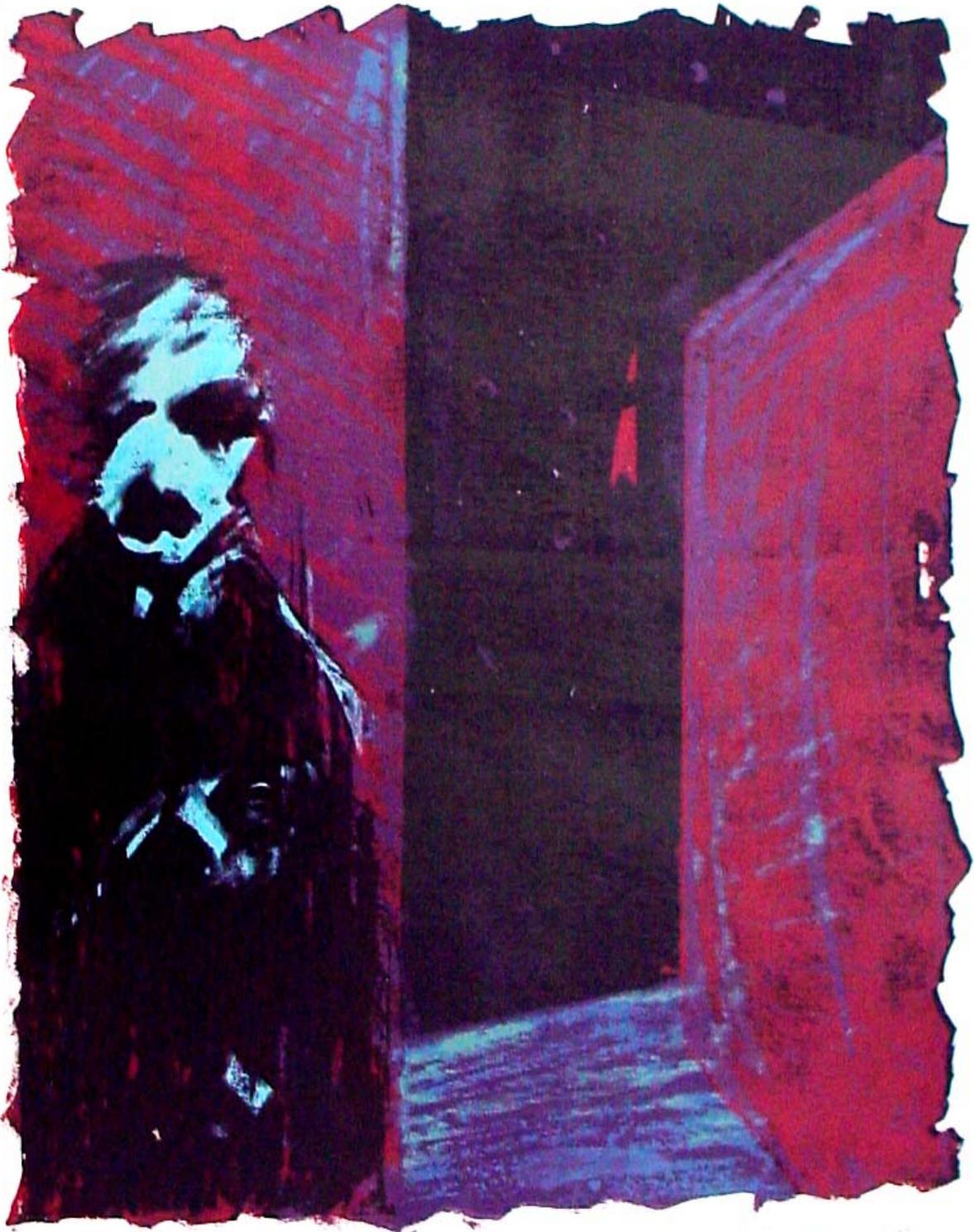


Bluegrass Accolade

BCTC Literary Journal - Issue No. 1



Poetry Editor

Tammy Ramsey

Associate Professor, English
Bluegrass Community and Technical College
Lexington, Kentucky

Fiction Editor

Maureen Cropper

Assistant Professor, Electronic Resources Librarian
Bluegrass Community and Technical College
Lexington, Kentucky

Cover Art

Bill Snyder

Associate Professor, Biology
Bluegrass Community and Technical College
Lexington, Kentucky

Cover Art Title: "Loneliness"

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2008

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The *Bluegrass Accolade* was begun as a project of the Literary Arts Subcommittee of the Bluegrass Community and Technical College's Arts on Campus Committee. Our thanks go out to all who helped make this project possible, including the writers, poets, and artists who contributed their work, and the committee members who contributed their time and effort to the production of this first issue.

her high school English teachers,

Real English teachers, I gathered,
who paid attention

to things like penmanship,
All of them
praised, extolled,
appreciated
her writing.

Where was the problem?
Whose was the problem?

The C had been written clearly,
the only message I had clearly given.

She tossed,
interpreted,
my comments
out of the text,
like so many words unnecessary to the drama,
and flung the paper towards me.

"You can revise," I told her,
eager to retrieve this
A student,
eager for one more chance.

"No time," she said,
dismissing me,
the problem settled,
deciphered.
Assigned.
Her exit line
so fine,
she pauses to repeat it.
"No time."

JOE ANTHONY *St. Francis and Joey*

St. Francis, he was told, by Sister Mary Caroline,
his first grade teacher,
threw all he owned away.
He wanted to be poor.
Free from all the material
possessions a rich young man
in 14th century Assisi might possess.
Joey wanted to be free, too.
He was already, in South Jersey 1952 terms,
poor, though nobody had told him that.
But he knew he wasn't free,
and he wanted to be.
So he threw what he had away,
his jacket, his first grade reader
with its nice neat family of David and Anne
and Pal,
his shoes, too, and ran sock-footed
up and down the field at the edge of the
new housing development, yelling,
I'm poor, Lord, poor, meaning,
he gathered later,
I'm free, Lord, free.
But he wasn't, of course.
He was just six.
Nobody is free at six.
At seven, the age of reason,
the choice of hell looms, and six is spared that, at least,
but six reads, and knows its limits.
He had had to turn in his running already
for the field abruptly stopped
at two torn trees waiting for the bulldozers.
Joey wondered, as he paused, who would feed him?
Who would help him find his jacket, for that matter,
and his shoes, for though it was just October
and winter's edge more than a few fallen leaves away,
his feet were cold, he noticed, suddenly,
and the night sky strange and menacing.

MICHAEL BENTON

A Celebration of Alterity

Alterity
Slippery word
Whose meaning is
Not decipherable
Never stated clearly,
Nor fixed firmly
The nerve of the word
Alterity

It may be approached,
Though, if one dares,
Through networks
Of associations
Altar, Alter
Alternative, Alternation

I yearn to sacrifice
Myself upon the
Altar of her sexuality.
Yet, I hold back
Fearing that the pleasure
May somehow alter me.

Her scent and taste
Seizes the roots of my soul
What alternative is there?
I vacillate, between pleasure and pain
Ceaselessly resonating between
Yawning gaps of reason

Even the meaning of alterity
Precipitates a crisis
Symbol of difference
Naming of the OTHER
Its power mocks
Conformity's lack

Resist the conservative urge
To embrace sameness
Explore those who differ
Open up closed circuits
Rise up to celebrate
The eros of alterity

DON BOES

Escalator

At the top of the escalator
I unshackle my complaints
while my pleasures grow
more inclusive: snagging a foul ball
hit by the opposing team,
grinning at the photos
in my high school yearbook,
swallowing three pills
at the start of each day
instead of more than three.

And then there's my son,
establishing a garden
near the cracked driveway.
Like my dad, whom he never met,
he plants tomatoes and carrots,
easy vegetables even a kid
can coax out of the circus ground,
along with a few flowers
beginning with the letter z.
Not a grower myself,

I'm a nailer and a clipper
and never appreciated my dad
so although no critters are in sight
I erect the chicken wire
that stumps the local rabbits.
On the way down, I can't get lost.
I descend into a network
of jackets and sweaters and pajamas
and I glimpse a shoulder I wish I knew
or a neck from 1988 or a mouth from Boston.

The last step melts into the floor.
This year melts into the next.
Yesterday, in travel accessories,
an old friend appeared, his brief case
shining and my name on his lips.
Some people have no problem coming
closer. When I back out of the garage
my Volkswagen nearly kisses
the tallest zinnia. My pal
shook my hand before I could shake his.

DON BOES

The Old Neighborhood

Remember the road trip
from Louisville to Cleveland
to visit Michelle (we called
her Mickey) and to see
the Indians play the Royals
in the mistake by the lake?
Long ago reduced to rubble,
that stadium. So what else is new?
Those bleacher seats are dust
and Mickey was dead of a flustered heart
weeks after we headed south.
She adored *The Confederacy of Dunces*.

The new owner of my childhood home
has demolished the tree in the front yard,
the tree festooned by my father's
homemade birdhouses, the tree
in the front yard of the house
I will always never live in again.
Now that address is treeless
although my memory
still provides song and shade
and summer afternoons
with my little brother
surrounded by a chain link fence.
Whether guilty or not so guilty,
we all want more polish
applied to our permanent record.
After my brother died
I found a pistol under his sofa.
Mickey, by the way, bicycled
across the kingdom of Spain.
She sat next to me in right field.

HASSAN DAVIS

The Power Poem

This right here is my power poem
and I only shout it out
When I need to make the world back up.

See my power poem is sharp like me
And with this power poem I can cut thru crap
waaaaaay before I have to start walking in it.

Sometimes I just sling my poem.
at offending ideas,
And weak minded thoughts,
I toss it at anything and everything
That tries to keep me in my place

I just launch it
With all my wit
Straight slashing that trash talk
With my verbal accuracy.

See, This power poem is not your
garden variety, run-of-the-mill, everyday power poem
it is not Power poem lite
Or one calorie power poem.
It ain't a Decaf power poem with just a hint of hazelnut.

This power poem contain
100%,
High-octane,
Broad-band
Super-caffeinated,
Un-filtered might.

It's the kind of poem that can make a mommas boy
Leave home, start cooking, get a job, make the bed,
And wash his own stank draws

It's the kind of poem
Make that dog you always see chasing cars,
Come walking home with a tire.

It's the kind of poem make a woman want to
Bring home the bacon
Fry it up in the pan
And eat the whole damn meal herself
Then tell her man
"If you were really hungry
You would have had dinner ready when **I** hit the door"

Oh yes this is a power-full poem
And in case you still have doubt
I am serving free samples just for you,
And you
And you.

So, open up your ears
Pour some of this down your drain
Cause when the first verse caresses your brain ...

Damn!!

You won't be able to just sit around
Waiting for the world to get right.
You gonna feel the urge to grab this baby by the love handles and
Turn it upside down all by yourself

See, this right here is my power poem
And I only whip it out when the world needs to recognize.
Then like Batman I fade into the night
Leaving only these words
Stuck like blades in the back of your mind.

His Funeral

The air was crisp
and floating down.
it pressed my thought
as he rode
upon his back
behind our heads.
he liked neither ...
and didn't trust
someone else to drive.
but now reduced
to riding there.
In life, his sleep
was gasps for air
and so thought
he stood a better chance
turned on a side
"Not as likely to be a 'goner'," he often said.
Within the hearse,
I heard his voice
calling me to build the fires
"Boy!" rang in the room,
my feet remembered hitting the floor
before the echo quit.
I glanced over my shoulder,
as I have done
often since,
to see if he approved
my tears,
but saw no movement
of the casket lid.

New Year's Eve

We stayed home ...
not because there wasn't anything to do
sure, we could have been sandwiched
among the revelers at the Crystal Ballroom
of the Hyatt Regency downtown
or sitting around some chipped Formica table
at a Veterans of Foreign War post
my mother-in-law even invited us
to come by their place
"We'll be celebrating New Year's early this year –
Around nine thirty," she said.
"John and I have to be in bed by ten
or we won't be able to get up and go to McDonald's
for coffee in the morning."
It just didn't seem right –
New Year's Eve over, two hours before it was over.
So we stayed home ...
cooked New York Strips and baked potatoes on the grill
boiled some freshwater prawns
and dipped them in butter.
Then I got out my collection of greatest hits of the 1960s
we fast danced to "Shout" and "Louie, Louie"
slow danced to "Ferry 'cross the Mersey"
and I'm Leaving It Up to You"
you grabbed a two-pound weight out of a basket
to use as a microphone in a cute pantomime
of "Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying"
and sat on the subwoofer
while the driving bass of "Green Onions"
rattled the doors of the stereo cabinet
then fell over onto the carpet
laughing hysterically,
pedaling your legs in bicycle circles
while saying this was
the only way you could continue dancing

I played D.J., Disco Dan, Melvis the Pelvis,
and jumped off the footstool onto our carpeted
dance floor when "Wooly Bully" came on
Like Junior Early did in high school
when he met Cleta Dodd
in the middle of the gym floor
and danced like a fool on fire
After all,
we stayed home and
it was New Year's Eve.

ERIC HENNINGER

Bob Ross

Cadmium Yellow, Dark Sienna, Phthalo Blue,
Titanium White, Alizarin Crimson, and Yellow Ochre too.
It takes so many colors to make a tranquil scene,
I have to get a loan and live beyond my means.

You tell me to paint “happy little trees,”
To move my brush smooth and free.
In my world, anything can happen,
But my “carefree” clouds are grossly misshapen.

You make it look so easy there on the T.V.
With countless fan brushes and creativity.
My eager smile is now a frown,
I have every color but Van Dyke Brown.

You get such a joy and such a rush
Every time you “beat the devil” out of your brush.
My mind really enjoys the painting part.
It’s my hands that may not be cut out for art!

ERIC HENNINGER

Double Bogey

Lush green fairways call to me.
The unforgiving rough beckons louder still.
Distant flag blows whimsically in the wind as it taunts and dares me.
The sand trap belches its tan granules at me in mockery.
Still and seemingly harmless the water waits for the innocent.
Trees in their strength ridicule me,
They draw me by some unknown power.

At last it comes to this,
After overcoming all obstacles,
I stand on the edge of the elusive green island
But a chip away from the rare birdie.
I am one with the ball.
No, I am the ball.
My club of choice argues with my grip.
It twists in my hands.

Again it comes to this,
I stand now on the opposite side of the elusive green
But another chip away from saving par.
Again I am certain that I will be the ball.
I strike and drop my club to the ground
Looking down at the ball only feet in front of me.

Here, a mere putt away from saving the hole with a bogey,
My eyes deceive me and the surface of the green island shifts.
Tips and articles confuse me playing tricks on my mind.
The short grass rises to trip my putter.
The ball tires on its way home.
Fatigued and able to go no further
It never reaches its destination.
Alas, another double bogey.

DEBBIE JOHNSON

Girl

Make the bed every morning. Breakfast and hot coffee by seven. Wash the dishes. Wash the clothes. Sweep the floors. Pull the curtains. Weed the garden. Water the flowers. Feed the cat. Brush the dog. Bath the baby. Take the kids to school. Don't ride motorcycles. Don't talk to boys with tattoos. Don't call boys. Don't kiss on the first date. Make him get the door. You're not going if he honks the horn. He won't buy the cow if he gets the milk for free. Men work. Behind every good man is a good woman. Go to the grocery on Thursday. Women shouldn't drive. Men don't do diapers. Always wear a bra. Always fix your face. You're getting fat. Don't swear. Don't drink. Don't smoke, it makes you look trashy. For God's sake don't get pregnant. Don't go out with a wet head, you'll catch your death. That skirt is too short. That blush is too dark. That lipstick is too bright. Did you use magic marker for eyeliner? Girls don't date younger boys. Girls don't date older boys. Girls don't play sports. Don't lie. Don't tell that. Go to church on Sunday. Smile. Stay married no matter what. Don't talk about such things. Sweep that under the rug. Are you having sex? Are you losing weight? Are you on drugs? Have you been drinking? You can be anything you want to be. You want to do what? Marry a rich man. Marry for love. Don't ever get married, men are losers. Why aren't you happy? If you'd ever apply yourself you could have it all. Family secrets are secrets we don't tell family. Are you listening? Stop rolling your eyes at me. Go to your room young lady!

REG LEE

Junk Yard

Last Thursday night was when the frozen turkey crashed through our front window. My wife and I heard it and we got out of bed to investigate. It was a twenty-five pound bird, still in its wrapping. It had only broken one plane of glass, and I commented on how incredible that was. "Wow", my wife said, "Jill dropped a turkey like that on her foot and broke it". "Yeah", I said, "it's pretty heavy". "Why would anyone throw out a perfectly good turkey," my wife wondered. I checked the expiration date. "It went bad on Monday," I said. We threw the bird away and cleaned up the glass. I kissed my wife goodnight as we returned to bed. "Maybe we could get something useful next time," I said. "Herbie," my wife said, "you know that no one throws anything useful away". I agreed with her and remained still, pretending to fall asleep. When she started snoring, I crawled out of bed and went downstairs. I retrieved the frozen turkey and put it in the oven to cook. Then I went down to the basement. There I found the other treasures: the typewriter, the broken chandelier, the torn-up couch, the string-less guitar. All of these objects had come to us through the window. A black hole existed somewhere and the tail end of it was on our own lawn. Sure, it was a pain in the butt replacing the window all the time. But it was exciting having a scientific wonder close up like that. My wife didn't mind as long as the junk was thrown away. But I couldn't do that. I had big plans in store for the black hole and the junk—envisioning yard sales, hundreds of them, and when the timer went off, perhaps some turkey sandwiches.

REG LEE

Splintered Friendship

Randy and I were orphans. The orphanage that we spent our formative years in has since been demolished—deemed unfit for children by the city council. Not that the heartless and cruel ways of the orphanage is entirely to blame for the way we've turned out. My ancestry is chock full of lunatics, harlots, murderers, and the former President Andrew Johnson. It's possible that I might have turned out this way even with a loving family. Randy was another story. Nobody knew where he came from, or why he'd get infested with termites from time to time. He seemed real enough, but when he got hurt, tiny splinters of wood came out, instead of blood. And when he told a lie, his nose would grow big. It wasn't noticeable if it was a little lie, but when he told "Big Whoppers", his nose would grow fifteen feet. When that happened, Randy would repent for his sinful ways, usually a thousand or so 'Hail Marys', before the nose shrank back down to size. After the orphanage, Randy and I joined the military. We thought it would be a good way to meet scantily clad women, and for a time, it was. But the Polish-Jamaican War broke out, and Randy was sent to kill for his country. I was dishonorably discharged due to my bad credit, but I knew the real reason. The Army was looking for a super soldier and I didn't fit the bill. Randy received a ton of medals for all the killing he did. And I don't know if it was because of all that, but after the war, Randy returned to his lying ways. At the orphanage, the other kids would tease him unmercifully about his growing nose. But the adult world was different: Randy found that the ladies actually liked his long honker. So he gave up on repenting, choosing to let it grow. Now I'm behind bars in San Quentin, a nickel and dime rap. And Randy is a successful shark, working the lambs and sheep of the corporate world in New York. But the lies he's telling these days must be enormous. Because I woke up Monday and found the tip of his nose outside my cell. I glanced around, suspicious at first, because prison makes a person naturally suspicious. But it was definitely Randy's nose. I tried to see through the bars and couldn't see much, but the nose seemed to go for miles. I wondered if it stretched all the way from New York, or if Randy was somewhere nearby on business. There was no way for me to tell, but the nose came closer to me—right up to the bars. I touched the nose for a moment, patting it like I would a dog's head. I'm glad my friend Randy is doing alright. I was really worried about his screwed up life for a while.

REG LEE

Victory by Default

a
chip has been on my shoulder for the better
part
of three days.
it involves a woman
which
it usually does.
my love's so non-committal
i don't actually know if
i'm in love with
this woman
or
if i just want to
round the bases with her,
hit a home run,
and all that stuff.

i'd like to get the chance
to show her
what a terrible lover
i would make.
the ladies, they call me
'Mr. Quick',
i would say.
and she would giggle as our
clothes met the
floor.

chasing skirts
is
a favorite
hobby of mine.
i'm not one of 'those guys'
however,
the Olympians of the
sport,
except in my head,
where i take the gold
every time.

this woman is nice,
very sweet.
the kind you'd take home
to mother.
i'd like to place first in the
chase for her.
i'd like to tell her
my 'Mr. Quick' joke.
i'd like to learn what's
so great about love
again.

but every time the race
is about to began,
when i should be 'ready,
set' on the
starting line,
i find myself in the stands,
buying
hot dogs or tamales.
as the gun goes off,
i see the competition go
flying round the track,
as i, now a bystander,
can only watch
and think, 'that should've been me'

LUCIE MACDONALD

Humu

Moving silently to nowhere,
Submerged in an artificial sea.
Acquiescent, willing to share
His space in time. Content to be
Picasso's dream of silver streaks
And colors shared with earth and sky.
Never ceasing fins form valleys and peaks—
His translucent veils. Metallic eyes
Of iridescent blue belie the fact
He sees only himself and by chance
A friend or two. One charitable act
Is his. He shares his sustenance,
But is merely a soldier in the fray,
For his feeding comes but once a day.

LUCIE MACDONALD

Ode to Bev

As in the adolescent bloom of youth,
Love's blind song is raised from far
Away, in tune with heart's discordant truth.
Besmitten eyes are glazed and bar
The way to any who may choose to share
Life's discontent. Portals close
To all but the chosen one. Love's lair
Is home where illusions repose.
But then, like lightning in a moonlit sky,
Doubt's dagger twists to rent the soul,
And takes its place where hope did lie
Aspawl upon a sunlit knoll.
The soul, though scathed, ascends to rise above
The torment of unrequited love.

LUCIE MACDONALD

The Pond

Enclosed in the encompassing arms
Of Earth, imprisoned with nowhere to go,
Submerged dwellers are safe beyond the harms
Of Man. Tangled webs of green below
Grow strong to make a hiding place,
Abounding with those of a nether world
Secure inside their secret space.
An endless shore curled
To meet itself outside the keep,
Reflecting blue above and worlds beyond.
Oblivious to what lies deep
Below, the shore produces one green frond
Or more within its girth,
To join the depths in Nature's birth.

JAMIE SAUNDERS

You Can't Outrun the Rain

Anything is possible
or so we're often told
All our dreams achievable
if only we're so bold

Miracles are happening
around us everyday
Yet fear keeps us believing that
you can't outrun the rain

We have flown beyond the sky
and sailed across the seas
We have climbed the mountainsides
and high up in the trees

Everything is possible
with so much to be gained
Just don't let fear make you believe
you can't outrun the rain

ALEXANDRA SMITH

Epiphany at the Waffle House

The red clotted sun barely radiates,
Through the cracks in the dusty blinds
And her eyes half closed in reverie
As meat crackles over lard,
She comes to terms with her wrinkles,
Her lips cracked skin, total apathy,
Fried grease and ham on her skin rolls,
I know she thinks I'm too young,
To smoke the cigarette in my hand,
"Did you have a dream?"
She says a missionary, spread Gods word,
Like wildfire, save the world,
Through the holes in Jesus' hand,
And the blood tears trickle down,
Lambs blood on the fryer.
I stole a dollar of change so that,
I could come here, make-shift church,
Just wanting a cup of bitter coffee
Then return to normalcy,
Not the hollow eyes of her,
Of dreams unfulfilled.
Instead I returned there and realized,
There was no music playing, like usual,
Maybe silence helps eat away
The hopelessness of a lost youth.

JOE ANTHONY

The Guy Who Killed My Mother

The guy who killed my mother got five years I hear but probably only served a year or two since drunk driving in 1950 wasn't really considered a crime but it was the middle of the day and he was coming down the hill on the wrong side of the road and she was the mother of three. All that got a small headline and probably the 5 year sentence which after all was a pretty big sentence in 1950 though I'm not even sure he got 5 years but that's what my dad mumbled once when I pressed him. Nobody talked about it. Nobody talked about anything, you know. When my mother was mentioned, about once every three years or so, everybody tensed up like you were saying a bad word out loud but in context like you were reading the bible so it was ok like "the sinners were damned" or "Heaven and Hell" so you weren't just cussing, you had a good reason for using those words, but still the words were the words and they were there like some big wreck in the road that you steered around and kept looking at all the way past though the cop was waving you by, keeping moving, keep moving. That's the way Mother's name might come into the conversation—but not too often, of course, since that would have seemed disloyal to Jeanne, our step-mother, except the word step-mother was never used, either—shades of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty and all those other fairy-tales where the step-mother is evil and tormenting and all that. An outsider, maybe an old friend of my dad's, might mention my mother to me, like, "I guess you don't remember your mother, do

you?" considering I was two months shy of my fourth birthday, everybody would freeze up like he had broken a taboo or something. I did remember 3 or 4 images but I usually just shook my head because I knew remembering out loud would get a sarcastic response for the next day or so as Jeanne, we called her mother, would talk about the "evil" stepmother. I was the last of the three of us to call her Mother, Bobby the eldest was the first followed by Ronny—I know this, because Jeanne would recount the story about how Bobby was first and I knew I was to blame for being so tardy. She'd also tell the horror of how she first came into the house, she was a housekeeper sent by Catholic Charities and subsidized by them, how we were all doing what we wanted, eating what we wanted, and the moldy laundry in the cellar left by some previous housekeeper that Jeanne tried mighty hard to save but couldn't. It wasn't any use scrubbing and soaking. I always remember that. Once laundry gets moldy, you might as well throw it out.

The three things I remember of my mother don't have any real rhyme to them and they sure don't have any reason. I was playing with Jo-Anne and her brother Buddy and it was a neighborhood though I was only three I was allowed out of sight and across the street which is pretty odd to think about now that I think about it. And mother was calling my name, "Joey, Joey," in that steady crescendo that I guess only mothers used for a dad calling would get louder and madder when he didn't get a response. But she kept calling in that steady sing-song but Jo-Anne kept telling me not to go so that when mother did appear she was mad and I cried

out that it was Jo-Anne's fault she had told me not to go but mother ignored that and started to whale at my behind. You can't blame others I guess I learned or at least don't listen to Jo-Anne.

The second memory I got is me playing in a room and mother and daddy yelling at each other in the next room—maybe it was the living room because I remember their faces---daddy red but mother holding her own. Only I wasn't upset and I don't think I remember it because I was upset. It was just a part of the household. Later on, Dad and Jeanne had a lot of fights and some of them were upsetting like the time Bobby took the knife from Jeanne as she crept her way toward Daddy drunk on the living room chair and the only time I remember Daddy hitting Jeanne, knocking her flat out on the floor because he had found out that she hadn't let an old friend of his, Mo Lewis, into the house when he came visiting when Daddy wasn't there. Mo was a long-time drunk, and kind of sleazy, too, --he was a shoe salesman for years and I remember my aunt, she moved in the same circles, saying she couldn't imagine letting him bend down to her ankles, fitting the shoe on her foot and letting his fingers creep upwards, the creep she shuddered. So Jeanne not letting him in when he was half to the wind and she still a pretty woman seemed reasonable only she never could keep anything to herself and she let my dad know when he was drinking and if there was one thing that would make my dad blow up was the idea of a friend of his coming round and not being let in the house. But we all yelled at daddy and he looked ashamed or taken aback and it never happened again as far I know and she never crept towards him with a knife again, either. As far as I know.

The third memory I have of mother is the day of the accident if you can call it an accident when you're already so tanked you can't tell which side of the road it is and it isn't even three in the afternoon let alone three in the morning. Mother is asking me if I want to go pick up Bobby and Ronnie from school, St. Rose of Lima's which was over in the next town from Audubon, about a mile or so away in Haddon Heights near the Haddonfield border. They were in first and second grade and sometimes walked home since it wasn't that far and though we knew about drunk drivers those days, nobody worried about child molesters which isn't to say we didn't have them, just nobody worried about them. But we had borrowed Granddad's 1938 Dodge for some reason and so we could go pick them up. So mother was asking me if I wanted to go which I guess was sort of a rhetorical question since I was still three and I don't think she was going to leave me on my own. But she might have left me with a neighbor, I don't know, maybe with Joanne and Buddy's mom though I have no memory of them having a mom I guess they did. So I hopped in the front seat because kids traveled in the front seat in those days and we headed up Washington Terrace which is where we lived but we hadn't got off the block before that fellow hit us smack on which I don't remember any of except that I ended up in front of the steering wheel with a split lip and my mother had flown out the passenger side and somebody speculated that she had somehow grabbed me when the fellow hit us and somehow saved me but at the time all anyone would tell me when I asked for her because I do remember right after is that she had flown up to heaven, flown up to heaven with

the angels without saying goodbye I wondered but never really asked because it was understood that I wasn't really to mention her name.

I was a lot older when my dad mumbled that thing about the five years but I don't really know if that was true or not. That's more than fifty years now and five years is just a drop, a drop. I did try to get more information when I was older; I'd get him off alone, away from Jeanne, but he wasn't talking. He never did understand why I'd want to go over all that stuff, that past stuff. He figured I didn't remember her anyway did I? I was way too young. But I did, I told him, a little. Only I never told him what.

MICHAEL BENTON

A Thanksgiving Speech that I Wasn't Allowed to Give

I suffer from a Deleuzian stutter, or a Derrida-da-da, in which my language is stifled by the spectacle.

So many friends lost through time, through neglect and through conflict. "We have lost the friend . . . the friend of the perhaps . . . of respectfully experiencing that friendship." So many dead, some institutionalized, and some just disappeared back into the void. "I will continue to begin again . . . and I'll have to wander all alone in this long conversation that we were supposed to have together."

Spectral visitors stay my hand reminding me that the only answers are in questions that produce more questions. Unsure and uneasy, I stumble about asking questions of everything and everyone.

Popular culture haunts my questions and mocks my unrest by co-opting it for entertainment: "I know why you hardly sleep. Why you live alone and why night after night you sit at your computer. . . . I know because I was once looking for the same thing. . . . It's the question that drives us."

My spectral guides condemn those that have escaped into this cultural amnesia of recycled consumer pleasures. Yet, I wonder if we can truly blame these defectors for choosing the tender

steak over the complex gruel? When were they offered an opportunity to believe otherwise: “Your soul is like an appendix! I don’t even use it!” My TV encourages me to escape into its warm embrace and forget the outside world:

The television screen is the retina of the mind’s eye. Therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore television is reality, and reality is less than television.

Rejecting the siren's lure, I turn everything off and find a quiet place far away from the competing voices. I am listening for the emergence of a being, an/other who escapes my comprehension, this listening requires a transition to a new dimension of understanding.

I am listening to you: although I do not understand what you are saying, I am attentive to your silence amongst history’s mentions, I am attempting to understand and hear your intention. Which does not mean: I comprehend you, or that I know you ... No, I am listening to you as someone that I do not truly know ... with you but not as you ... I reside in a realm of absolute silence in order to hear what you have to say or what is left unsaid or what reverberates from the unknown. I quest for new words, for new meanings, for new modes of understandings that will bridge this river of silence ... for an alliance of possibilities that will not reduce the Other to an item of property or a subject to be mastered. This unspeakable silence is a rift that shatters the boundaries of my life in order to produce a conflagration of nothingness that sears the forest of my consciousness clearing the way for new growths. Perhaps, as the borders of my psyche that restrain my various selves breaks-up, there will be the productive explosion of new life spreading across my interior landscape. Chaos enters my realm and produces ... possibilities.

"Perhaps the impossible is the only chance of something new, of some new philosophy of the new ... Perhaps friendship, if there is such a thing, must honor ... what appears impossible here." Where are the friends that ask questions of the dominant and seek the impossible? I dream of relationships yet to come, writing as a politics of creative imagination that refuses to be silenced. I await a new politics, new friendships and new possibilities... in the meantime I'm not afraid to say I really don't know the answers, but I am seeking new questions.

For that I am thankful!

Patchwork Cast:

Jacques Derrida's eulogy for Gilles Deleuze: "I'll Have to Wander Alone."

The character Trinity speaking to Neo in the movie *The Matrix*

Michael Kelso on *That 70s Show*

Brian O'Blivion in David Cronenberg's film *Videodrome*

Luce Irigaray *The Way of Love* and *To Be Two*

Jacques Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*

Sprinkled throughout:

Michael's fears, hopes and desires

Ghosts:

Guy Debord

Gilles Deleuze

Michel Foucault

Martin Heidegger

Karl Marx

Friedrich Nietzsche

Intellectual Intoxicants still resonating years later (recipe called for the cook to stir and simmer for years until tightly bottled conception explodes all over the place):

Rebecca Saunder's and Ronald Strickland's courses at Illinois State University "Mourning of Modernity" and "Marxist Cultural Theory"

Like all meaningless writings one must periodically turn over the topsoil exposing the rotten concepts, words and beliefs to the sun, leaving the exposed underground to develop into a new potent hummus... when developed into a potent mix spread liberally across the society. Recipes must be changed frequently to resist contamination from the monological discourse that seeks to control pointless thoughts.

JAMES GOODE

The Soldier

Evline Tolson thinks that the world is filled with unpredictable people. You only have to live in the small town of Franklin, Tennessee to see the truth of it. What about Reva Ruble Jarvis who went to the grocery to get loaf of bread and a dozen eggs, ran off with Willard Wireman the butcher at Foodland, and never came back home, abandoning her husband and four children? What about Gertrude Kertickles who, at the age of eighty, grabbed Clarence Ray Sparrow, the Sears repairman, by the jewels from behind while he was bent over working on her washer? Clarence Ray was never the same. He was always looking over his shoulder after that and just couldn't concentrate on the finer details of the repair work he had to perform. He had to quit Sears and live on a Social Security mental disability check. Isn't that proof enough that you just can't tell about people?

Sure there are those who live in little suburban houses who have 2 ½ kids, a four-door car, and go to their tiny office cubicles every morning and never do anything different, but there are countless many more Reva Rubles and Clarence Rays in the world. This doesn't take into account all the murderers and rapists. Just tune in on the T.V. any time of the day or night and you'll see the Jeffery Dahmers and Ted Bundys of the world. Evline thinks that Jeffery Dahmer looked like Jude Law and Ted Bundy was not too far from a young Tony Curtis. You just can't trust nobody, no matter how normal they look.

Whenever Evline takes her girls, Lura, Ella Louise, and Betty Alice anywhere in the car, she warns them of all the dangers inherent in just being outside the house—particularly in an automobile. It is almost as if she has brainstormed a list of everything that can go wrong and prints it on her mind with a permanent marker. This list is repeated on every trip they take anywhere, even if it is just to Walmart.

They are on their way to Murfreesboro to visit their Aunt Callie Lorene who is married to Alfred Earl Petercheff who owns a Chevron station. Callie is Evline's baby sister who married right out of high school and moved directly to Murfreesboro. She has lived in the same house right next to Petercheff's Chevron for 25 years now. They have never been able to have any children but Callie likes children better than anything in the world. After the first ten minutes in a room with Alfred Earl, he thinks that children ought to go back to wherever the hell they came from. He particularly doesn't like girls. They are just too much fluff and smell-good to suit him, he thinks. He prefers the dark recesses of the bays in the Chevron Station and the smell of fresh grease, old oil, and unleaded gasoline.

"Now, if we run out of gas you all know what to do. Lie down in the floorboard and cover up with that quilt I've put back there in the seat," Evline says as they speed down Route 96 out of Franklin. Lura eyes the Drunkard's Path quilt Evline has carried in the car for as far back as she can remember. She has regular unannounced drills where she slams on the brakes and yells, "We're out of gas girls!"

They have learned to fall like sacks of grain onto the floorboard, Lura pulling the quilt over top and tucking it in around them. There can be no sound from beneath the quilt or Evline says, "Do you want to let the molesters know where you are? The longer we can delay, the better chance we'll have. Now, shut your yappin' lips." They don't ever seem to perfect the drill enough to suit Evline.

"Don't you EVER even think about pickin' up nobody," she says. "Don't even let that thought enter your head, 'cause it worser than the most deepest carnal, sinful, devil-ridden thought that you could ever think!" She adds.

"We need to pee," Betty Alice says from the back seat. "We need to pee real bad."

"We ain't been on the road but twenty minutes," Evline says. "I told you girls to get all that done before we left Franklin. I'm not stoppn' ever mile or two for every hair brained thing you might want to do." She jerks the steering wheel sharply to the right and pulls into a Quick-Stop. The girls pile out of the car as she holds the back door. They smooth their Mary Kate and Ashley skirts with the palms of their hands and pull up their socks.

"I ain't got time for you all to primp," Evline says. "Let's get our business done and get back on the road. Callie Lorene is expecting us early this evenin' and I aim to not disappoint her. You know how Alfred Earl is anyway. He ain't going to like us being there regardless, but he will really have his shorts in a wad if we're late for supper. You know he likes to eat right on time."

They go into the double doors of the Quick-Stop, down by the drink fountain and into the women's restroom. Evline helps each make a nest of toilet paper on the seat and then waits just outside the gang of stall doors until they all get finished. She marches them over to the sinks and scrubs each of their hands thoroughly and dries them carefully with paper towels.

On the way out of the Quick-Stop, Betty Alice begs for a fountain Pepsi. Evline has a rule about them having too many soft drinks. It is just plain bad for their teeth and complexions, she thinks. She buys them each a bottle of Evian spring water and gets them all back into rear seat of the car. She turns back onto Route 96 and starts to put pavement behind her.

After a few minutes, they are approaching Benhill just outside the Stones River National Battlefield when they pass a young soldier sitting on his duffle bag with his thumb extended from his right fist. Lura can see his face as they pass. His mouth falls into a deep frown as he realizes they are not going to stop.

"Momma, did you see that soldier boy?" Lura asks.

"Yeah, I seen him. Do you think I'm blind?" She says. The car has begun to slow down.

"Do you think he needs a ride somewheres?" Ella Louise asks.

"Well, he ain't got his thumb stuck out just for his health," Evline says. "People who stick their thumb out while they're sittin' on the side of the road generally want to go somewhere farther than where they are."

All three girls are thinking they should pick the soldier boy up and take him where he wants to go. None of them say anything because they already know what Evline will say. They have their necks craned and are peering out the rear window back at the soldier.

The car slows to a crawl. The girls ready themselves for Evline to yell, “We’re out of gas!” But she doesn’t; she whips the car around into a wide place at the side of the road and turns back toward the soldier.

“Now, I’m goin’ back to pick up that there soldier boy. He’s servin’ our country, a makin’ sure we all can be free. He’s got a Mamma somewheres and she is wonderin’ where he is. He’s probably headed home to some home cookin’. Now don’t any of you EVER do this. This is a bad thing so don’t ever do this. If you ever even think of doin’ this, I’ll know. You realize that mothers know everything—even your thoughts, so it ain’t no use to even think about it. The only reason I’m doing this is because he’s a soldier boy in service to his country—the greatest country in the world because it is free. Now let me tell you. When I get down here and put him in the front seat with me I don’t want you to take any of those six eyeballs off him. If he makes any kind of suspicious move, you let me know with hand signals. I’ll be lookin’ through the rearview mirror. If you see anything that looks like a gun or knife you let me know and if I see anything I’ll give you a signal,” she says as she passes the soldier again, goes down to the next wide spot and makes a 180-degree turn.

The girls don't know any but the basics of hand signaling. Evline makes hand signals all the time and they don't have any earthly idea what she means. They know if she turns her palm down and makes rapid pumping movements she means for them to lower their voices or if she holds the palm of her right hand straight out toward them, they know to stop whatever they are doing or saying. But, otherwise, they don't know what all the other flailing means. They don't really know what Evline will do if the soldier turns out to be a molester in disguise.

Evline pulls to the side of the road and opens the driver's door. "Howdy soldier boy! What is your name and where you goin' to?" She asks.

The soldier gets to his feet, with his duffle bag strap dangling in his left hand and a non-filtered cigarette held between his forefinger and thumb of his right hand. "I'm Jimmy Phillip Hutchins and I'm headed over to Almadale to see my Momma. I missed my train connection in Nashville yesterday and decided to thumb my way home," he says.

She is relieved to hear that he is only going to Almadale because it is only about five miles down Route 96. But, he missed his train? She thought. There is no passenger train service out of Nashville to this part of Tennessee anymore. He must have meant to say that he missed his bus, she concludes.

"Well put your duffle bag in the trunk and ditch that cigarette. I don't allow no smokin' in my car," Evline says as she turns the key in the lock and lifts the trunk lid. Jimmy grinds the cigarette butt on the pavement, scatters the grains of tobacco to the wind, and hefts the overstuffed bag into the cavity.

"You get up in the front with me," she says. He opens the passenger's door and collapses into the plush, leather seat.

"These are my girls, Lura, Ella Louise, and Betty Alice. Lura is the oldest, then Ella Louise, and Betty Alice is the baby. Betty Alice hates for Evline to call her "the baby" because she has already turned five and will be going to school next year.

"I trust you because you're in an Army uniform," she says as she pulls back onto the highway, giving him a lingering eagle-eye look. The only reason I picked you up is because you are in service to the United States of America and are protectin' us. But if you make one false move, I'll cut your ears off with this Case huntin' knife I got over here in the door pocket," she says.

"Yes ma'am," the soldier says as he raises his left eyebrow and scoots toward the passenger's door.

Evline drapes her arm over the seat and lets it dangle down the back, swinging like a pendulum.

The soldier has a musty smell that fills the interior of the car. He removes his wool hat and places it on his lap.

"Where all have you served in the Army?" Evline asks.

"I've been in the Pacific fighting the Japs," he says. I was all over them islands. We was in the landing on Guam, then landed on Leyte in the Philippines on Thanksgiving day, then Kerama Retto . . . I was within a few feet of Ernie Pyle when he was killed at Ie Shima. Then

we moved on to help in the liberation of Tokyo.” He paused, removed a comb from his shirt pocket, and ran it through his wavy hair. “I sure am tickled that the war is over and I just can’t wait to see my momma.” If Truman hadn’t dropped the bombs, I guess I’d still be over there or dead one!”

Evline glanced over to see the campaign metals dangling from his pocket and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead. A long, crawling shiver ran up her spine. She began to gesture furiously with the dangling right hand. The girls looked at one another. The signals didn’t mean anything to them. They could see no gun or knife. Finally, the gestures slackened. There was a profound silence for several miles. The soldier stares off into the horizon, lost in his memories of war. Finally, the car slows to a stop and they leave the soldier at Almaden in a swirling fog that causes him to evaporate as the girls gaze at his receding image through the rear window.

ERIC HENNINGER

Brother

Have you ever been caught in a rainstorm? I'm talking about the kind of rain that starts with a light drizzle and you pay little attention to it. It seems quaint and fascinating and you don't bother to take any precautions or find cover, and then before you know it you're stuck in a torrential downpour; a rain so heavy that it washes everything away leaving little trace of what was once there.

That's how it was when the white men first came to my encampment. We didn't realize it at the time, but their coming was like the falling of small rocks that precedes an avalanche or rockslide. Had we known the dangers to our way of life from the onset things would have been handled differently. There is no doubt about that.

I was eight years old when I first remembered hearing stories of white skinned men coming to trade with neighboring encampments and tribes. I had never seen anyone with white skin before. Those who had met the white skinned men marveled at the amazing things they had brought; paper that could tell you what was going on elsewhere, guns, liquor, and a new religion. While there were those who were fascinated by these newcomers, many of the old men were apprehensive and distrustful from the start.

Some of the other children and I would go watch the white man's wagons as they made their way through our lands. The Earth seemed to complain as the wagon wheels dug deep into its brown flesh. Before that time the only trails that had been made were by the moccasins on our feet and the hooves of our unshod horses. With each passing year the number of these white skinned men grew and it wasn't just the men anymore, it was women and children as well. Not only were the numbers of these intrusive people growing, but they were hunting our buffalo and they were becoming increasingly more difficult to find. The old men continued to be worried about this intrusion onto our sacred land.

I heard my parents talking about white soldiers attacking camps that had moved close to the white forts. They had moved there because they had been promised food and shelter. With the buffalo disappearing this seemed to be the best option for many. One such unprovoked attack resulted in the death of several soldiers when angered young braves retaliated to the shooting of an innocent and peaceful man. The soldiers then went to a camp while many of the young men were away hunting and killed old men, women, and children. It became a vicious cycle; mistreatment, retaliation, skewed versions of what had actually happened, and the misrepresentation of the Lakota.

All the boys who grew up Lakota learned to be skillful with a bow, especially if they were to become warriors. That was our way of life. We hunted for what we needed; clothes and food. We never took more than was needed and nothing was taken without an

understanding and deep reverence for the sacrifice that creature, our brother, had made for our survival. We were one with the Earth and shared in the same journey of all living things.

One cool afternoon during the moon when leaves fall, another boy, Little Feather, and I were stealthily walking through the grassy plains practicing our marksmanship. We did this by shooting arrows at grasshoppers as they jumped up from the long blades of grass. Little Feather and I were so preoccupied with our activities that we barely noticed when we stepped onto a narrow trail near the Black Hills. We heard voices speaking in a language that was unfamiliar to us. Then we heard laughter which we understood quite well. We moved toward the voices to investigate.

The plains gave way to the forests of the foothills and we proceeded toward the sound of the voices. Eventually we came to a clearing. Little Feather and I stayed hidden on the edge of the clearing not daring to venture into the open without knowing whether or not it was safe. We lay perfectly still against the dried ground as our eyes moved back and forth taking in this unusual sight.

There was a small square structure with smoke rising from its top and strange clothing hanging from a rope suspended from a rope suspended between a tree and the structure. There were two children, who appeared to be close in age to Little Feather and me, playing in the clearing as well. They laughed loudly and played boisterously with one another.

I was eleven now and well on my way to becoming a man and warrior, but due to my preoccupation with these white skinned children, I moved my leg and loudly broke a twig. The laughing stopped and the children's eyes scanned the tree line. They looked right at us and were terrified. I wasn't sure what they had to be frightened about. Little Feather and I were frightened because we had heard how the white man treated Lakota, but these two boys should not have been frightened. The Lakota were a peaceful people so there was no cause for them to be alarmed.

There was a deafening silence for what seemed like an eternity as we stared at the white children and they stared back at us. Finally, and to my surprise, one of the boys said, "You can come out of there. It's okay."

I had no idea what he had said, but he sounded friendly and harmless. For a moment I thought that the same thought must have crossed the mind of many Lakota as they traded with the white men. I glanced at Little Feather and he nodded. So hesitantly we crawled into the clearing and stood up. There was more staring. I thought they looked kind of odd with their light colored hair and skin and shirts that fastened all the way up the front. Their clothes looked so uncomfortable and they weren't adorned with any bright colors or feathers.

"I'm Tom," said one of the boys as he patted his hand on his chest and then reached it out to me. I gathered enough to assume that he was giving us his name. It was a strange name to my ears and I could only assume that his outstretched hand was a gesture of peace for his

people so I raised my hand and nodded my head. My custom was obviously unfamiliar to him and his was to me, but we seemed to have a mutual understanding.

From that day on, Tom, his brother John, Little Feather, and I became inseparable friends. We brought Tom to our camp. Many of the people had never seen white skin before and were very curious. Little Feather and I laughed at the two brothers because they looked so scared when several Indian children began clamoring about to touch the white skinned boys. The older ones, including my parents, raised a skeptical eyebrow at the presence of these boys. But, since we had a strong sense of community, the boys were welcomed overall.

Occasionally a white trader would pass through who spoke Lakota and the white man's language. We would offer him tobacco in exchange for acting as an interpreter. In this way Tom and John shared with us the stories that their parents had told them about "savage natives" and how they would, without cause, attack white settlers.

Thanks to the trader the older ones in the camp were able to set the record straight for the two boys. They patiently and eloquently explained to the boys how the white soldiers had broken many promises to the Lakota and had withheld promised provisions to those that had chosen to live near the white man's forts. They explained how the last time the soldiers tried to make a "treaty" with the Lakota still living away from the forts that the leaders had told the soldiers the only arrangement they would agree to was if the soldiers would leave the land of

the Lakota. The soldiers were warned that the lands around the Black Hills would be defended if the white man continued to encroach upon the sacred land.

Little Feather and I were never able to visit the place where Tom and John lived because they said that their parents were not very open to having Indians in their home. Their parents also weren't very thrilled when they learned that their boys had been to a camp full of "Sioux savages." Tom had tried to persuade his parents that Little Feather and I were good and not "savages" at all, but they would not listen to reason.

Although their parents forbade them to have anything to do with us Tom and John managed to sneak off to visit us anyway. Over time, however, the visits became fewer and fewer. I know that the decreasing visits were due to growing up and having more required of ourselves and I didn't take it personally, but I still missed my friends. We had learned some strange and interesting things from them. I found some of their customs fascinating, but I never understood why so many whites hated the Lakota or wanted to drive them off their land.

Eventually, as the years passed, the visits stopped altogether, but I thought about Tom and John every day. I'm sure they were busy learning whatever it was they had to learn to do for their family, just as Little Feather and I were becoming proficient hunters and skilled warriors for our people.

Many more of our tribe had moved closer to the white forts on encampments they called "agencies." There were those of us that didn't feel that we should be so dependent on the white

men. For countless generations we had gotten along just fine without any help or intervention. Many were still quite content with the traditional way of life. Although it had become increasingly difficult to find buffalo, we still hunted deer and elk and whatever else we needed to survive. Even though life had changed somewhat it was still better than losing our way of life altogether.

Our family moved to one of the last encampments of the “wild” Lakota; that is, all of us that had not moved to an agency. Our encampment was led by a man that all the young warriors had come to know and respect. Crazy Horse. He was a man that you couldn’t help but admire and look up to. He was rather quiet and gentle, but was adamant about preserving the Sioux tribes’ way of life and was fierce and fearless on the battlefield.

We had all heard of Crazy Horse’s exploits. He had made quite a name for himself, although he would never be heard talking about his accomplishments. He walked and spoke in a silent confidence that needed no empty words or battlefield tales to advance him. His actions spoke for themselves and he quietly accepted his given, though unasked for, role as leader of his people.

During the moon when the sun stands in the middle, there came a day when scouts brought word to our encampment of a large number of soldiers heading toward our encampment near the Greasy Grass Creek, better known as the Little Big Horn. All the young

men were ready to follow Crazy Horse into battle. Some of the young warriors had never fought the white soldiers, but we trusted our leader's experience. He had soundly defeated the white soldiers before.

Crazy Horse had ridden off to surrounding encampments to gather brave warriors and returned early in the evening and rode around our camp with the gathered warriors. He did this as a call to arms and we quickly and eagerly joined his band of painted men to defend our land and way of life. As the sun began to set behind the Black Hills we rode off to meet the enemy.

Bows, quivers of arrows, war clubs, and rifles were still and silent as we made our way through the darkness, painted, fierce, and on a mission. The only sound was the soft thudding of our horses' hooves. We traveled all night to meet the soldiers on the battlefield.

As I assume everyone does when facing a situation that could potentially be their final act, my mind went back to my childhood. In the silence I could see my parents, I could smell the fires, and I thought of how much our way of life had changed in my lifetime. I thought about Tom and his brother John. What were they doing right now? How would they feel about what the soldiers had been doing to the people who had been their friends?

For me the night had passed quickly while I was lost in thought and before long we were approaching the Little Big Horn. Early morning mist rose from the cool waters. I cleared my mind and prayed for strength and quickness. I had barely collected myself when suddenly I

found myself in the middle of a chaotic battle. I was caught off guard due to the exhaustion my body felt. Not only had we ridden all night, but it was only a few days before that we had battled soldiers at the Rosebud. Now we must do it again if we are to preserve our way of life.

I quickly got my bearings and fired off a couple of arrows in rapid succession and watched as two soldiers fell from their mounts. The sound of war cries and gun shots filled the air and the smell of death was everywhere. We fought valiantly like the proud warriors we were.

For a moment time seemed to stand still as I saw the leader of the soldiers, a man they called Custer, fall to the ground dead. Many of the soldiers began to retreat and warriors pursued them up the banks of the river. I stood motionless as the sun finished burning the mist from the Earth. It was like a dream instead of reality. We were winning against a much better armed enemy. Surely the gods had smiled on us.

My mistake was to stand still and take in what was going on around me. I had let my guard down. That's when I felt the point of a soldier's sword at the side of my neck. He had snuck up on me and clearly had the upper hand. I slowly turned my head and looked him straight in the eyes. There was a strange mixture there of fear and hate. The two was a murderous combination. I knew this because I had felt them myself.

I closed my eyes and resigned myself to my destiny when I heard a voice cry out to the soldier. "Stop!"

I didn't understand what was said at the moment, but I did recognize the voice. It had been a long time since I heard it. "Tom," I managed to remember how to say.

He pushed the other soldier out of the way and put his arms around me in an embrace. "Friend." I was astounded. Here in the middle of all of this hate, distrust, and killing was a man, who should have been my enemy, calling me friend. I returned his embrace and in that moment so many things came clear to me. We really were not that different and stood to learn many things from one another.

However, not every Indian thought like I did and not every white man thought like Tom. The soldier that he had kept from running me through mumbled the word "traitor" and stabbed Tom in the back. Tom slumped in my arms and tears ran down my face streaking my war paint. What kind of person would kill their own kind?

The soldier stood still, staring at me, apparently too frightened to run. If he had been a wise man he would have run. I admit I acted out of anger, but not simply because the soldier was white. Rather because he took the life of one I would have considered a brother. The relationship we had forged as children, although our lives had taken us separate ways, was built on something that transcended our colors and backgrounds.

I gently placed Tom on the dusty ground and drew my war club from my belt. I gripped it tightly in my hands and ran towards the soldier. His fear rooted him to the Earth like an old tree and I knocked him to the ground. I stood over him and raised my club over his

headland watched as he flinched and turned his head waiting for the blow. I couldn't do it. Instead I pulled this miserable excuse for a human being to his feet and spoke one of the few white words I knew, "Go."

He seemed to understand and ran off along the river only to be run down by the other warriors chasing the fleeing soldiers to be sure they didn't return. I returned to Tom's body to find him barely holding on. I knelt and lifted him into my arms. Before he left this world I spoke to him another of the few white words I had learned, "Brother."

MARK G. SPEARS

You Have No Right

Jack Martini dreaded the conversation he would have tonight with his seventeen year old daughter, Carlie. She was on the upswing of her rebellious teenage years. His warnings of an all girl's school in the next county over had fallen on deaf ears. He didn't think she was into sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but the skimpy clothes and roughneck looking boyfriends had him worried.

In the small town of Versailles, Kentucky, population 2000, everyone knew each other's business. Carlie's behavior was a hot topic among young and old alike. Jack was doing all he could for the kids. Eight year old Jack Jr. was a model citizen. Eleven year old Samantha was not only a model citizen, but also a county soccer star. They lived in a two-story, white Victorian-style house that was built sometime in the late forties. Carlie lived in the only upstairs bedroom that had its own bathroom, while Sam and Jack Jr. shared a bathroom at the opposite end of the upstairs.

Tonight, over a round of frozen dinners, Jack was going to tell Carlie he needed her help. That's the way he would put the question, "Carlie, would you mind watching your brother and sister this weekend while I'm out of town on business?" What he really was saying, "Carlie, I need you to watch your brother and sister this weekend while I'm out of town on business?" Telling Carlie to do something was an instant invitation to confrontation. He had

learned a while back to make it sound like he was asking. This way, Carlie felt like she had a choice. It was seldom that she said no and forced his hand. He could arrange for one of the other soccer parents to cart Sam back and forth from games on Saturday and Sunday, maybe even talk them into allowing Sam to spend the weekend. Jack Jr. would spend most of the weekend in his room reading.

Reading to Jack Jr. was the smartest thing Jack had ever done. When Jack Jr. was four years old, Jack bought the entire Dr. Seuss series. Every night for a month, Jack would read him one of the books. By the time Junior was five, Jack was reading him books most eleven and twelve year olds were reading. By the time Junior was six, around the same time Sandy, his mother, left them, he was reading on a fourth grade level.

Sandy needed more out of life. Living in a town with only three stoplights, no shopping malls, and the main mode of transportation a 4x4, was not what she had signed on for. Jack loved her; still loved her. They were college sweethearts. He even kept their wedding picture in his billfold. The kids were at a church function the night she told him.

"I'm leaving, Jack," she said.

He looked up from the kitchen table, smiled, "You going down to the Food Mart?"

"No, Jack, I mean, I'm leaving you," she said.

Jack's stomach, and still does when he thinks about it today, felt like it was in the middle of a football game. "What the hell did you just say?"

"I'm leaving you, the kids, and this hell-hole of a town we live in," she replied.

“You said you were tired of the big city, that New Yorkers didn’t know how to drive. We moved here because you said this is what you wanted,” Jack replied in anger.

Sandy walked to the kitchen counter and pulled a pack of Marlboro Lights from her purse.

“When did you start smoking?” Jack asked.

Sandy was a heavy smoker in college, until she met Jack. It had been his only stipulation to dating. Quit smoking, and it’s all good. She did. She loved him then.

“What difference does it make?” she replied. “I’m leaving.”

Jack stared at her hard, his brow crinkling at the bridge of his nose. Work was going great. The kids had a stable home. He was happy; thought Sandy was. Had he done something? Did the sun rise in the west instead of the east this morning? And just where in the hell did she think she was going anyway?

“I need a drink,” Jack said. He pulled a bottle of Makers Mark from the cabinet above the refrigerator.

“Thought you didn’t drink,” Sandy said sarcastically.

Jack looked at the bottle, looked at Sandy. She wasn’t going to drive him to this. He put the bottle back in the cabinet. He could hear his heart beating in his ears. Smoke from Sandy’s cigarette wafted through the air attacking his nose. “So that’s it? You’re just walking out?”

Sandy nodded. A car horn sounded outside. Jack followed her toward the front door, past the family photos on the hallway walls, past their Golden Retriever lying on the floor in the

den. When Sandy opened the front door, Jack saw her suitcase. *When had she done that?* The cab driver exited the faded yellow car and popped the trunk. He was Jamaican, dreadlocks snaking out from under a tie-dye hat. Sandy didn't look back, didn't say another word. The cabbie placed the suitcase in the trunk. Sandy tossed her cigarette onto the road, the tip still ablaze. Jack felt dizzy, his head swirling like a college freshman who had just finished his third beer. He wanted to run to the car, pull her out, and talk some sense into her. The kids would be devastated. He was devastated. He watched for as long as he could through the large oak trees that lined both sides of the street. When the car was out of sight, he looked up and down the street. The neighborhood was quiet except for a few dogs barking. Yards were perfectly manicured; flowers blossomed along white picket fences. Mr. Barns, the WWII veteran that lived across the street, stared, a questioning look on his face. He pretended to check his mailbox.

Jack's thoughts returned to Carlie as he pulled into the driveway. In the front yard, Jack Jr. tossed football with a much smaller kid that lived four houses down. The kid's parents were divorced as well. The kid's dad high-tailed it out of town about three years ago. Jack supposed that's why the kid always came up looking for Jack Jr.

Jack jumped out of the car, caught the football in the air as it was getting close to Jack Jr., and spiked it on the ground like he had just scored the winning touchdown. Both kids just looked at him.

"You're such a dork, Dad," Jack Jr. said as he retrieved the football.

"You kids have a good day at school?"

The kid from down the street shook his head yes.

"I started reading *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*," Jack Jr. replied proudly.

Jack rubbed his son on the head realizing that he was long overdue for a haircut. "Going to have to get that mop cut," he said.

Without a word, Jack Jr. and the other kid took off running around the house. Jack continued up the walkway toward the front steps. He sat down on the top step and loosened his tie looking skyward at the white puffy clouds. Smoke, he thought. Add a bit of grey and you have puffs of smoke, like from a cigarette. He wondered what Sandy was doing. She called yesterday to check on the kids, *only the kids*. From the living room he listened to the one-sided conversation, trying to decipher what was being said on the other end of the phone.

"Hi, Mom," Carlie said followed by a long silence.

"Boring...as usual. I don't know why I have too," Carlie replied.

"They are doing fine...all things considered." Longer silence.

"When?" Carlie's voice pitched with happiness.

It was the *when* question that had tugged at Jack's shirt collar all day. When what, he wondered. As soon as Carlie hung-up the phone he asked what her mother had said. She refused to tell him anything. A plot? Teenage attitude? What was it? He was being the very best parent he could possibly be. He worked as little overtime as possible; rarely worked

weekends; gave the kids most everything possible. But in the end it would never be enough for Carlie. He was her scapegoat in the divorce of her parents. Jack Jr. and Samantha went on with life as usual. "Don't interfere with their processes," the court appointed child psychologist told him.

"What are you doing, Dad?" Sam asked as she sat down on the step next to him.

"I was looking for designs in the clouds," he replied. "Do you see anything?"

Sam looked at the clouds just above the house across the street. "I think maybe that's a dog," she said and used her index finger to outline the image.

"Are you happy," he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. "Why do you ask?"

Jack put his arm around her, realizing how lucky he really was. "Go wash-up, dinner will be ready shortly," he told her. He looked down at his hands, at the wrinkles. Although he still loved Sandy, he knew at forty, he needed to move on. For him and the kids. Need to get dinner ready, he told himself.

Following dinner, Jack asked Jack Jr. and Sam to leave him and Carlie alone in the kitchen. They said okay and headed off to their bedrooms to finish homework. Carlie huffed and puffed, fidgeting in her chair as if she was being inconvenienced. The body motions added to Jack's dread.

“One of the Project Managers at work is sick,” he began. “The guy was supposed to drive up to Cincinnati for an Architecture conference this weekend.” Carlie refused to look up. Jack sighed inwardly trying not to show his frustration. “So my boss told me this morning that he wanted me to go.”

“No,” she replied.

“Carlie, can you please watch your brother and sister this weekend so that I can make this trip? I’ll only be two hours away.”

“Damn it, I said no!” she replied.

“You do not talk to me that way young lady,” he said feeling the anger rising from his stomach. “I didn’t raise you to...”

“That’s right, Dad, you didn’t raise me!”

Jack sat dumbfounded as Carlie continued her tirade. “I want to go stay with mom. I don’t want to be here anymore!”

“Dad?” a voice said from the doorway.

Jack looked over to see Sam and Jack Jr. staring at them. “It’s okay, guys, go on back to your homework.”

The two kids looked at Carlie, the scowl on their faces clearly showing their unhappiness. Jack Jr. walked away but Sam continued to stare. Of the three kids, Jack knew Sam would always be the one to stand by his side. She was somewhat of an introvert, like him. They even looked alike with their hazel eyes, blonde hair, slender build. Jack Jr. looked more

like Sandy, on the short side, with dark eyes and hair, but had his own unique personality.

Carlie really didn't look like either one of them, and had a temper that developed on its own.

She had a striking beauty that was rarely found in redheads.

"Go on upstairs," Jack said to Sam. She did as he asked, and then he turned back to Carlie. "What is it that I've done to you to make you be so angry?"

Carlie huffed. She shuffled in her chair as if she were considering her words. "You drove Mom off. That's what you did."

Jack rubbed his chin. This argument reared its head about every three months. Sandy walks out the door and doesn't bother to call him or the kids for months. When she did decide to start calling, calling as frequently as once a day, Jack noticed a change in Carlie. She became more defensive, more likely to start an argument with him. But this was the first time she had ever said the words, "I want to go stay with Mom."

"There's nothing you can do about it," she continued. "I'm old enough to decide what I want, and that's all the courts will care about."

Courts?

"That doesn't sound like you talking, Carlie," Jack replied. "So is that what your mother has been telling you?" Jack put his hands down to his sides squeezing them as tight as he could. "That's what you two were talking about on the phone last night, isn't it?"

Carlie stayed silent.

Jack had never once considered that Sandy would try to take the kids from him. They were one of the reasons she left. Could he tell Carlie why her mother left? He'd hoped Sandy would someday see the error of her ways and come back to them. Everything would be back to normal. But not now. *I've worked my hind-end off to provide for these kids, and now she wants to take them away from me?* He looked around the kitchen and imagined Sandy standing at the kitchen counter smoking her cigarette. *I'm leaving you*, echoed in his head. The threads of hope he had been hanging onto began to snap. For the past several months he had blamed Carlie for the way she was acting toward him. But it wasn't her at all. It was her mother.

The phone rang bringing Jack back to his current predicament with Carlie. Sam yelled from upstairs that she would get it. Jack wondered if it would be Sandy calling to infect the kids even more.

"Dad, it's for you," Sam yelled.

"We're not finished, here," he told Carlie.

"Yes we are," she replied. "Mom will be here tomorrow to get me."

"Dad!" Sam yelled again.

Jack froze momentarily. That was the *when* on the phone Carlie had asked about. There was nothing more to be said. Jack made his feet move toward the cordless phone in the den. This had to be Sandy calling to give him *the news*. How was she going to tell him? *"She needs her mother now. It's best for her."* What about Sam and Jack Jr.? Carlie mentioned nothing about them.

Jack picked up the phone, "Hello?"

"Jack, it's Dennis Mango from work," the voice replied.

"Hey, Dennis, you kind of caught me at a bad time," Jack said, partly relieved it wasn't Sandy, partly angered that it wasn't.

"Hope you're not packing. Look, I'm able to go to the conference now. You wanna switch?"

Jack smiled inwardly. The sun was going to set in the west tonight. "Not a problem, Dennis."

When Jack hung up the phone, he sat in his favorite recliner. Moments ago he was ready to explode. Now he just stared at the pictures on the coffee table in front of him. One of the pictures was of the entire family, including Sandy. He kept it *for old time's sake*. He leaned forward and laid the picture face down. As he looked around the den, he realized other things would have to change. The furniture he kept because Sandy like it so much, would have to go. The kids thought it was too old fashioned anyway. The curtains now reminded him of rags that would hang from the windows of a haunted house. The kids wanted the house to join the 21st century. The curtains had to go. He stood up and walked to the kitchen where Carlie was still sitting. He hated white cabinets. The refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher were white as well. The room reminded him of a sterile hospital operating room.

"What are you looking at," Carlie asked, but Jack said nothing.

He walked out to the enclosed patio just off the kitchen. The patio furniture was a puke-green color. It would have to go. When he turned to go back in the house, Carlie was standing in the kitchen watching him.

“Dad?”

Jack squeezed past Carlie who was in the walkway between him and the stairs. His feet touched each step with confidence. So many things needed to be changed. Sam and Jack Jr. met him at the top of the stairs but he ignored their questioning look. When he opened Carlie’s bedroom door, he found the only messy room in the house. Her furniture was at least fifteen years old, a complaint that arose as often as all the other complaints. It had belonged to Sandy’s parents.

“Why are you in my room?” Carlie demanded.

“First off, whether you want to be here or not, I’m still your father, still demand respect the same way I give it to you.” Carlie stood silent. “Secondly, we are going to make some changes to the house. I can’t promise it will be all at once, but it will be done. Your bedroom is the worst, so we’ll start there.”

Carlie started to speak but quickly stopped when Jack put a finger to his lips. By the time he checked the other rooms upstairs, he realized he had a large project ahead of him. But it was long overdue. He had waited too long, held onto hope too long. Was he buying his kid’s love? No. He was shedding the skin of false hope. Sandy had every right to see her own kids. But she had no right to steal them from him.

“Clear your social schedule for the weekend,” he told Carlie.

“But I thought you had to...”

“Not anymore. Tomorrow night the four of us are driving to Lexington to do a little shopping.”

“But mom will be here to pick me up,” Carlie replied.

“We didn’t know Mom was coming,” Sam said.

Jack looked down at Sam and Jack Jr. They didn’t know. Sandy wanted the one child she thought would take the least effort. *Selective parenting?* “When I get home from work, you will take Sam and Jack Jr. down to Mario’s Pizza. I will deal with your mother.”

Carlie didn’t argue. Sam and Jack smiled. They loved pizza. And Jack didn’t think they needed to see their parents argue if it came to that.

The following evening, Jack sent the kids to Mario’s while he waited on the front steps for Sandy. When *they* pulled up, Jack cleared his throat, prepared to deal with Sandy. Before getting out of the car, she leaned over and kissed the man in the driver’s seat. Unaffected, Jack stood.

“I’m here to get Carlie,” she said while puffing on a cigarette.

“She’s not here. Neither is Sam or Jack Jr.,” Jack replied.

Sandy frowned. She flicked her cigarette into the grass before noticing the front window. "Where are the curtains?" She then looked around him. "Why is the coffee table on the front porch?"

Jack turned toward the porch. "That old thing? I'm setting it out for the morning trash."

"You will be hearing from my lawyer," she replied.

"I'm sure I will," Jack said before going back into the house.

