

Bette Lynch Husted

Anything a Box Will Hold

Our line inches forward.

One postal clerk on duty and shift change
at the mill, the trailer plant, both prisons.

We all want to go home.

The man ahead of me carries his box
tucked under one elbow—a toddler snatched up
mid-laugh from run-and-tussle on the grass—
except, of course, it's winter. His mackinaw's
unbuttoned to the cold.

The poor buy money orders.

Someone behind me
sets her package on the counter
to push along, then reaches out
to clutch it back.

For \$7.95 we can ship anything
a box this size will hold
to soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan:
wet wipes, soap and razors,
cookies. Five boys dead
so far, one home without his legs.

The man shifts, cocks his box
on one hip. In plain view now: PAROLE CLOTHES.
Black marker letters square as his fist.
All six sides.

*(Nobody's ever read to me before —
Sammy, in my prison class,
cheek resting on his folded arms. . . .)*

At last it's his turn.

This wasn't my idea. His voice
a daisy cutter spiraling the room
one pitch too high.

*It's nothing fancy. Just enough
to get him home, maybe
he's learned enough
he won't go back.*

We stare at passport signs,
posters of stamps. That hanging Appaloosa quilt.
Outside, the flag's at half staff
for a boy from Warm Springs.
Then, again, the litany of questions—
Is anything inside our boxes fragile?
Liquid? Hazardous?
Perishable?