

COLLAGE

Spring 1997



COLLAGE

Collage is produced by students and published for the students, faculty, alumni, and friends of Middle Tennessee State University.

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Caring

Vikki Williams

Becca Blossoming



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An Epiphany

I'm late because
I had an epiphany.

I've been sitting here
holding it
in my
two cupped hands,
watching it.

It's too big
to fit
inside my mind.

I sat
watching.
Night came.

by Sue Mullin



did you know?

girl becomes fish
fish on the shore of a raging sea
gasping for breath
as they smother her face with a pillow

girl becomes kaleidoscope
a ray of radiant reds blues yellows
as they kick slap punch her

girl becomes channel
a way out an outlet a point scored
for their darkness their hate
their animal rage their dicks their games

girl screams no
hey scream yes then

all at once

girl is no longer girl
she is old old woman wondering
where she went wrong
where the air the blood the white went
where Mary went

but oh
there there

boys will be boys

she will piece together the remains
mourn the loss
dress in black for no apparent reason
live on the dark side
with Valium for sleep
Snoopy band-aids for scars
Southern for Comfort

while they go on the road more traveled
on probation of course
minus \$500 in their pockets

this old woman says

fry the fuckers

don't you know what no means?
they say
as they find another girl to
steal the breath life love from
hell yeah we know
no means yes

didn't you no?

by Melissa J. Seneway



Act 1001: Coffee Break *by Melissa J. Seneway*

The air hangs thick and my coffee is bitter and cold so I say screw the coffee. I proceed to light up a Salem Ultra Light 100 with the yellow lighter my dream lover gave to me the night before after we made love on the dance floor in a hole-in-the-wall club with lots of psychedelic lights and women dancing with women and men grinding on men. I was caught up in the middle of the sweaty mix so I could feel like I belonged just a little ...

I take a long, hard drag off of this poor excuse for a cigarette and long for a Lucky Strike as I ponder this freak show of existence I'm performing in. Suddenly a handsome man sporting an Armani and a flashy gold band on his left ring finger strides past and gives me a suggestive wink. In return I give him my best Drop Dead Bastard Go Home To Your Wife stare. All at once my attention is diverted to a hard-looking woman with witchy dyed black hair and pounds of pancake make-up on her worn face. She is in the ring of fire, surrounded by a passel of screaming children with noses running and diapers sagging. As I watch one of the little girls is misfortunate enough to scream just too loud so Wham! goes the woman's fat hand with stuffed sausages for fingers across her offspring's pale little face. I roll my eyes in disgust and give this mother my best Haven't You Ever Heard Of Birth Control stare ...

I tire of that part of the show so I swivel around in my chair and listen to the cheap orange plastic crackle beneath me. Just as I vow to get back on the Ultra Slim Fast plan an older couple of sixty or so sits down within earshot. The bald, overweight, loudmouthed husband goes to get he and his wife some of the nasty brown sludge I had long ago abandoned. She offers to help him and he is belligerent. He informs her that he is quite capable of carrying two goddamn cups of coffee and she shuts up instantly. I decide I hate them equally - him for treating her like shit and her for taking it. I give him my best And Just Who The Hell Do You Think You Are stare and her my favorite They Have Support Groups For People Like You stare ...

I look across the way at the next act and see a beautiful family of four strolling along. The blond-headed father is carrying the angelic blond-headed daughter on his broad shoulders and the blond-headed mother is holding the small blond-headed son in her delicately thin arms. All the while these Dredson dolls are staring at each other in utter adoration so I decide that either the mother or father must be an alcoholic or something because no family is that perfect. I raise my right eyebrow and give them my best

Yeah Right I Know What's Really Going On stare ...

I wrinkle my nose, grind out my Salem Ultra Light 100, and say screw trying to cut back and lighten up and quit. I head off in search of a pack of Lucky Strikes, hearing my mother's voice somewhere in the distance preaching the horrors of cigarettes. I silently say to her Sorry Mama, but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. Just as I'm through I spot an old scruffy but not dirty man perched on a step fondling a bottle of Budweiser. For some strange maybe gravitational reason I stop short and look into his blue eyes twinkling beneath bushy brows of salt and pepper. Instantly-momentarily we are connected for he enjoys the freak show just as much as I do and he too curses and laughs at and cries for the actors just as I do. He is reading my mind and seeing through my facade so he holds up his bottle of Bud to toast me because he knows I drink like a sailor and had only seconds before been criticizing him for drinking. I see all of this in his wise old eyes so rather than silently curse him I smile knowingly and give him my best You And Me We're Of The Same Kind look. He nods and takes a long swallow of beer ...

While I'm paying a skinny little wimp with a pepperoni pizza face and a hideous red polyester vest on for my much sought after Lucky Strikes I think long and hard about that old man and marvel over his insight. He knew I am a total hypocrite and then I realize that he's one too and he's probably Catholic. Irish Catholic, at that! We are alike in that we're hypocrites because we're Catholic and we're drinkers because we're Irish. Two drunks who get cleansed in Confession and then carry on, criticizing, moaning about the state of the world through the rest of the week ...

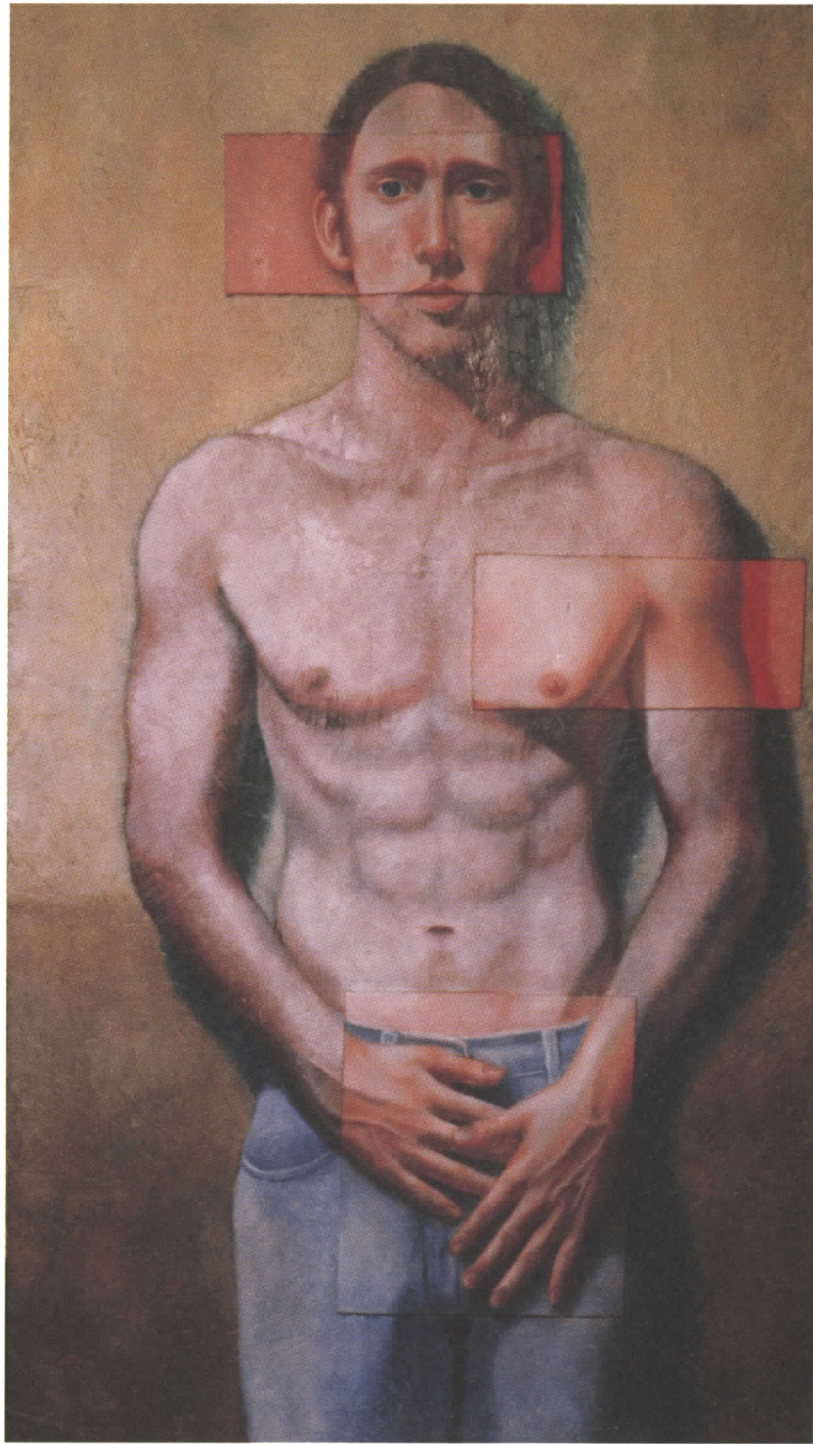
I laugh out loud at the irony of Act 1001 of the freak show. When I reflect on the man with his fancy suit and wedding ring, my mother's sermons on the evils of smoking, and that old man who was yelling at his wife for the fortieth year in a row I find it all downright hilarious and begin laughing uncontrollably. I am completely aware of the stares I am getting which make me laugh even harder so I give them all my best I Bet You Think I'm Paranoid Schizophrenic stare right back ...

Joyfully-gleefully lighting up a Lucky Strike, I wonder who will be in the next act of the show and where I'll ever find a decent cup of coffee and how many beers the old man on the step has had by now. I sigh contentedly because, friend, don't you see? In every one of the freaks in the freak show I see me ... *

one for a ceiling fan

melt and swelter
sweet sweat on golden bourbon
as the room swells hot as a handful of broken thumbs
 she shifts a shrug across softening shoulders
 as I almost got to forget who I was
this almost was not
almost there
almost there

by Joseph Morris



Self Portrait

Brian Koelz

Red Vinegar

"She mulled on him daddy"
daddies eyebrows leaned forward
and took a bow-
then he relaxed
he was pleasant, his face like aging wine.

"Didn't know she was in love, eh?"
His reclining leather spoke shrill as he shifted.
"Did you?"
"Of course I did" The cork pops.

Danielle sat in the corner,
Pot did nothing for her.
She took swallows of water and benadryl.

"What do you think honey?" — He was mildly intoxicated —
Sal drank from his eyes.
"Big Sis is gonna get married"

"I'll throw change at the minister"
She sat back, easily split a pill between her
ivory teeth,
and swallowed.

by Joey Rositano

Beloved Mute

Her deliberate silence pulls and rips,
strips skin to bone.
Thinning fingers grace worn ivory,
trading black keys for his soul.

Sound can drown
beneath the rippling glass.
Tuneless, wordless lullabies,
too strange and sweet.

The voice like
an anchor to ankle.
Dense wood, too heavy it drags
her down to clouded depths.

Bitter bubbles surface and burst
with each a soundless scream
made to rake a lover's heart.
Her unspoken words hover and tease.

Raven curls, white wings
tangle and float in liquid lulled.
From his mouth she draws breath.
From his beloved mute, only sighs.

by Denelle Finken-Bratcher

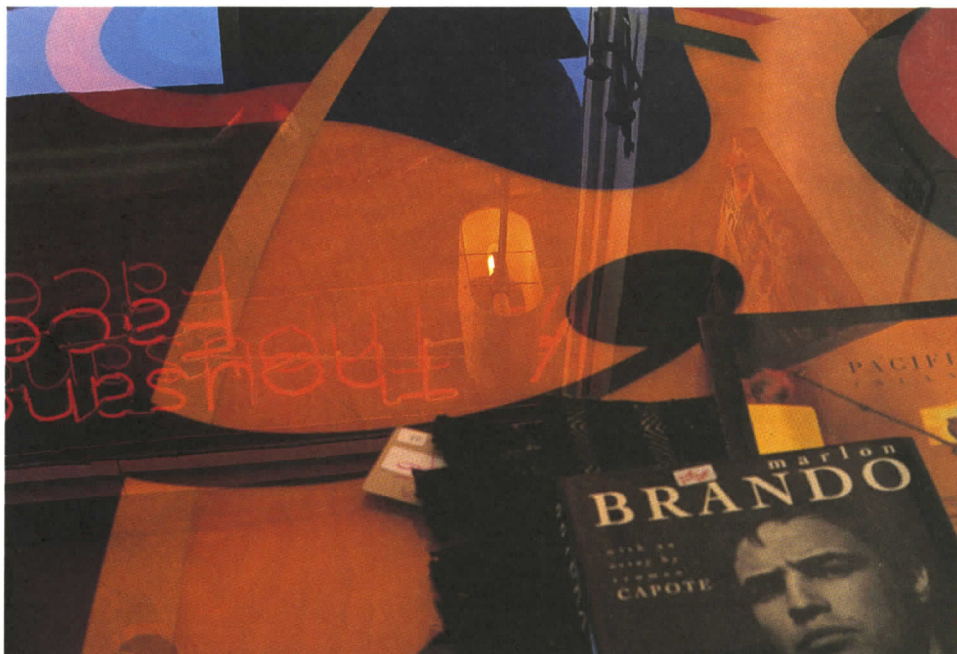


untitled

Ryan Stoney

untitled





Hillsboro Village

Paul McKelvey

Hillsboro Village



Old Farmer Russell

Old farmer Russell,
For fifty years you toiled the soil,
Worked hard for a living,
Weathered good times and bad,
Took a wife, made a son,
Built a home —

All from your own sweat,
All from your own labor.

A man of the earth,
breathing air that was clear
And drinking from bottles without labels —

Said ain't,
Said Grace ...

Through hard times and prosperity,
Against the very land—*no time for the Japs, mind—*
Against the Big Boys up North—*to Hell with Ike—*
Against your own flesh and blood—*no money for schoolin', make yer own.*

Against your own body—*doctor says it won't be long now.*

And now you lie there,
Fifty years of living etched in your still face,
A mask of life,
With decades of dirt and grease and blood ground under your nails
And into your soul so deeply no mortician can clean them,
In a suit you never could afford during your life
And would never wear even if you could—*damn zoot suit,*
About to sleep eternally beneath a marble cross;

It's funny they'll plant you with all these dead people
When all you ever wanted was to lie forever in your own fields—
The only thing you ever had or ever really wanted.

by Jonathon Malcolm Lampley

Love Poem

I want to lace you with
shoestring kisses
and watch lips slowly unfold
like the sand dunes
on the western side of Lake Michigan
I took my guitar away from the shore
and climbed each one
pretended I was in the Sahara
your lips are the same
heaps of soft tissue
I want to walk away
drawn by something beyond,
below, amiss
centered, in between, and ivory sea
solid, an icerink
only a summer day
I wish to walk around your neck
like traversing a world
If I pretend it's not mine
if I step away
perhaps it won't grow old

perhaps I will engage you like a Titan

On a sure day
I stand by the dirty water
driftwood from Chicago
Chicago working her way west
little noticed.

by Joey Rositano



Lisa Kurtz

Untitled

Harry Woods

East Nashville





Soap & Company Packaging

Katherine Garrett

Felicia Martin

Untitled



Travis Rader

Stone Age Matches

Don't Tell Me God's a Man

drinking life from the water of the earth
you a babe
at its mother's breast.

honey flows thick
like a woman in love
voluptuous hills and soft mossed mounds
make her body.

storms born of rage
great crags of strength
lustful fires and timid
mild valleys.

creatures curled in care
in warm dens or warm wombs
ritual red rains
bring the flowers.

by Shannon M. Smith

Ignoring the Desk in the Corner

I hope I've been
more amusement than imposition
being at the bottom of the bottle.
Broken conversation interposed —
Counterpoint laughter — musical genius.
My thoughts become mottled
like a dying leaf on the eve of winter.
Love is lost, practicality is the
Watchword of the season.
Take my hand and we'll walk
— for a while —
Into the sunset
like in the old black and white cowboy movies.

by Alex Rollins

Ki Young-Hong



Red Chair Stony

Sherry Teal

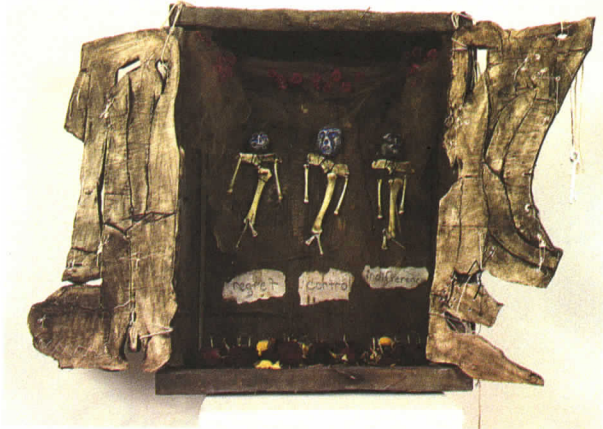


Oracle of Venus

Oracle of Venus



Inner Abyss



Inner Abyss

Crime

In former years when cheeks were dry
We feared a swift payment in spades
For acts or omissions to act
From the videotape of our lives

In later years when cheeks are wet
And Yahweh plays the VCR for us
We'll watch with him praying for passing grades
Fearing all the while an act
Or omission to act
A home by some river in Hades.

by J. Eldon Stover

Vixen

one man would fashion from her a coat to wear proudly upon his back like a mantle of gold shining false
light into the eyes of those whose opinions he would value more than his own until the shine wears thin and
the gold becomes lead dangling by its threads covered in dust
like a memory that you cannot learn from but only regret
and she prays and she prays that one day she will see him wear her again
like an old friend too lost to remember but
too close to forget.

one man would make her a pet to teach his worldly tricks like a puppet to be told who she is and what she is
to become for surrender may suffer contentedly but resistance puts the smile on his face
for he is the master and she is that slave though the sugar is cheap the fist takes less
and which teaches the lesson best and she cries and she cries
hiding in corners and licking her wounds
he stares into those frightened eyes as if in his reflection
he sees God.

one man would turn her away although she is starving his cup overfills he will not give up those petty
tangibles for her broken frame as he is strong in his convictions shielded by his independence yet what he
calls independence is a small dark room where he sits cold and alone with dreams of a mirror
and he looks hard into it and he will stare and he will stare
withered and dead but no matter how deeply
all it will ever show him is what he has lost at the cost of
his precious independence.

one man would show her his wings with feathers painted in enchanted hues and scents of passion fruits his
lures in promises this fable's wine he will make her the saint of one million whores
for he is the hunter a vampire of hearts hiding and waiting for that gently pressed night
where his venom runs swift like the rats and their gifts and she screams and she screams
into the tear shed silence of all those whom have come before her
trophies of the demon whom calls himself Man
waiting to welcome the next.

one man would stand before her watching as she sleeps to bring himself beside her and cradle in her warmth
for he does not know the language of other men he does not know their secrets he is a stranger as lost
amongst as she he is a seeker of great magicks and a brethren to sacred things a traveler searching for his
one true and only love like a key to unlock the innermost parts of the soul that he cannot reach alone and yet
so easily with her and as this man cradles beside her what could not be done has been done and he whispers
to himself "what wonders must exist in heaven"
for he becomes the fox ...

by Christopher Steven Byrd



Joseph O. Shay

Things I Love



Eric Ridaill



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November Second

Great glowing half-orb
in the night sky
is the profile of her bosom,
her nurturing self reaching down to me
from her new dwelling

to Touch me—
The image blurs and spills
onto my cheeks
wet lashes close on clouded eyes.

by Janet Patterson

Paper People

by Lisa M. Daniel

I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines.

- Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, Act 2

On every Sunday, after church, father would stop at the local market to pick up a newspaper and gas the auto. While he chatted with Mr. Green about this morning's news, mother and I would look over the desserts. We stared silently at the neatly laden rows of pies, cakes, and other confections which had been dutifully prepared by Mrs. Green and her three daughters. Mother was exceptionally quiet this morning. She did not thank the minister for his service nor did she entertain Mrs. Green with her usual disinterested domestic inquiries. At any moment, I expected her to break this unbearable stillness with a "Sarah, what did ya use to culla this icin" or a "How long did you boil yaw puddin." Nothing. A jostling in the far corner signaled our departure and Mrs. Green, noticing the commotion, handed my mother the usual Black Forest cake. I would have preferred the coconut-creme pie, but Black Forest has always been father's favorite.

When we reached the register, father was mumbling something about the economy and coal while groping for the inside pocket of his coat. This is where my father keeps what he calls the "bare necessities of life," though I have only seen that pocket produce cigars, money, and a pair of reading glasses.

As my mother drove home, father began his Sunday reading ritual. Although I was not yet able to read, much to my mother's dismay, I would glance over my father's shoulder and wonder about what all those little words meant. I concentrated on all the empty spaces between them trying to make sense of it. Flowers and snakes, trees and branches, and sometimes a smile and sometimes a frown would form in the pale white surrounding all those indistinguishable black words. These things I understood.

Upon returning home, my mother and I began

supper. This was a blessing. It took my mind off of the uneasy eagerness I felt in the very pit of my stomach whenever I envisioned what was to come.

I would often check in on father, peering through the crook of his arm from behind his reclining chair. Billowing clouds of white smoke puffed from my father's mustached lips. The sweet scent of burning tobacco was intoxicating. It was a familiar smell -- old, musty upholstery, cigar smoke, and newspaper print. I imagined that this was what a press room smelt like. That is where father said he smoked his first cigar. It was in celebration of his promotion to editor of his hometown newspaper in Knoxville. I have heard the story enough to have lived it myself but that was long ago, before he married my mother and long before I was born. Sometimes, I think he blames her. "New York," he would say, "I don't want to know them kind of folks." According to father, you had to know a people to tell the truth about them. Otherwise, you might as well make up the news.

Father came to expect my behind-the-chair visits. Anticipating the moment in which I was deeply engrossed in my own thoughts, he would reach under his arm and touch his black, ink-stained thumb to my nose. This was immediately followed by a visit to the washroom where father would soap his hands and then my nose. The bubbles held tight to the tip and the smell of strong perfume was sickening. I would close my eyes tight and squinch up my nose until father removed the inky bubbles with one of mother's white, cotton cloths.

He knew that his angered her, and I chastised him greatly. In response, he would wad up the stained cloth and tuck it into his pants pocket where mother would always find it on Wednesdays when she and I laundered the clothes. This was quite problematic, at least until I was able to

convince her to allow me to check the pockets and turn the dingy socks. This was only one of the many sacrifices I made to keep peace in my family's house. Mother came to believe that the cloths had gone the same way as lost socks.

In actuality, Mr. Green was using them as oil rags down at his market. Father would often go there in search of conversation and a cigar-smoking companion. I tagged along, carrying with me a bag inhabited by several of my dolls who traveled most comfortably upon a bed of gray, cotton cloths. This risk was grave, for such deceit would have tainted father's image of me irreparably. Mr. Green seemed to understand. He never questioned the source of my dirty laundry.

After wiping my nose clean and hiding the evidence, father would settle back down into his chair, neatly refold his Sunday paper, and beckon me to turn on the radio. He sat, finishing his cigar and listening to the day's news until, finally, he nodded off. I often wonder whether his dreams are also of the news, or if they free him from this apparent obsession.

I returned to the kitchen to hurry mother along. Sundays always seemed to be the same and, because of this, mother knew that it was time. She covered the stew and left the bread to rise. Removing her crisp, white apron, she walked to the sewing room and returned with her sharp, silver scissors. "Well, what ah ya waitin faw?" she whispered through smiling lips. Her scissors always frightened and amazed me at the same time. Both destructive and creative, they sparkled.

I knew my part in the plan. I held my breath deep inside and quietly crossed into the family room where father lay sleeping. My mind still entranced by the sparkle of my mother's scissors, I approached my father's body. He looked like an angel of the highest order. I knelt down beside him and bowed my head. Then, after a moment's ponderance, I scooped up his paper and rushed off to the kitchen.

I laid the paper atop the tale in front of my mother as if it were a sacrificial offering. She unfolded it and separated the pages which bled ink into the tips of her fingers. I chose several pages from the lot including the ones which told of gardens and people both happy and sad. mother never understood why I selected certain pages and left others for the fire. She and father were always so caught up in words.

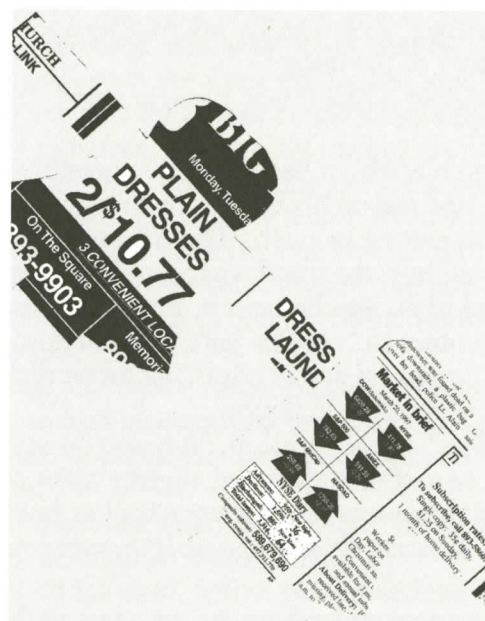
I handed mother the pages I had chosen and looked on as she skillfully folded them over and over again.

As she did this, she also breathed a song accenting each word that coincided with the pressing of a fold. It sounded like a chant. To me, this was a magical ceremony. All of those mysterious words folded to a soft chant while stew boiled. It was mystical and inspiring.

I followed my mother's hand as she reached for the scissors. Placing blackened fingers into the silver rings, she opened and closed them several times before taking them to paper. It was a pleasing sound, sharp and slicing. As she began to work, the scissors sparkled madly reflecting both the light of the kitchen and the newspaper print. Scraps of paper fell to the table and some to the floor. I caught one up and unfolded it. It opened into a sea of spiky waves.

Mother was nearly finished now. The scissors took on a new personality. They were slow and careful to refine corners and round edges. Finally, the scissors rested. They met the tabletop with a clang as mother shook them from her fingers. She then set her creation down and began to pick up the remnants of paper left on the table and floor. I glanced at her and then to the table. There lay a single, perfect, paper doll composed of many layers. I grasped the doll's hands and gently pulled creating many more perfect paper dolls. I completed their circle and together we walked upstairs to my room where we could be alone.

In my room, I would make wishes. I wished that the world were paper and people too. Paper-thin like my dolls -- so easily read and seen right through. My father would agree with me. I think he sees the people in the newspaper too, long before mother cuts them out. •



A Dying Vision, and the Go-Stick

by Britt Maxwell

Louis Colby *thought* he was a cop. Furthermore, he *thought* he had just rounded a corner into a dark alley and been shot in the chest, but that couldn't possibly be true, because ...

He was in a car, not in a New York alleyway, and he was driving back to college. It was the end of Spring Break, and the sun had just stepped out of the clouds, instantly warming his face as he drove down the highway. In the passenger seat was Lou's friend Ryan, a stocky young man who was presently glancing through a *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

"Look at this," Lou said, and pointed to a wooden stick that was lying on the dashboard. "I got it in Florida."

Ryan took the stick and looked it over. It was nearly a foot long, and reminded Ryan of a ruler he had owned as a child, but there was no metal edge for line-drawing, and it was blank of the hash marks that would delineate the length of inches. "What is it?" he asked, turning it over in his hand.

"The man that sold it to me said it was a 'Go-Stick.' Cool, huh?"

"Ghost stick?" Ryan echoed, misunderstanding.

Lou corrected his friend on the pronunciation and explained further. "The real name of it is something like *Kwisurn* or *Kwistum* or something like that. He said this old African tribe used to make them a hundred years ago by soaking dried tree bark in the blood of children."

"Gross," Ryan commented, and Lou laughed.

"It's not true, you know; it's just a tourist thing. I mean, he didn't explain how a guy from Florida got an African artifact, so I'm really not putting a lot of faith in the history of the thing."

Ryan waved it like it was a magic wand. "So what does it do?"

"For three bucks, it had better do something," Lou chuckled, and put on his blinker to change lanes. Traffic was getting heavier. "The Africans had this theory about how the mind was a powerful force, and all you had to do was harness it. So that's where the Go-Stick comes in." At this part, Ryan looked at him dubiously, and Lou had to admit the authenticity of the story was somewhat in doubt.

"Anyway," Lou continued, "it hasn't done much yet." The two of them laughed slightly and Lou looked down, but didn't see the steering wheel as he thought he would. Instead, Ryan's *Sports Illustrated* was in his hands.

When he looked back up, he was now in the

passenger seat, and Ryan was driving. At first Lou thought this was odd, since he was almost *positive* that he had been driving a minute ago, but in the end he just shrugged and went back to the magazine. It was best not to think about it.

Before long the sun had dropped so low that the western sky had become a murky orange and the east was dark purple. On either side of the highway, an endless plain of farmland stretched over the horizon. They drove for hours in silence.

When the clock on the dash read eight-forty, Lou was sure the sun would have gone down and the night would have begun. But for some reason that Lou didn't care to ponder, nighttime had not arrived on schedule on this day. No stars were out. The sky was not black but red, like blood.

"Funny weather," Lou commented blandly.

"I'd say it's normal," said Ryan. "After all, 'normal' is what you make it. That's what my Philosophy professor said."

Lou smiled. "Normal is what I make it, Ryan?"

"I said it's what *we* make it, you moron. What *we* make it. You know, society."

They passed a hitchhiker. He was standing with thumb outstretched in classic hitcher fashion, and a fat buzzard was perched on his arm. The buzzard was nipping pieces of flesh away from the hitcher's ear, but the man didn't seem to notice.

"You said 'what *you* make it,' Ryan, meaning *me*. I heard you." Then, as Ryan mumbled something in response to Lou's words, their positions shifted again. Now Lou was again driving and Ryan was in the back seat.

"So tell me more about this Go-Stick," Ryan said, wanting to change the subject. "If you could really use the thing, what could it do?"

Lou looked on the dashboard; the stick was still there. "Well, the guy said that if you could get your mind in the right state, and you had a Go-Stick, you could affect the physical world with your thoughts."

"The right state," Ryan echoed from the back of the car, "Like meditation?"

"I guess so."

"So do it."

Louis actually laughed out loud. "What do you mean, 'do it'?"

"I mean, you just paid three bucks for it, the least you can do is try it out." Ryan actually sounded serious.

For a moment Lou really considered it. As he did, they passed another hitchhiker, this one looking oddly

like the one they had passed a mile ago. But his one had two buzzards, one for each ear. His eyes were dark and hollow; they watched Lou as he drove by.

"What the heck," Lou said, and took the Go-Stick, which was looking suspiciously like an ordinary ruler that had been sanded down so the hash marks were gone. But what do you have if you don't have your faith? he asked himself.

Meditation was not an option, since he was driving now. So as he watched the road, he concentrated on the stick and decided to use the mystic sorcery to create a—

(for less than one second his mind flashed back to his childhood, when his best friend Matthew had told him, with all the weight of his youthful wisdom, about an M-16.

"It's a gun," *Matthew had said darkly.* "Soldiers use it. They call it an M-16."

"Emmsixteen," *Louis had repeated in his most respectful tone. Only years later did he learn that "emmsixteen" was not a word, but a letter and a number.)*

—a gun, he decided! An M-16 rifle! He would make an M-16 out of thin air, using only the timeless wizardry of the Go-Stick and his own mind!

So Louis proceeded to concentrate on the weapon (and why in the world he would want to create an M-16, of all things, he had no idea). But, of course, nothing happened. The stick didn't work.

"I guess you have to be meditating," Ryan offered. He was in the front seat again.

"Or dreaming," said Lou.

"Anyway, we're here."

At once Lou realized that he had stopped paying attention to the road. With a resigned sense of confusion, he saw that they were no longer on the highway. The endless plain was gone. They were driving on a shaded country road, both sides of it bracketed by overhanging trees. Red sunlight, like blood, mingled with the shadows and fell across the windshield.

"This isn't school," Lou said, peering toward the end of the road, where a great white house was perched on a hilltop. "This is my house. My parents live here."

Ryan looked at his friend, and his face was lined with worry. "Of course it's your house, Lou. Where do you think I've been driving us?"

Ahead of them, on the side of the little road, was the hitchhiker again. But he was dead now, and seven or eight buzzards were working on the carcass.

"No, we've been driving toward school, Ryan. You know, college! And besides, you haven't been driving, I ha--"

But now *Sports Illustrated* was in his hands, not the wheel. Penny Hardaway was on the cover. Ryan

was driving.

"You're home now, Lou. Your mom and dad want to see you."

"But mom and dad are dead, aren't they?" Lou wondered idly as he looked out the window. They had come to a stop, and the house loomed over them like a giant. The white bricks had been turned red by the crazy sun. Ryan turned off the engine.

Louis turned back to Ryan and his breath caught in his throat. His friend had vanished, and in his place was a child who could have been no more than eight years old.

The kid was wearing an army field jacket, which swallowed him up because it was so big, and underneath that he wore only his He-Man Underoos. Draped across the kid's lap was the M-16 Lou had wished for, all black and grinning steel, and on his head was a green combat helmet, which was marred by a single black hole that was spitting blood from the kid's head like some ungodly fountain, and Lou recognized it at once as a bullet hole.

The kid opened his mouth, and Lou could see that two of his front baby-teeth had fallen out and were being replaced by new ones. In his childish voice he said, "Emmsixteen," and his eyes were blue, but then the blood began to run into them—

"Jesus," Lou gasped and the car door opened, dropping him onto the driveway. Sharp gravel bit into his back as Cyrano, the family dog, trotted over. Louis looked at his own hand, which had clenched around the Go-Stick (ghost stick) before he had fallen out of the car.

Before he knew what was happening, Cyrano had locked his jaws around the stick and was making every effort to wrench it free of Lou's hand. "Stop that!" Louis cried, not knowing why. "I need that, I need it—"

—And he was back in the car again. But this time he was in the back seat, with Ryan, and his mother and father were in the front. He looked madly out the window and saw they were on the same stretch of highway as before, but now all traffic was gone.

Mom and Dad were chatting mildly about this and that, their voices only dimly heard. Ryan was concentrating on something that he was scribbling in a spiral notebook. To Louis it looked like poetry. Ryan stuck his pencil to his lip. "What rhymes with 'friendly fire,' Lou?"

Slowly, realization came to Louis. The truth dawned on him like sunlight breaking through the clouds after a storm. He turned to Ryan and said, "I'm dreaming."

His friend only shook his head. "That doesn't rhyme at all. Maybe 'trendy crier'?"

And Lou laughed, which was something he was glad he could still do. "No, I'm really dreaming! This

is all some stupid dream, of course! I mean, look at the sun; does that look *normal* to you?"

Ryan did look at the sun, which was just as blood-red as it had been for the last several hours. "Well, 'normal' is what we make it, after all. That's what my philosophy professor said, anyway."

"No, it's what I make it, because it's *my* dream, man!" He was laughing so hard he thought he would explode. He thought maybe he should pinch himself.

But Ryan wasn't laughing. He wasn't even smiling. "Yeah, Lou, it's all in your head," he said softly.

And Lou's door opened again. For one insane second he was in mid-air, no longer in the car; and in the next he was spilling out, all balance lost in a crazy swirl of red sunlight and purple clouds and he was falling, falling ...

He didn't hit the road, as he thought he would. Instead he opened his eyes and found himself sitting on the gravel of his own driveway. His mother was beside him.

"Mom," he said distantly, and he felt as though he had lost all touch with reality. There was a searing pain developing in his chest, but it wasn't from the fall. "Mom, what is this? A dream, right?"

And then she smiled that wise smile of hers. "no, not really a dream, son. Not as you know dreams, anyway."

"What does that mean?"

She folded her hands in her lap, and as she did Louis noticed the sky had gone from red to black. But now it was peaceful; not angry. "Louis, what do Ryan and your father and I have in common?"

He thought. "I don't know, you and dad died before you could ever meet Ryan."

"Yes, son, we died. And so did Ryan, remember?"

Louis thought again; things were becoming clearer now. "He was in the Army, wasn't he? After college, he joined the Army."

"A training accident."

"He was accidentally shot."

Mrs. Colby nodded. "Shot by and M-16 with a faulty safety. In the head."

"So how old am I?" Louis wondered vaguely, out loud. "I thought I was twenty; in college."

His father's voice was heard from inside the house. Mr. Colby said: "That's my final word on the matter, Louis."

Lou turned, but his father wasn't really talking to him now. He was speaking to someone inside the house, whose name was also Louis.

And to his immense surprise, *his own voice* answered. "You can't do this to me, dad. If I want to join the academy, I can and I will, and you can't stop me."

"Yes, but *New York*, son," his father answered. "You could be hurt ... killed!"

Louis—the real Louis—turned to his mother. "Who's in there with dad?"

For a long second Mrs. Colby chose her words, then said: "Your father is talking to his son."

"But I'm his son, mom. His only son."

"Yes, it's you, Louis. But his happened years ago, before you left home."

So this was the past. Not the real past, maybe, but some strange after-image of it. He remembered: "I decided to be a cop after graduation."

"A bad decision," she said. Her eyes were gray and stormy.

Louis watched her for a long time. The pain in his chest was worse now, much worse. "I was shot, wasn't I? Only a minute ago, in New York."

She nodded.

"And this ... dream?"

"Life is a dream, Louis. Death is when you wake up."

He looked down and saw a hole in his shirt, and an wound in his chest was bleeding freely. "So is it time to wake up, mom?"

The storms still raged in her eyes. "I'm afraid so, son."

As he looked at her, she started to fade, becoming more translucent as the seconds passed. Behind her Louis could make out a vague shape, but it wasn't in focus yet.

"If life is a dream ... then whose dream is it?" he asked. The pain in his chest made it hard to speak.

Cyrano the dog padded over to him and sniffed at the Go-Stick in Lou's hand.

"Right now it's your dream, Louie ... "

The dog's jaws clamped down on the stick and he fled with it, deliriously happy with his prize. Behind Mrs. Colby's rapidly fading image, Lou could see that the shape was someone's booted foot.

His mother continued: "... but you have to ask yourself ... whose dream will you be living when you wake up?"

And then the house, his dead mother, the dog, and the whole dream vanished, and Louis Colby was lying face-down on a New York sidewalk. The pain was gone. He was beyond pain.

The booted foot was that of a mugger — a two-bit thug with a .38 special — and he was the one who had put the bullet in Lou's chest. It took all of Lou's final strength just to watch him go.

The only thing he noticed about the thug was what was in his hand: a moment ago it was a snub-nosed .38 revolver.

And now it was a stick, only a foot long, and positively humming with mystical African energy. Or so the guy in Florida said.

And the last thing Lou ever did in his life was wonder: *Whose dream is it now?* *

the creative arts magazine of Middle Tennessee State University
office: James Union Building Room 308, 615.898.5927

DEADLINE: TBA

Deliver all submissions to the *Collage* office during office hours, typically 8:00 - 4:00. Please follow guidelines closely. Submissions will be disqualified for failure to follow guidelines. Direct any questions to the *Collage* staff.

The Basics

- Any one student may submit up to five submissions in each category. The categories are as follows: poetry, short fiction, essays, interviews, photography, painting, sculpture, drawing, pottery, etching, and most other art forms.
- It is the artist's responsibility to retrieve artwork after the publication is released. Written submissions will be discarded.
- *Collage* accepts submissions from MTSU students and faculty only. Collaborations with non-students or non-faculty are not accepted.
- All submissions must have a cover sheet.
- Notification of selection results will be sent by mail to all those submitting.

The Cover Sheet

- The following information must be included: name (even if you wish to be published under a pseudonym), address, MTSU post office box number, telephone number, title of submission, and signature, which indicates that the work is your own, without plagiarism, and also gives *Collage* one-time publication rights for both print and on-line publication. All rights return to the author or artist after publication.

Written Work

- In the interest of fairness, the author's name must not appear anywhere on the work except the cover sheet. (This is automatic grounds for disqualification.)
- Please submit four copies of each written piece.
- All written work must be typed.
- No written work in any language other than English will be accepted unless accompanied by a translation.
- There is no set maximum or minimum length, but keep in mind that the magazine is usually 32 pages in length.

Art

- If possible, the artist's name should not appear on the work itself. It should appear only on the cover sheet which should be attached to the back of the piece. We understand that some paintings, etc, may already be signed.
- Slides or photographs will be accepted in lieu of original work, but, if selected for final judging, the original must be submitted. Please clearly mark slides.
- Mounting and professional presentation are greatly appreciated.
- It is the responsibility of the artist to retrieve artwork after the judging process is complete.

Photography

- Guidelines for art submissions apply to photography as well.
- Only photography for which all processes were completed by the photographer will be accepted. Submissions of "drop-off processing" will not be considered.

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A special thanks to
Ollie Fancher

