

Alva's Life

by Stephen Spencer

He sipped his black coffee from a bowl
 And took a bite of the raw onion, like an apple.
 He strummed his worn Gibson guitar,
 And the high nasal-tone of "I'll Fly Away"
 Transported him back to the hills,
 Where he fished the Tug River in the moist summer nights,
 Where he hunted rabbits, squirrels, and groundhogs
 To feed Emma and his five children,
 Where he rose each day before dawn to work in the mine,
 Where his first born, twins, died before they were two.
 They buried them at the family gravesite
 On the side of the mountain at the end of the holler,
 Where the family gathered for reunions
 And listened to preachers for hours,
 One after another, on sin and salvation,
 While the children chased each other around
 The tombstones of their ancestors,
 And the sinners sat at tables eating fried chicken
 And smoking hand-rolled cigarettes.

The northern city promised a better life.
 On his days off he found the wild,
 Where he camped and fished on the Scioto's banks,
 Where he dug night crawlers for extra money
 And stored them in a refrigerator on the back porch,
 Where he raised vegetables inside the chain-linked yard
 Of his aluminum-sided ranch house.

The doctors at the VA hospital couldn't say
 If it was the coal dust or the asbestos from the brake factory
 That finally did him in.
 The hill people came up to his funeral
 Dressed in bib overalls and dirty boots.
 Beside the coffin was his picture,
 In uniform, young and crisp and serious,
 Before he got his leg shot at Normandy,
 But he never once mentioned the war.
 The grandsons sang "I'll Fly Away"
 And carried him to the final spot,
 Where a dash,
 Between two dates on a simple marker,
 In a treeless cemetery with dirt lanes,
 Surrounded by gravel pits and vacant industrial lots,
 Diminishes the span between birth and death.