimes,

though Leon barely, in fact, shuts up. *Amen, brother.* *Got dat right.*

There’s light from somewhere to see the sweat on him, to gauge

the tight disclaimer of his smile: *I’m just appeasing Mr. Crazy!*

His scraper arm, in shadow, climbs the shaft. Mine's a side panel.

Leon has the floor, working the jerky tom-tom of our busy signal.

We rasp and peel. Each archback of stripped skin releases a sweet

toxic stink, so omnipresent I can’t smell it till I’m miles away,

heaving my work clothes off in volleys, to step over their ripe

sprawl like a body. Figure of death or dissolution, there’s not light

enough to tell; *whichever of them bitches wants me baddest*.

Derek Kannemeyer,

from "Blue Nib Chapbook 1", available on Amazon or from Blue Nib,

and reprinted in MUTT SPIRITUALS, from San Francisco Bay Press.

*This piece is another piece of true memory, with the names changed. And not much else at all. There was a sign on the factory floor, I remember, which said something like WARNING: THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY HAS DETERMINED THAT THE SURGEON GENERAL IS HAZARDOUS TO ITS HEALTH. All those tobacco factories are long gone from that Shockoe*

*part of downtown Richmond, Virginia, which is now all gentrified and pretty.*