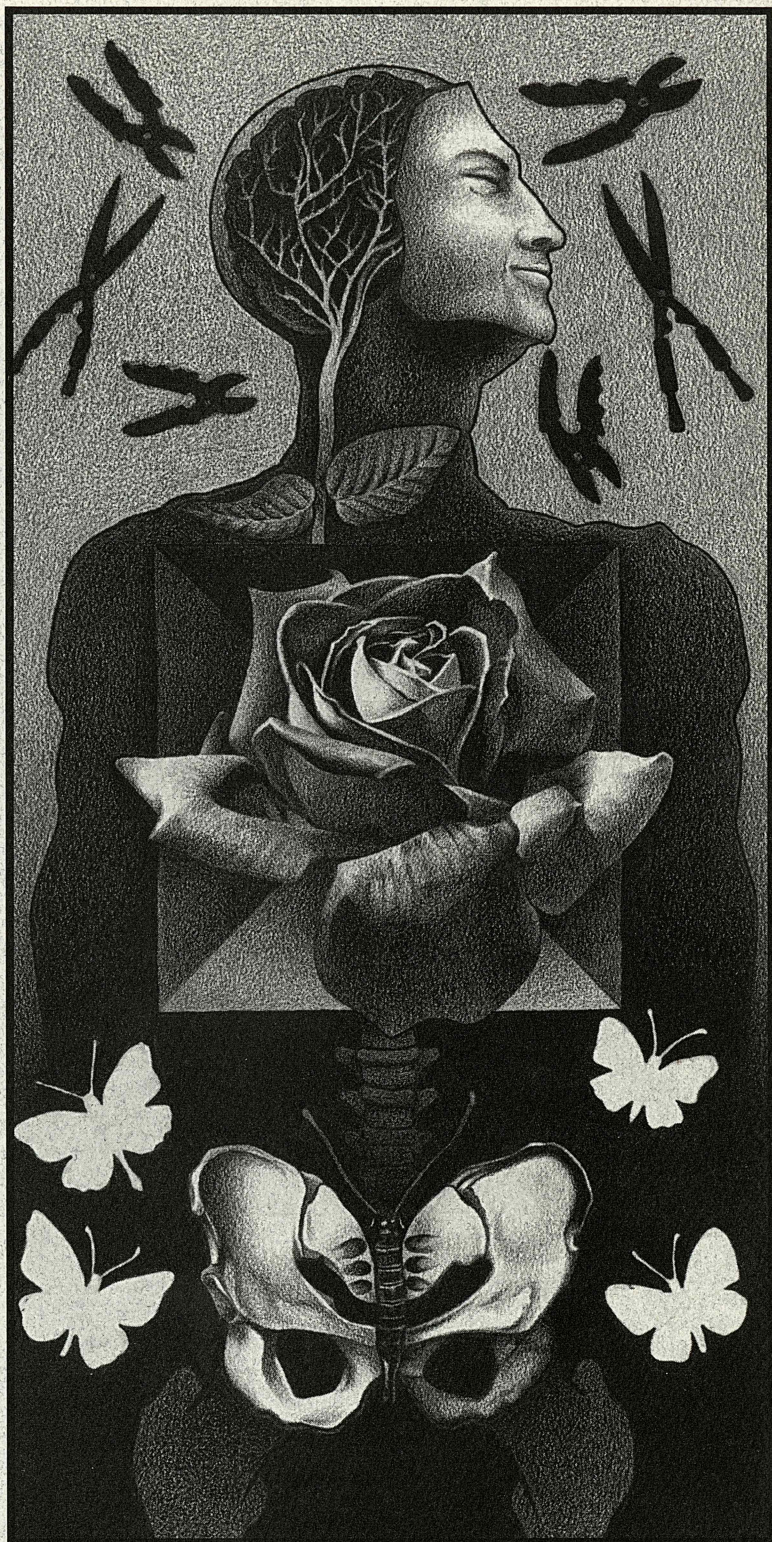


Stylus

93-94

The Literary
Annual of
Midlands
Technical
College



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Editor: Curtis Derrick

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Preface

Once again it is my privilege, as *STYLUS* editor, to announce the award winners for the current issue. They are: short story writer Gary Rabon for "The Weekend Widow"; essayist Jeff Shannon for "The Old Man and His Trail"; poet Bruce Stephens for "Dried Flowers," "Epiphany on Rabon Road," and "The Seventh Day"; visual artist Christopher Todd Wright for "Me and the Irie Tree"; and our cover artist Hal Reed. Our congratulations go to these artists and writers, as well as to the others in our contents.

Competition for *STYLUS* continues to be intense. There were nearly two hundred submissions this year from fifty-one students. Reading through the manuscripts, one feels the presence of a sizable literary and artistic contingent within our student body. All the members of that group deserve praise and encouragement. Whether or not your work was included in this issue, we appreciate your submission and hope to get more from you in the future. We also hope that you spread word about the magazine. Last year's issue won second place regionally in the literary magazine competition of the Community College Humanities Association. Our prominence in such contests will continue to grow, providing we get the very best our authors and artists can produce. If you are a writer, aim to write more. If you are a fan of good writing, support us by urging student authors to submit.

The word "magazine" originates from the Arabic word for "storehouse." That idea is particularly fitting for *STYLUS*. Each year it stores for posterity a portion of our literary and artistic harvest at Midlands Tech. That in itself is cause for celebration. But in a more vital sense, this storehouse, like other printed magazines, holds the food and the seed for thought. Each selection mirrors life, the world we live in, and that special world of inner feelings. The private sentiments of a story's protagonist, or the persona of a poem, or the voice in an essay reminds us of the common threads in human experience. But do not assume there is only profundity and enlightenment here. There is also ample humor and entertainment. It is an issue well stocked with murder, mayhem, rogues, lovers, and genuine heroes.

Special thanks to Dianne Luce and Jean Mahaffey for offering me a second year as editor, a job made much easier thanks to faculty readers, Tyler Smith, Nancy Kreml, and Patricia Clayton. I am also grateful to Linda Mims for clearing the mine field of forms and requisitions; Claudette Lorick, Minnie Jones, and Katsy Stewart for clerical support; Audrey Caine and Miley Corley for their help in the purchasing department; and Sisi Sims for another year as graphic designer.

Curtis Derrick
Editor

Contents

Hal Reed untitled front cover

Fiction

Jennifer Hunt untitled(*frontispiece*) 8

Gary Rabon The Weekend Widow 11

Jonica Lenore Williams The Tie That Binds 17

Stacy Gregg Crossing over the Threshold 22

Poetry

Christopher Todd Wright Me and the Irie Tree (*frontispiece*) 26

Cassie Foy Nature's Knowledge 29

Boogey Man 30

Rebellion 31

The Snake 32

Eugene Downs I play my blues in the dark 33

Anniversary 34

Gail Watts The Crack in the Sidewalk 35

April House You 36

Momma 37

Sharon Felder If You Could Hear Her Play as I Have 38

Bill Goodwin To Give Life on a Sunday 39

Ruthie Jones-Garguillo Someone Other Than Myself 40

Jim Johnson Survival Sonnet 41

Gary Rabon The Good Old Days 42

Robert Marchi Trash Cans 44

LaVon Simpson Learning 45

Tammy McGee My Brother 46

Blues in the Night 47

R.F. Jordan Trees 48

Claire Taylor For You When the Night Crept In .. 49

Bruce Stephens Dried Flowers 50

Epiphany on Rabon Road 51

The Seventh Day 52

Essays

Christopher Todd Wright untitled (*frontispiece*) 54

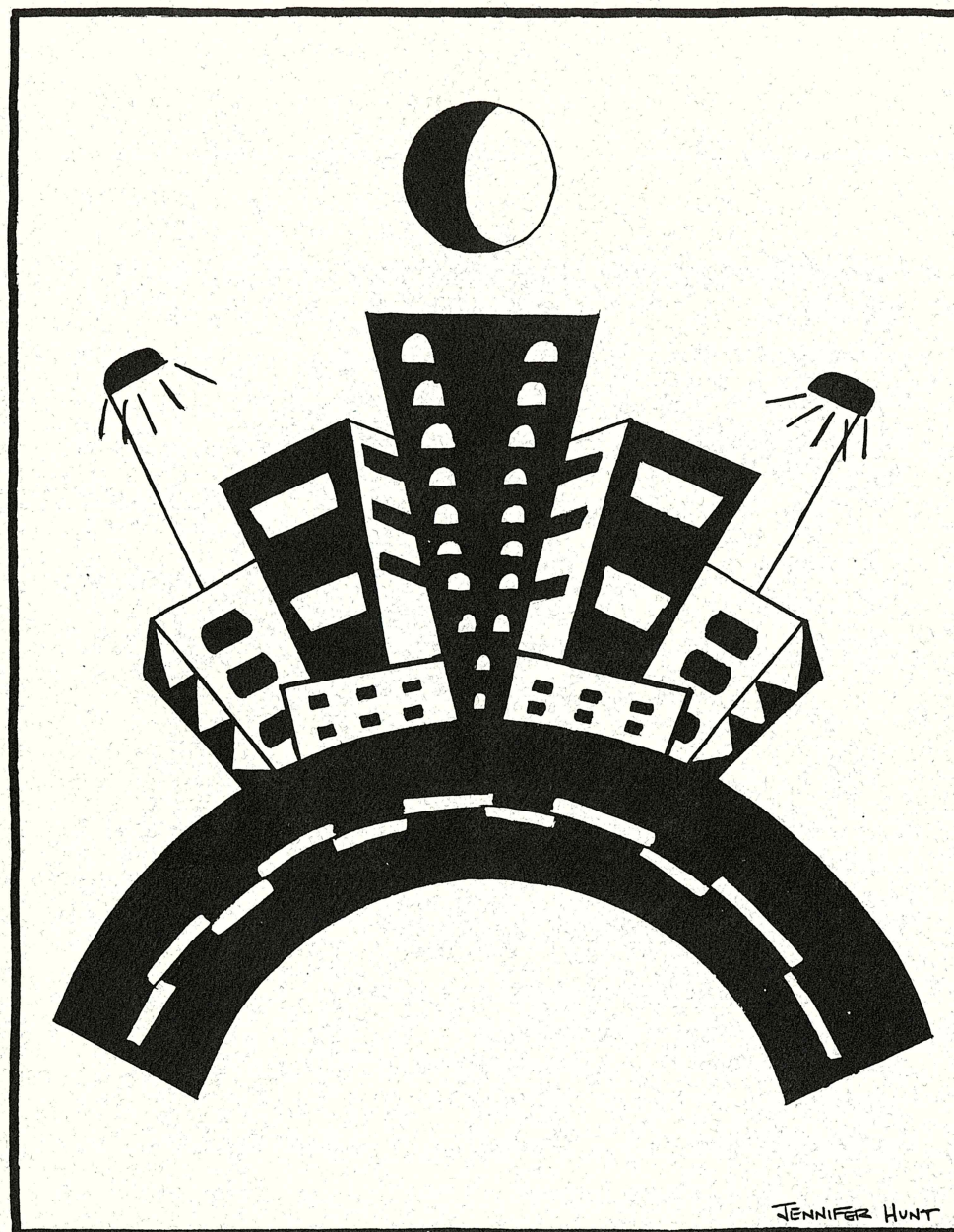
Jeff P. Shannon The Old Man and His Trail 57

Wayne Cook The Bird 59

Stefano Marcello The Knot at the End of the Rope 61

Contributors

authors and artists 65



Jennifer Hunt

Untitled

Fiction

The Weekend Widow

"Ha-ha-ha-ha...oh, Herb, ha-ha-ha, that's so funny!" Doris managed to cackle to her husband as he shoved into his mouth yet another forkload of peas and mashed potatoes. "Dear, you really do tell such funny jokes. You should be on t.v."

To such praise Herb Wheeler merely shrugged and swallowed, neglecting to inform his wife that he'd heard the joke several times in recent weeks at a neighborhood bar. However, today at the Sunday dinner table, he repeated it to Doris as a way—his way—of "making up" for the slap he'd given her earlier when she'd burnt the morning toast. This was, one might say, a tradition in the Wheeler household: Herb loses his temper for one reason or another, beats up on Doris, and then later, by way of apology, tells her a joke to cheer her up and let her know that he's no longer angry and that he still loves her.

"More peas, dear?" Doris asked, gesturing toward a chipped yellow bowl as if to pick it up.

"Nah," Herb mumbled, while scraping up the last remaining morsels on his plate. "I'm full as a tick. Besides, it's just about game time."

As Doris nibbled sparrow-like on a piece of chicken wing, Herb leaned back in his chair and massaged his capacious belly, and with a luxurious "Brrr-awp!" expelled much of the gas that had collected within the past hour since his first beer. Satisfied, he rose from the table, stood for a moment and pawed at the rumpled seat of his pants, and then slowly and unsteadily lumbered toward the television set in the den as if hypnotically drawn by the fact-filled caterwauling of two former NFL "golden boys"-turned-commentators.

"When you're finished eatin', you can bring me another beer," bid Herb to his wife from over his shoulder. "And it better be cold."

"Yes, dear," came Doris' faintly cheerful reply.

With a feeble grunt, the large, overly-fed man lowered himself down onto the worn, faded couch. Off went his odorous Hush-puppies with a "ka-thump, ka-thump," and as he began staring intently at the chatty, well-groomed duo on the t.v. screen, his stubby right index finger wandered diligently from one nostril of his flat, crooked nose to the next.

"Hurry up with that beer, will you?" Herb barked, not taking his eyes off the tube. "The game's 'bout to start."

"Coming, dear," Doris piped as she hurried from the table to the fridge. When she made it to the couch and stooped to hand Herb his beer, she asked him which two teams were about to play.

"Uh, the 'Skins and the—Brrrawp!—Forty-niners," Herb dully replied.

"Oh, goody!" Doris said excitedly. "I like that new young 'Skins quarterback. Let's see, what's his name—Quayle?"

"Coyle!" Herb sternly corrected. "Donnie Coyle. And he ain't with Washington anymore. He got traded to Tampa Bay."

"That's him," Doris gushed. "People magazine name him 'The Sexiest Man Alive.'"

"People magazine," Herb echoed with a mimicky nasal whine, "named him 'The Sexiest Man Alive.'" And then, with a vicious snort, added: "Bullshit!"

"Well," Doris asserted, "I think he's cute."

"Brrrawp!"

"Well, I do."

"Doris," Herb growled impatiently, "will you go fuckin' clean the kitchen before I throw this beer at you? Please?"

Without another word, Doris quietly drifted back into the kitchen, to the table, and the dirty dishes and leftovers.

As she stood at the sink, soaking knives, forks, and glasses in the warm suds, and later, rubbing the clean, wet plates with her towel until they squeaked, she took her mind beyond the simple chore at hand and, undisturbed by the loud drone of the television that emanated from the den, reflected upon the life she had known before she met

the man she had married—and also upon her life since.

When she thought of the way things had been—of the person she once was—before Herb Wheeler had entered her life, she smiled and, for a moment, enjoyed the memory of a young, pretty girl of a long ago summer's day spent with friends at the lake, and of the boys who vied for her attention.

But now she was thinking of her husband and many unhappy, painful memories began to cloud her mind. She honest-to-god feared the man and could hardly remember a time when she hadn't. He was as wholly unpredictable as he was violent—the smallest matter could set off his angry outbursts. Hardly a week went by in which some sort of abuse did not occur. A month had not passed since he nearly broke her jaw for not returning home with the car on time thereby causing him to be late for his company bowling tournament. A week later he hit her for talking on the phone too long. And only two days ago, after seeing a rat in the garage, hadn't he threatened to beat her when she finally admitted that she had not recently put out any poison because she had forgotten to pick some up at the store? Granted mercy, Doris tearfully apologized for the oversight and then immediately went out to buy the most lethal brand available.

Each day together, at the very least, was tense and oppressive. In fact, their four children, all of them grown and married and with families of their own, refused to enter the house as long as their father was around. Reunions, therefore, were seldom and strained and punctuated with pleas for her to leave and divorce the man that had brutalized them all for so many years.

There was one thing, however, that seemed to pacify Herb, and that was football. College or pro, it didn't matter. Just switch on the t.v. set on an autumn Saturday or Sunday and keep the cold beer coming, and he was relatively at peace. It was no wonder that Doris had come to view fall as her favorite time of the year. But despite the relief which the season seemed to offer, the relationship between her husband and herself had become by this time

unbearable. Indeed, it had at last reached the breaking point.

Presently Doris snapped out of her dark reverie when she realized that Herb was calling out for her.

"Doris...Doris!"

"What is it, Herb?" she answered from the sink while quickly drying her hands.

"Bring me the Pepto, will you? My guts feel like they're on fire."

Because of the loud volume of the television, Doris couldn't quite understand what Herb had said, and so she stepped from the kitchen into the den. "Now, what's that you say, dear?"

"I said, 'Bring me the Pepto,'" Herb snapped peevishly. "And hurry up about it! I got heartburn or something."

"Poor dear. I'll just be a second."

Doris walked back to the kitchen and took a bottle of Pepto-Bismol down from the cabinet. From a drawer she took a large spoon and with both items in hand, she returned to the den and her ailing husband. After administering to him two spoonfuls of the smooth liquid, she decided that it might be wise for her to remain nearby in case he should need anything else. As Herb stretched out on the couch clutching his abdomen, Doris reached for her knitting and made herself comfortable in the green leatherette recliner. For almost twenty minutes Herb lay quietly, listening to the game on the television, his eyes shut as if trying to doze off, while Doris, on the other hand, would look up intermittently at the set between stitches and loops and comment on the progress of the game. Before long though, Herb began to shift restlessly about while groaning and complaining of a shortness of breath. He piteously called out Doris' name. She put down her knitting and looked over at him. "What is it now, Herb?"

"Doris, I think you might better go call a doctor. I feel bad. Please, run in the kitchen and call."

Doris picked up the remote control and turned down the volume of the t.v., but she did not get up and go to the

phone to call. Instead, she sat there staring silently at her husband.

"Doris, do as I say," Herb at last spoke, after he realized she hadn't moved. "Go call a doctor."

"Oh, Herb, you're not really sick. You just ate too much, that's all."

"I don't know, Doris. I think you better call a doctor. Or better yet, call an ambulance. Something's wrong."

"Nonsense!" Doris mildly exclaimed in a reassuring tone of voice. "Herbert Wheeler, you're no more sick than the man in the moon!"

Upon hearing this remark, Herb tried to raise himself on his elbow in order to get up from the couch, but instead found he was too weak and could barely move. "Doris, you gotta help me," he whimpered. "I can't get up. I can't even move. Please, Doris. Go on in the kitchen and call. Y'hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you," Doris replied, her voice now hollow and unemotional. Still, she did not move from the recliner.

With each precious second that passed, Herb became increasingly agitated at his wife's obvious indifference to his suffering.

"Doris, goddamnit, call a doctor!" Herb exclaimed impatiently. "Now!"

"No, Herb, not 'now,'" Doris calmly stated as she put her knitting aside. "First, I want to ask, do you remember all the times you beat on me and the kids? Do you remember the times you humiliated us and made our lives hell? Well, do you?"

"Doris, please," Herb moaned, as tears began to well up in his eyes. "I'm serious. You must call a doctor. I'm sure I'm about to..."

"Herb, do you know why the kids never come around? Have you any idea at all what you've done?"

As his breathing grew more labored, Herb's eyes became alight with panic and began darting from wall to wall, window to floor. His skin glowed a deep violet hue. His body began to shake as if chilled by a raw, arctic wind.

"They hate you," Doris persisted. "They hate you, and

they fear you. Herb, ... why? Do you even know why you treated us like you did?"

At last her husband became still and turned to look her in the eyes. "Doris,..." he gasped, "I'm...terribly sorry. I...need you to..."

Several minutes of near-silence passed. Herb's strangled voice had been replaced by an odd, gurgling sound as billows of pink foam began to flow from his nose and mouth. His eyes, unblinking and lifeless, stared vacantly up at the ceiling. Eventually the cheers of football fans and shrill whistles arose and could be heard again. Doris had returned to her knitting. She paused for a moment to look up at the television.

"Oh, Herb!" she exclaimed happily along with the crowd's surprised roar. "The Forty-niners just fumbled and now Washington has the ball! Ha-ha-ha-ha...ha-ha-ha!"

The Tie That Binds

The evening air was thick with the smell of honeysuckles as Rev. Alexis Bland made his way through the sanctuary. It was Sunday, and he made it his business to make rounds to see that everything was in order. Actually, it was a habit. He could not help but be cautious considering how his life had been most of the time. Ever since he was seventeen, he had had a rough go of things. However, none of this fit into the realm of the normal; in fact, his life was one big meshing of small, significant, abnormal happenings. He seemed to be stalemated by turmoil. It had been years since he had experienced a peaceful, decent night's sleep, but he could not complain. He had what he needed, and God was all he wanted. In a strange sense, the big, dark, empty church that he was now locking up was much like himself peaceful yet somber. He was thirty-two, and still unmarried. He had no surviving family, or at least none that he would claim. Some may have viewed his as a boring lifestyle, but not the reverend. No, he just went on existing in the solitude he preferred.

As he exited the vestibule, Alexis was alarmingly aware that he was no longer alone. His mind drifted back to an encounter he had, about three years before, with an intruder in his home. His intruder, as Alexis told the authorities, had broken into his house with the sole purpose of murdering him, though they did not know each other. As they hauled the man away, he pulled Alexis close and whispered in a most callous, deranged tone, "I'm coming for you, Alexis." No five words could hold more horror for this one man. As it echoed through his skull, ricocheting off of every bony panel, he instinctively reached for his pistol, one he still carried—another reflection of a past he would much rather forget. As the footsteps got closer, he could feel the fear swelling up inside. The adrenaline was pumping with a fury that could not be denied. He pulled the hammer back. He took aim. Death was...

"Hello, Alexis," said the woman who had just tripped over the doorstep. This diversion gave Alexis the opportunity to hide his gun without her noticing. Her name was Ellen Carlington Abu. She was, as it were, the closet thing to a girlfriend the reverend had, though he kept her at bay. Her appearance, to say the least, was stunning. A perfect, hour-glass body akin to that of the most sensual calendar girls and shoulder length hair that was cropped closely around her face, framing the perfect beauty of ancient African empires.

"Alexis, are you alright?" she inquired, sensing that he was frightened. "Did I frighten you, dear?" The reverend nodded unsurely, almost sensing a greater meaning to her visit. "Well," she continued, "I just stopped by to see if you had checked your mail. Obviously, you haven't, so I brought it up for you." She handed him the normal, hefty handful of prayer letters, thank-you notes, and junk mail that is commonplace to any church. But one letter stood out like a sore thumb. There was no envelope, just a piece of paper. The paper was crinkled and grimy to the touch, as if it left to sit for years. The scribbles on the paper were garnished with childish drawings. As for the writing itself, it was barely legible, to most. But to Reverend Alexis Bland, it was painfully familiar and, as a result, equally horrifying. He grabbed Ellen, his pecan-colored skin now pale and peaked.

"What is it, Lex? What's wrong?" asked Ellen. She was confused and fearful, but she knew she had to stay with him. She had to know what troubled him. The sleuth in her had long been attracted to the mysterious Reverend Bland, but the strange letter set fire to her curiosity.

There was a crude map on the note, leading from where they stood in the vestibule up to the bell tower. Reluctantly, Alexis followed the map, with Ellen close behind. Reaching the tower, Ellen could feel the tension in Alex. She, too, was terror-stricken without knowing why. Together, they gazed inside the dark, foreboding tower. Once they had entered and gone halfway to the staircase, the door slammed and locked tightly behind them. Startled, Ellen spun around to

see a man who was cloaked in the night shadows that haunted the tower. However, as if to avoid his own tragic reality, Reverend Bland kept his back to this, his Doppelgänger. Ellen could not wait to hear what kind of story lay behind this new mystery. Maybe, she thought, this would give her some clue to the reverend's eccentric, withdrawn behavior. At this point, she had to know.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Oh, Alexis didn't tell you? Tsk, tsk," replied the man as he emerged from the eddies of darkness, revealing his uncanny resemblance to the reverend.

"Alex,..." began Ellen, confused yet utterly intrigued.

"I am Alexis's foil," said the stranger.

"You," accused Ellen, "you're the man who tried to kill my dear Alexis!"

"My dear Alexis," mocked the stranger. "Funny, that's just what mother used to call him—before you murdered her and father! And I wouldn't say that I tried to kill him. I was avenging my parents and trying to clear my name!" Ellen was amazed and wanted to know more. As she examined the stranger more carefully, she detected that he was slightly deformed. However, despite deformity, he seemed extremely articulate. He continued, "That's right, your 'dear Alexis' is a cold-blooded murderer, and I have a score to settle with him. I haven't got long. The police will surely come for me here. So, Alexis, it is time to give me what I came for."

"What is it that you want?" asked Ellen, her curiosity now at its peak.

"He wants me to confess to killing our parents," answered Reverend Bland in a grim, sinister voice, as he firmly stroked the butt of his pistol.

"That's right, Alexis," replied the sarcastic stranger. "Tell her how you were jealous of the attention given to your deformed twin brother! Tell her how you pushed me down the stairs when we were ten and crippled me for life, Alexis," he said pointing at the brace on his leg. "Tell her how you couldn't take the neglect anymore, Alexis! Tell her how you finally snapped and gunned them down in cold

blood, and then blamed it on your poor, crippled, deranged, twin brother, Alexis! Go on! Play fair now! Tell her, Alexis! TELL HER!"

"NO!" The scream pierced the cold night air. In the embodiment of that single scream, all the years shouted out of the reverend's life. "Damn you! You want a confession, you pathetic little retard? Yes. I killed them! I couldn't stand seeing them baby you anymore. All my life, I existed in that house as a second class child! They even blamed me for complications during the pregnancy! Yes, I killed those ungrateful fools, and I don't regret a damn thing!" With the eyes of a lover, he turned to Ellen and said, "My dearest Ellen, I'm sorry, but I just couldn't tell you. You wouldn't have understood. Ah, we had such a promising future together. But now, I'm afraid I'm going to have to kill you too." He raised the pistol, and with only a second's hesitation, he said, "I love you." Then, at point blank range, he pulled the trigger. The sound reverberated off of the bell, almost deafening the twin rivals. And then, turning to his brother, Reverend Bland said, "Now, dear brother, after all these years of grief and living in fear, it is all over." He pulled the trigger, but there was no response. The gun was empty. All he could do was look at his own gun in amazement. Seeing this golden opportunity, Alexis's twin took charge.

"Yes, brother," he said, "this is the end—FOR BOTH OF US!" With this, he charged headlong into Reverend Bland, sending both of them plummeting to the unyielding earth below.

Early the next morning, the police were all over the churchyard. Everyone was surprised and dumbfounded at the events. All they knew was something very tragic and strange had occurred there that night.

"A damn shame what happened to the minister," commented one officer to another.

"Yeah, who would have thought old Alexis Bland would turn psycho," replied his partner.

"Really though, this was crazy! I mean, shooting Ms.

Abu and then throwing himself out of the bell tower. It don't get much weirder than that."

"But get this, did you know the reverend wore a leg brace?"

"Imagine that, a rev with a gimpy leg."

"What's that? A letter in his hand?"

One of the officers kneeled to retrieve the paper that was held so firmly in the man's hand. "He musta been holding onto' this for dear life," the officer observed. "He's got a hold like a vice grip!"

"What does it say?"

"Nothing. It just looks like a child's drawing," the policeman said, too preoccupied with the childishness of the letter to notice the inscription in red crayon saying, "I'M COMING TO GET YOU, ALEXIS!"

Crossing over the Threshold

It was a clear, bright, sunny day. The air was brisk and filled with the aromas of blooming flowers. The birds were singing, and the trees were swaying with the rhythmical patterns of the delicate breeze. It was definitely spring. Whyman never remembered a day so beautiful. All of those years of shedding blood, sweat, and tears had finally paid off. Whyman couldn't believe it. He had finally done what the majority of his friends at home wouldn't do. He had finished college. Today was the day, and he was graduating. This was by far the proudest moment he'd ever experienced.

As the guest speaker was being introduced, Whyman let his mind wander off to some of those moments. There had been the day when he'd gotten his acceptance letter from Morehouse. He was going to be the first in his family to go to college, and this was the place that he had always dreamt of going. Then, he fondly looked back on his high school graduation. It was the last time that he and his boys had all been together. Finally, he reflected on the day that he'd gone over in his fraternity. Pledging had been tough, but whenever he stood next to his brothers in red and white, or stepped with his cane, he knew that he was finally home. This group was the best thing that ever happened to him. They made a brand new man out of him, gave him a brand new life, and he loved it. He could do anything he wanted to do, or go anywhere he wanted to go, and he knew that a brother was there to get his back. Thinking about his frat, he smiled to himself as he thought, "I am a Kappa man, and there is nothing else like it in the world."

Whyman snapped out of his thoughts. The speaker was standing at the podium now. Whyman looked around for his mother. She'd travelled all the way from Washington, D.C., to be with him today. For as long as he could remember, she sacrificed everything for her family. As a matter of fact, she worked two jobs almost every day and

still found time to have dinner on the table every night, take them to church every Sunday, and volunteer for all of their functions at school. He knew that he had a good thing in his mother, and he wanted to keep it. Which is why every night after he said his prayers, Whyman thanked God for giving him the best mother in the world.

His mind drifted back to the neighborhood. He thought about it often. Whyman always thought about the summer nights there. The air was always thick with gunshots, sirens, and car horns. He always hated going back there on vacations. It was a horrible place, but the only home that he had, so there was no getting out of it. The summer nights were always steaming hot. Sometimes you couldn't breathe very well unless you were inside with the air conditioner. By August the heat was unbearable. Whyman always thought that the Devil himself must have lived down the street. And it never failed, the hotter it got outside, the more trouble there was on the street.

Whyman remembered walking through those streets late at night on his way home from work. He would always be paranoid, watching his back every step of the way. Those streets were lethal. It was all too easy to get caught up in the middle of something. There was always something going down. It didn't matter how early in the day, or late at night. Whyman despised those nights, but it was no wonder. After all, it was a night like those when he lost his brother to the streets. After that, Whyman went out and bought his first piece. He made up his mind that he was not going to be another statistic. He absolutely loved his gun. Besides his mother, he knew it was the only thing on earth that wouldn't turn on him. He didn't strap it on to show off. Nobody even knew that he had it. That gun was his most prized possession. He would clean and polish it regularly. Whyman kept it close to his heart, because he knew that if he took care of the gun, it would take care of him. It was his best friend, and most importantly, it was the only ally that he had in Hell.

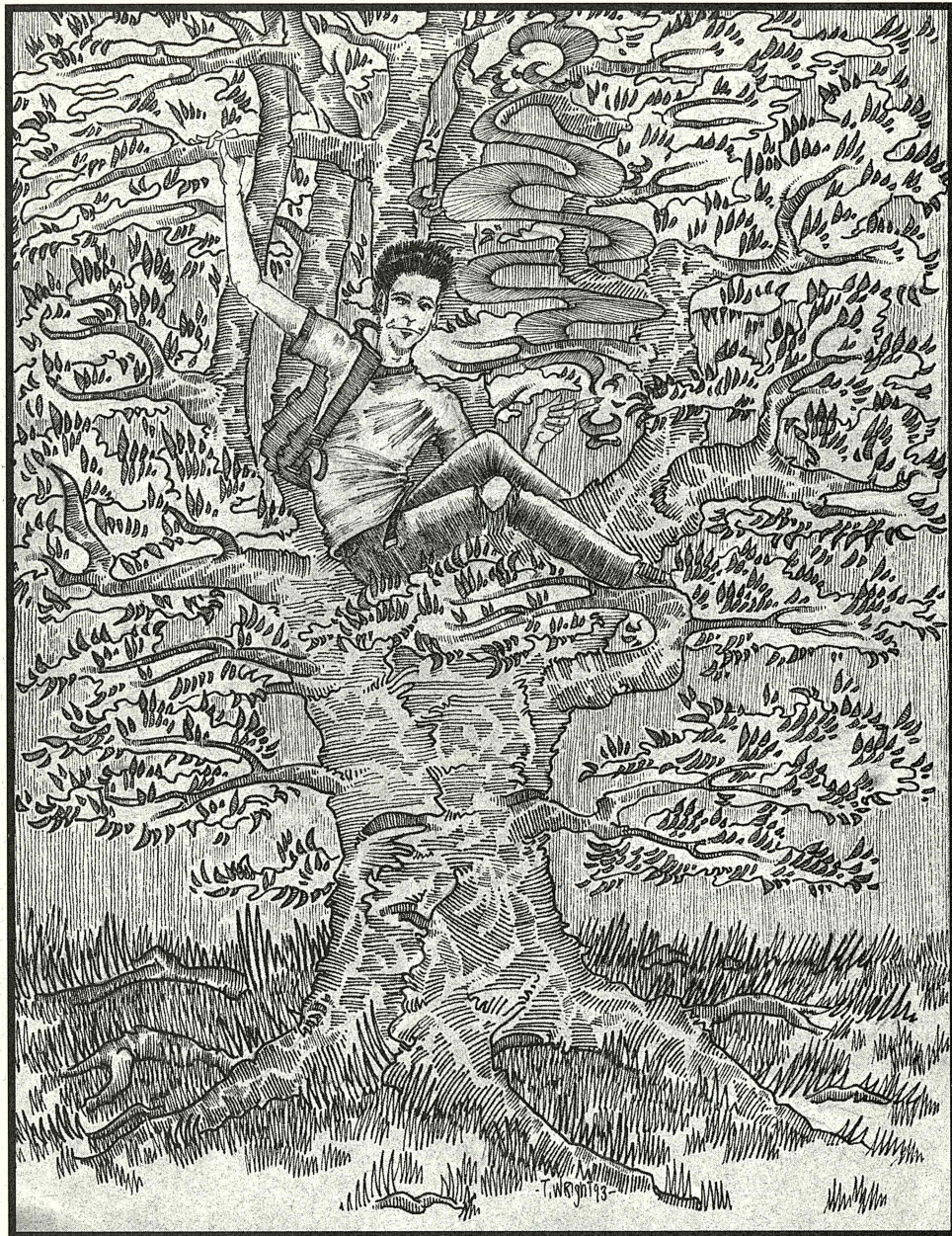
Whyman and his mother left Georgia for D.C. right after the ceremony. It was a long ride, but they arrived

home between 10:00 and 11:00 that night. He drove slowly through the neighborhood in order to get a good glimpse of what was going on. Nothing had changed. The same people were on the corners selling drugs, drinking liquor, and hanging out. He didn't know what he had expected, but this saddened and angered him. At school, he had grown use to a totally different lifestyle. The atmosphere was different. The people were different. The sounds and smells were different. The streets were different. Whyman had crossed so many thresholds while he was away that all of these things seemed to be ridiculous. He was in a foreign neighborhood now, and all of the people who once seemed so large were now childish and immature. He couldn't understand how he could have lived there and actually gotten use to it.

The first thing that he did when he got to the house was go to his room to find his faithful friend. He didn't feel like seeing his family and old buddies at the time, because he was exhausted. He hoped that no one saw him coming in that night and that any visitors that he might be getting would wait until the next day to drop by. Whyman went to the box in the bottom of the closet to get his gun. He was always careful to leave his room immaculate when he went to Georgia so that his mother wouldn't come in to clean it and accidentally find the weapon. When he lifted the lid off the box, he was relieved to find the gun just like he left it. He went to the door to lock it and laid the gun on the nightstand next to the bed. For a long time, Whyman sat and stared at it, while he contemplated his life. He thought about where he was going and what he was going to do. When he was younger, everything seemed so bleak. There were so many times when he could never see himself getting out of that terrible town, and when he finally did, the roads always seemed to lead back there. There was no mistaking it though, Whyman finally knew what he had to do.

The next morning Whyman woke up to the aroma of breakfast cooking in the kitchen. That was one of the few things that he missed about home when he was away. The

sun was shining so beautifully that he's almost forgotten where he was. Everything was so peaceful. He even thought that he'd heard a couple of birds chirping amongst the noisy traffic. After breakfast, Whyman went back to his bedroom. He got his gun out again and gingerly cleaned it for the last time. When he was finished, he tucked it in his pocket, kissed his mother, and walked out of the house. When he got to the pawn shop down the street, he kissed the gun and laid it on the counter. A new day had come for Whyman, and it was time for him to let it go.



Poetry

Christopher Todd Wright

Me and the Irie Tree

Nature's Knowledge

The superb nature of being
is not being.
The honest endowment of knowing
is not knowing.
The striking movement of force
is not to push.
The unknown speech
is to listen.
The purest of intelligence
comes through watching.
To sense vibrations at their fullest
is to feel your surroundings.
The best form of marching
is learning to crawl first.
Speed comes at intervals
of a slow, steady pace.
The foremost rule of life
is to live and let live

Boogey Man

I'll make you cry, little man,
with many fearful schemes,
Come, little soldier,
show me all your dreams.

On your bed, you close your eyes
I'll be there,
I am the Boogey Man,
lounging in my lair.

Children weep when I appear,
dead of the night,
sharing mystical pleasures,
adding to the fright.

It's time to wake up, boy,
with your pillow held tight,
I'll still be here,
when you turn out your light.

Rebellion

Left door states:

DO NOT ENTER!

i journey on through.

That window orders:

DO NOT OPEN

i break the glass.

On the phone was written:

DIAL 9 TO GET OUT;

therefore i began with 6.

In the room a sign was posted:

SILENCE!

i jumped up and screamed.

The walls came down on the rebellion.

The Snake

The silent stroke of slippery feet
mark the passage—unnoticed creature.
He slides across the floor—
ice-smooth nature.
He is predator—a search
for unsuspecting prey.
His slinky skin a silhouette of reason,
eyes unseen upon his face.
He is a determined mind enhancer—
He curls and swerves, skirting obstacles.
Reaching prey, he STRIKES
abruptly with a single hiss!
Dissolving his intentions, away
he slowly slithers.

I play my blues in the dark

Silvertone zone ten
Cranked and wailin'
Tubes glowing
Cool incandescent blue.
I touch.
Get burned.

I think of women.

Anniversary

Lines were n'er so simple
As when together we were much in love
Could sit for hours and contemplate your dimples
And count the stars in your eyes, my dove,
But now you've flown and verses aren't forthcoming
Pen and paper are as chisel and stone
And too, my heart like gristle is becoming
Behind ramparts bricked of muscle and bone
The years crawl by, be it blessing, or a curse
I still feel the sting on my flank
Of the branded words "for better, for worse"
But yours is the wound that grows rank
When death comes calling with its dark knell,
Quick be your judge, so you may slowly rot in hell.

The Crack in the Sidewalk

The smoking gun fell from her hand.
Echoes of the shots still reverberated in her head.

Through tear-filled eyes, the vacant stare
of death gazed back at her.

The yells, the screams, the bruises, the pain
all eradicated with a single well-aimed bullet.

Never again to be imprisoned,
through the concrete wall she will emerge

as the seedling always does through the sidewalk.

You

always you lurking behind
a cereal box
a street corner
the eye of a needle
thinking I don't hear
the alarm I see ringing in your eyes.
I always carry my smelling salts
and buckle my seatbelt in case I
slip and allow you to make me
laugh.

Momma

holding her
rosary beads—
turned to gold
she says—
click
screaming at
the cats to
climb back
down the curtains
hands pressed
to closed eyes
Do you see it?
she cries in exuberant joy
the lights
the colours.
You see that sun in
the sky?
she says.
It's a blessing.

If You Could Hear Her Play as I Have

sitting in the dark, playing some piano on borrowed time. There floats a sadness and a longing there among the empty room; dust particles floating down. Her hands are a little course but they move elegantly, sweetly and even so they rage at times. It is her manner of speaking...in notes. Even in the deepest sadness her notes have a feeling of strength and I'm sure it is from the intense pain she has emerged from; been shaped by...is being shaped by. A subtle strength; the music caressing her soul.

If you saw her face you would know, her green eyes glow in a blaze, fevered and intent with an inner fire fueled by past pain...crushed inside thick, thick walls. Her eyes are glazed in feeling embedded in unspeakable thought and unworded memory.

She is playing what cannot be said. If you could hear her play as I have, only a few could explain but anyone with ears could comprehend. For what is locked away, somehow, some way, must be released. Some call this release art but I call it necessity.

If only you could hear her play as I have.

To Give Life on a Sunday

I sit calmly and watch a sprinkler
in my garden dance slowly around in
an everchanging spiral of silver light
cool drops of water cascading down
to give life on a Sunday afternoon.

Someone Other Than Myself

You couldn't tell me anything...I was all into myself
Wouldn't listen to my parents or nobody else
Just to annoy people, I would play my music loud
Do just about anything to belong to the "in" crowd
Sold my soul for acceptance, wealth, and respect
What i really latched on to was a sentence of death

I didn't care about the homeless man lying in the street
Or the starving children without enough to eat
Closed my eyes to the man who beat his wife up every night
We're all free to do what we want, isn't that right?

I turned my back on my family to be "down" and to be cool
Laughed in the face of authority and broke all the rules
Woke up one morning to find the "in" crowd was gone
Half my life was over and I was all alone

I had no true job skills
A criminal past with the law
And when I looked in the mirror
I shuddered at what I saw

Was this the face of someone who once knew how to dream?
And would this face come to learn what true acceptance means?
With all that I had gained, so much became a loss
Was being "in" worth everything, no matter the cost?

I called my mom for the first time in years, just yesterday
I love you was the most that I could say
I took a walk last night and saw a homeless man on the street
I gave him my jacket and a few dollars, so he could eat
As I climbed the stairs to my apartment,
I thought if nothing else
I've learned to think of someone...other than myself.

Survival Sonnet

Passed ten corpses, I dropped from agony.
Glancing at my auburn limb, I confirmed
Wilfred Owen and what his eyes could see.
God taketh away with a fiery burn,
What carried me to church my entire life.
My dreams now flowing away with my blood,
And the end of pain shines grim on my knife,
With bent thirst for my soul to flee this mud.
But look! Six corpses to a medic's flag;
Where safety flies red and white in blue skies,
Four teeth grit my tags while my leg must drag,
If I could just rise up and catch his eye.

This corpse won't need his gun. Now, just one shot.
His eyes turn on flaming bones of rot.

The Good Old Days

Those were the good old days
Grandma said
When licorice whips were a penny a pound
and for two sawmill dollars
you could buy enough bacon, flour, and coffee
to feed a family of eight for a week.

The good old days, I reminded her
Were when mad dogs roamed
unimpeded
along quiet roads on hot August noons
and laughing Klansmen caused wide-eyed mothers to wail
for their babies
throughout long smoke-filled nights.

Those were the good old days
Grandma said
When men were men
and women baked pies
and the stars and stripes waved proudly
over the courthouse square
where old soldiers lingered and played checkers
and marked time.

The good old days, I reminded her
Were when mouthing nations flew to arms
faster than you could buy bonds or remember the "Maine"
and polio struck down children
before they even learned to tie their shoes.

Those were the good old days
Grandma said
When younguns listened to their elders
and did what they was told
at least
until that damned old Elvis came along and spoiled it
for everyone.

Those good old days, I reminded her
Were when children sat shivering in church
on Sunday morning
looking up to a firebrand preacher
who, with unmerciful brow
beat them down
to choruses of "Amen, Brother!"
howled by an unholy host

of pharisees and moneychangers
which discolored the stain-glassed Jesus
from yellow to red
and turned the weary sojourner with growling stomach
away.

The good old days, Grandma at last conceded
(with a patient smile)
Were probably not that good after all
but, nevertheless
there once existed an indefinable optimism
—as if a tremendous Destiny had awaited us all
just beyond the dim horizon of time.

And, I suppose, in her own way
she was right.

Those were the good old days.

Trash Cans

They are always there
to hide the remains
of waste and greed.
The more we need, the more we use.
The more we use, the more we waste.
How easy it becomes. Homely,

they accept our refuse
with wide mouths and open arms,
no questions asked.
They are slaves of a generation when
dependence has become ignorance.

The trash can.
So dependable, so reliable.
To them go many thanks.

Learning

Mama, we didn't have no heat again.
I would've been warm had my shirt not been so thin.
Mister Walter couldn't get the heater started
—couldn't get no wood!
But I kno' that he would have—if he could.

Mama, let me tell ya 'bout the books we had to share
Instead of it being groups of two—it was pair upon pair!
Mrs. James could only get ten books at best.
Course tho', it would've been fine
had our class been thirty less.

Oh, Mama, my friend Jeff wasn't at school today.
Had to help his dad work if they wanted some pay.
Hope I don't have to quit school to go to work—I hope.
'Cause if I'm prevented from learning,
it'll be hard for me to cope.
I tell ya I get joy out of knowing how to read.
Knowing that ONE day, I too can succeed!

By the way, Mama, I tore my pants on the chair I sit in.
Got time to sew them now—or want me to use a pin?
One day we'll wear better. Right now we just gotta wait.
I gotta learn 'cause I can't let
a lack of education be my fate.

But, I know with knowledge, I can have any job I choose.
And maybe my child will say
I want to walk in my Dad's shoes.

My Brother

He chased the cat and teased the dog
and climbed up every tree,
He tore his pants, picked some fights,
and skinned up both his knees.
He could hit a ball, fish a stream, put Indians on the run,
Rope a steer, ride the range, and shoot with two six guns.
He hated baths, brushing teeth, and getting into bed,
But when I'd look in later, I'd see a halo round his head.
He thought that girls were just about
the worst thing in this life,
He swore that when he grew up, he'd never take a wife.
He knew that school was just a jail,
the teacher was the warden,
I had to push him out the door
to the school bus every morning.
He took apart my radio, to see what made it tick,
By some uncanny witchcraft, he really got it fixed.
He ate enough for ten big men, he outgrew all his clothes,
He read about a hot rod, so he got him one of those.
He begged and traded all stray parts,
to try to make her run,
the day he drove her out the yard,
his smile was like the sun.
How he got through high school, well, I can only guess,
The night he graduated, he seemed taller than the rest.
Today before my very eyes, my little brother,
he disappeared,
In his place there stood a man, he's twenty-one this year.

Blues in the Night

Why won't you?
I'm too tired.
Oh, come on.
Leave me alone!
I won't be able to sleep.
Well, I can't sleep now.
PLEASE!
Why—in the middle of the night?
Because I'm hot.
You get hot at the damndest times!
You don't love me.
Yes, I do.
If you loved me, you'd do it.
Well—alright.
What's the matter?
I can't find it.
That feels better.
It should—it's all the way up.
That's enough—thanks dear.
Next time, open the window yourself!

Trees

The sapling maple in her yellow and orange dress
dances merrily, hems ruffling,
ruffles bouncing, flouncing gaily in the wind

Looking on, the chinaberry
stately in burgundy
watches with aloof disdain

Burnt orange and rust oak
adorns herself
in modest mein

Stepping lightly on carpets
of prickly pine
she hastens the others into line
to await the great sovereign
Wintertime

For You When the Night Crept In

Darkness falls and I feel sadness.
There was a time when I would relish your
pain, a sick reminder of my importance, my
absorption.
I don't know when it was that I crossed over—
began not to feel you so much.
I held the pain inside, yet it seeped
through my skin.
I reeked of you for so long everyone must have
been aware.

What you had over me lasted nearly a decade.
I don't know when I crossed over, stopped
being such a victim.
Now I have to wonder how you would see yourself
in a room full of mirrors—surrounded by an image
you know only too well.

I do not know if you will ever cross over.
Hundreds of miles can't save you, the baggage is
there.
Enter a room full of mirrors and let the sadness
save you.

Dried Flowers

When the lid was raised,
the perennial minuet would begin.
The Blue Danube would tinkle around
black knee boots and pink evening slippers.
Two frail hands, always touching,
fused stark blue and soft rose.
Painted black eyes stared out of alabaster
tinged with first love blushes.

When the lid was closed,
the old waltz floated on muggy breezes,
covered glossy boots with a sheen of dust.
The old Prussian, wiping his gypsum face
with a soiled sleeve, frayed epaulets
marking time to metallic notes,
slumped against the liquor store wall,
silken German nights resurrected.

Epiphany on Rabon Road

They call you
roadkill.

Some creature fated here, where
automobile tires crush and recrush
the last moments of your life.

I sit at the stop sign and wonder
as I wait for the traffic to clear
about all the things that had to
happen
for you to belong where you lay.

The seasons, the suns, the moons,
risings and fallings of the stars.
The estrus cycles, the days and
nights,
the food, synaptic responses, DNA,
fates, mistakes, joys, instincts.

They all brought you here to die.

I wonder at the reason.

I tip my head towards you in salute,
and resist the urge to shoot the
son of a bitch
behind me
blowing his horn.

The Seventh Day

God moved.

The amoeba oozed, "I want to be many."

The fish gurgled, "I want to walk land."

The frog croaked, "I want to be born here."

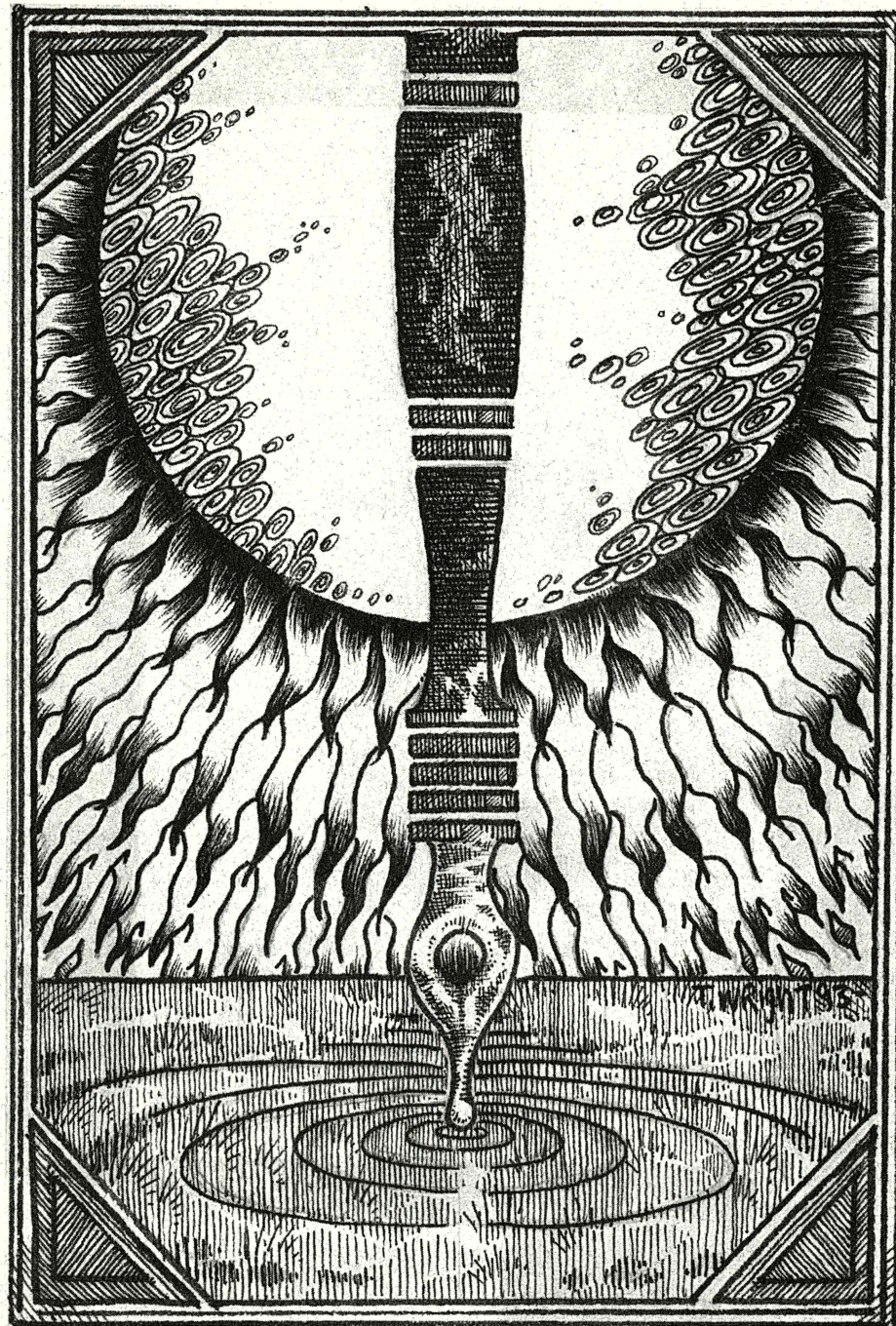
The snake hissed, "I want to fly."

The eagle screamed, "I want to nurse young."

The pig snorted, "I want to talk."

The humans said, "We want to understand."

God waned.



Christopher Todd Wright

Untitled

Essays

The Old Man and His Trail

It was the first of November, and the first cool front of the season was just starting to move in. I was sitting at a rather large corner bus stop waiting for my ride. Across from the bus stop is a beautiful church, and across the street from the church is a Mission that helps those who are down on their luck. I sat there looking at this church and was thinking about my own spiritual beliefs and the trails of life I have chosen to take.

Suddenly, I noticed that I was no longer alone. I was being joined by an elderly man. As he took his seat on the hard bench, he looked at me and our eyes made contact. He nodded as if to say he was there, and then he looked away. That was the last time our eyes would meet. He sat there with his arms on his knees and his head bent over, looking at the ground around his feet. I started to notice things about this old man that told a story of hard times and loneliness. He looked to be in his late sixties. He had gray hair, cut short, revealing scars on his head. His hands were rough, with dirt filled nails that were too long. His fingers were cracked and dry. There were also stains of nicotine from holding his cigarettes so long that they were to the point of burning his fingers. He wore no socks, and his shoes looked as if they had seen better days. One shoe had an old string for a lace; the other one was laced with a piece of wire. Each shoe had tape wrapped around the toes. I also noticed that every now and then, he glanced up looking towards the Mission across the street from the church. His face had an empty expression on it. The doors of the Mission had not yet opened for the evening. Taking note of this, he would resume his shy way of sitting quietly.

I wanted to sit there long enough to finally see some type of expression from him. I didn't have to wait long.

The doors of the Mission finally opened. His eyes lit up, and it was the look of satisfaction that comes when a person is hungry and knows that it is almost time to eat. As he got up and began walking towards the open doors, I noticed one last thing, his gait. It was slow with a small limp that was slightly noticeable—as in a man who has walked a long hard road.

As his body disappeared through the doors of the Mission, I felt sad but thankful. There are many trails in life a man must choose to walk. The most important of these is the one that makes him a good man and keeps him close to the spiritual world. I think somewhere in this man's life, he somehow got off of this trail, never to get back on the right path, but instead, he ended up on the trail of tears to the soup line. I went home knowing more about the trail of life that I have chosen for myself just from watching an old man on a bench.

The Bird

I was eleven years old and living in a small village in West Germany. My older brother and I were strictly forbidden to play with or be around B-B guns. We were issued the standard reasons. Momma would say, "You'll shoot your eye out. You'll shoot someone else's eye out. You'll shoot a window out," and on and on. Well, being so taboo only made B-B guns that much more desirable, and tempting.

A friend who lived nearby had a Daisy single shot B-B rifle, and it didn't take long to convince him that he would sincerely enjoy letting me borrow it. I went through the normal rounds of pretending. I was a sheriff shooting the bad guys, fighting Indians, and a soldier winning the battle. It got boring pretty quickly after shooting a few cans and bouncing a few B-Bs off a wall. I looked around, trying to decide what else to do.

We lived in an old farmhouse that had been converted into a few apartments. It was surrounded by trees—a lot of trees, trees full of birds—lots of birds! A little sparrow flew from a tree to the rain gutter of the apartment house three stories up. As far as I can remember, shooting at a living creature had never occurred to me before this moment. But I wasn't going to actually shoot at the bird. I would shoot close enough to just spook it so I could do a little childish chest-beating about what a marksman I was.

I began bringing the B-B gun to my shoulder, stretching way back and taking careful aim. I slowly squeezed the trigger with my now nervous, sweaty finger...BAP! I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The little bird was tumbling to the ground, and the chill that makes you run to the bathroom was crawling up my spine! Surely I must have hit the gutter under its feet and knocked it off balance! The little bird hit the ground and started flopping all over the place, all the while making loud, chaotic screeching sounds, the kind of sounds that produce guilt.

I thought to myself, "Boy, you did it now!" I looked at the little bird, and I could see its little leg ripped halfway off its bleeding body. "How could such a tiny metal ball do so much damage and cause so much pain?" I asked myself. Seeing this little bird suffer, I panicked, afraid that someone would pass by, see what happened, and tell my father.

Fear, guilt, and not knowing what else to do caused me to raise the gun, cock it and shoot again at the fallen bird over and over and over. I counted each shot... eight... nine... ten... eleven, until I was sure the little bird was out of its and my misery. Eleven shots to kill the little bird by an eleven year old boy, coincidence? Maybe.

The guilt started to set in, and the tears began to flow, so did the thoughts. "I hope no one sees me crying. What about the bird's mother and father? Did it have any little babies that now have no one to take care of them?" Guilt was an awful feeling.

I took the B-B gun back to my friend, just said "thanks," and left. I spent the rest of the day ready to cry every time I thought about the little bird. It was weeks before the pain of killing another living animal subsided to a seemingly bearable amount.

Before this incident, I already had a healthy curiosity of animals and other critters, but afterwards I began looking at them through different eyes. Over period of time, I began taking in every stray animal my parents would allow, from hedgehogs to snakes. I would also devour any and all information that came my way, from books to television programs. This interest continues today and has been passed on to my sons. We watch as many wildlife programs as possible and have accumulated a large collection of books on all sorts of animals, reptiles, and insects. I'm not able to state for sure that killing the sparrow created my interest and love for animals, but it definitely made me do as much soul-searching as an eleven year old boy could handle.

The Knot at the End of the Rope

A few years ago I went with my oldest son Jamie, who was ten at the time, to do some Home Teaching on Sunday afternoon. This is a church program in which two members go out as companions to visit with and check on inactive members. On this particular Sunday Jamie asked if we could visit the Kimbles, an elderly couple that he had become very fond of. During our visit, their five year old granddaughter came into the room. When she saw my wheelchair, she became puzzled and asked why my chair had wheels and why could I not walk? I explained I had been hurt in an accident and then put her up on my lap and showed her how my chair worked.

As we drove home, Jamie asked with sadness in his eyes, "Papa, does it hurt you when people ask about why you are in a wheelchair?" I told him no, because their questions help them understand the way I am. He then asked, "Papa, does it ever bother you that you cannot run and walk like everybody else?" I told him yes, at one time it did bother me very much.

That night as I lay in bed, my mind flashed back to Livorno, Italy, where I was born and raised. There, a child is expected by the age of six to start taking on adult responsibilities, such as household chores, meal preparation, looking after younger children, and, in the case of fishermen's families, helping out at the wharf. I was no exception to this rule, for by the time I was six I was helping my grandmama round the house, with daily marketing and with some of the cooking. When I reached the age of eight, after my kitchen chores, I would run down to the dock to help Grandpapa with that day's catch. While we mended his nets, he would tell me stories of the sea.

In 1962 my grandparents and I came to the States to be near relatives who immigrated a few years before. We were living in Huntsville, Alabama, a city surrounded by beautiful mountains. By the time I finished high school, I had

plans for myself. With the help of my grandparents, I was able to rent a storefront near the downtown area. It was here that I opened "Stefano's," a small fashion boutique. With my original designs and several appearances on local TV talk shows, I felt I was on my way to having the life I really wanted. There was nothing at all in my plans of having to become a husband and father at nineteen, but I adjusted, when my girlfriend became pregnant. As my wife, Virginia became my seamstress at the shop.

I had been married a little less than a year, and Virginia was due to deliver our first child any day. One day, since there was not much to do around the house, I decided to visit my best friend Joey atop Monte Sano Mountain. Our day together was great. We gave my car a long overdue tune-up, played some basketball, and talked about my becoming a father. Shortly after sunset, Joey's sister came to the back door with news my wife had gone in to labor. I left immediately.

Halfway down Monte Sano Boulevard, I was approaching a curve, when suddenly I came upon a car weaving all over the road. I swerved into the other lane to avoid a head-on collision, but the other car swerved to meet me. I swerved back into my lane, still trying to evade him, but he clipped my left rear fender. The impact caused me to fishtail as I fought for control. I felt the rear wheels slip off of the road, and what took only seconds seemed like forever. I screamed, as the car barrel-rolled down the embankment. Something was stabbing my throat and chest, and then there was a dreamless darkness.

After a time I could hear voices calling my name, and as I got closer to the voices, I started to wake up. As my eyes focused, I saw a strange man standing over me. He was a doctor. I learned that I had been in a coma for three days. I started to ask, "Where am I," but nothing came out. There was only sharp pain where my voice should have been. With both hands, the doctor gently held my head and informed me my throat had required surgery. It was dangerously close to my larynx, and I was not to try talking. I was told to try and stay calm, for he needed to tell

me about my injuries. I was first told that it was by the grace of God that I was still alive. I heard how my calf muscles were torn from the bones, that there was possible brain damage, that there was a lot of swelling around my spinal cord, that part of the steering column had been surgically removed from my chest, and that there was a possibility that I would be paralyzed from the neck down. They would not be sure about the extent of paralysis until the swelling subsided around my spinal cord. The only thing that they were very sure about was that I would never be able to walk again. I opened my mouth to scream, but again the hot, stabbing pain took the place of the words. I wanted to get up and run. All of my instincts told me to flee.

I laid there for a long time crying. About an hour later another doctor, a plastic surgeon, came into the room. He wanted to talk to me about the facial reconstruction that needed to be done. He knew I would not be able to speak, so he told me to only blink once for "no," and twice for "yes." This very kind, compassionate man knew the pain and torment I was going through inside. He sat down beside my bed and said, "Sport, I know you have been given a lot of bad news today to think about. I know that you are probably feeling like you have reached the end of your rope, and there is nothing left to hold on to. But this is when you tie a knot at the end and swing back into life." Before he left, he took a tissue from the nightstand and gently dabbed the tears that were clinging to my eyes.

As he was leaving, Grandmama appeared at the foot of my bed. He explained our eye blinking communication code, and then he was out the door. Sitting down, Grandmama asked excitedly, "Have you seen him yet? He's beautiful!" She could tell by the puzzled look on my face that I had no idea what she was talking about. Shocked, she said, "Haven't they brought your son in to see you?" When I blinked "no," she darted out of the room. I remembered, then, Virginia had been in labor, and I was on my way to get her. Grandmama returned with a nurse holding something in her arms. As they came to my bed, the nurse leaned

down, and I saw the beautiful, tiny baby boy. Grandmama said, "He's your son, James Henry Marcello." I knew then I had found a knot for the end of my rope.

As the weeks and months rolled by, more and more feeling and movement returned to my body. Physical therapy started to improve my grip and upper body. I spent hours trying to bring my body back as much as I could. When I was not in physical therapy, I would be in speech therapy. I learned sign language first, then as my throat would allow, I was taught how to talk by pushing breaths up with my diaphragm. The reconstructive surgery was performed on my face, to replace the crushed cheek bones, chin, and to cover scars. It took me awhile to get used to my new appearance and body, but every time I saw and held my son, I was so thankful.

Contributors

Wayne Cook lives in Lexington and is a student in the HVAC program.

Eugene Downs resides in West Columbia and writes poetry and short stories.

Sharon Felder appeared in last year's *STYLUS*. Besides being an avid journalist and poet, she hopes to pursue her interest in drama. She will be finishing her A.A. this spring.

Cassie Foy has been previously published in the Irmo High School literary magazine. She would like to develop her writing as a career.

Bill Goodwin has travelled the country since graduating from Hammond School. In addition to poetry, he is equally blessed with a gift for music.

Stacy Gregg is in her second year of the paralegal program. She graduated from Lexington High School and makes her home in Lexington.

April House has been previously published in *STYLUS* '93 and *THE VAINGLORIAN'S VOICE*. She lives in Lexington and considers Emily Dickinson and e.e. cummings two of her artistic influences.

Artist **Jennifer Hunt** graduated from Cardinal Newman High School and hopes to transfer to USC in graphic design.

Jim Johnson is an English major in the associate of arts program, who is considering a stint as a journalist in the Navy before pursuing his BA.

Ruthie Jones-Garguilo first published her poetry as a student at Berkeley High School. She hopes to transfer to USC and study journalism.

R.F. Jordan is concentrating in history as an A.A. student. She is married with three children and credits Instructor Virginia Parrott for kindling her interest in writing.

Stefano Marcello is an accounting major. Journal and story writing have been lifelong avocations.

Robert Marchi is in the associate of science program, where he persists in dodging his writerly impulses.

Tammy McGee is originally from Sumter. She is a human services major and was published in *STYLUS* '89.

Gary Rabon, this year's fiction winner, is currently in the commercial graphics program. He hopes one day it will support his writing habit.

Hal Reed, winner of our first cover competition, hopes to pursue commercial graphics and design as a career.

Jeff Shannon is a criminal justice major, who has returned to school this year at the age of thirty-five.

LaVon Simpson lives in Ridgeway and has published articles in *THE NEWS AND HERALD* of Fairfield County.

Bruce Stephens, winner of this year's poetry award, has been writing for many years. He makes his home in northeast Columbia and wishes he could write for a living.

Claire Taylor lives in Batesburg. She is an A.A. student and hopes to transfer to Columbia College. Her goal is a career in social work.

Gail Watts will complete the nursing program this spring. She lives on a farm in Swansea.

Jonicah Lenore Williams lives in Camden and hopes to enter the health information management program. She has been writing "off and on for about eight years."

Christopher Todd Wright, this year's art winner, is originally from Fort Mill.

