

# Danny Miller

## *Writing Award*

*Phillip Craig Ratliff (Pikeville College) won the  
Danny Miller Writing Award in the Undergraduate Creative Writing Category.*

## The Repairman

by Phillip Craig Ratliff

The repairman felt the needle of the temperature gauge creep like a poison vine along his spine as well as the instrument panel while he drove. He kept one eye on the faded white lines stretching out beyond the wide yellow hood of the International, while the other narrowed slit tracked the flickering pointer as it itched across the indicator's red warning boundary. He pondered the vehicle's lagging maintenance schedule and shook his head at the somber man who stared back at him from the windshield. His outfit should know better, he thought, his throat tightening in the manner of a constricted coolant hose. After all, they made a good deal of their money from the negligence that other men practiced. A man had better see to the things he needed in this world; they wouldn't be around long if he didn't.

He focused intently upon the snaking blacktop and steep drop-off shoulder, noticing the fat, black shapes of power transformers hanging above him, perched in the tops of spindly power poles like lines of bloated ravens waiting for their next carcass along the roadside. Each mile seemed to go by slower than an old regular Baptist funeral service, and he began to feel as jumpy as a rat stuck beneath an outhouse hole. He had just begun to hear the fuming of pissed-off coolant beneath the hood when he finally rolled into a Phillips '66 service station where a Bartley's Texaco used to be in the eastern Kentucky coal town of Praise.

Later, when the repairman came out of the grimy, little restroom in the back that smelled like pee, the station attendant up front was jerking a paper towel from the wall and shaking his head as he wiped his hands.

"You're lucky, buddy," said the attendant in an amiable but look-down-his-nose tone. "She didn't have hardly nothin' left inside of her. Looks like you just had a rotted radiator hose. Wouldn't hurt to run a compression check on that head gasket, though, when she cools down a bit, just to make sure."

The repairman nodded. The service man glanced through the gritty window at the out-of-state tags on the repair truck, and the repairman felt the man's eyes strip-search him before finally resting upon the pockets of his uniform shirt. "This gonna be a company bill?" asked the service man, with an edge of wariness in his voice.

While the attendant saw to the truck, the repairman walked down to the creek bank and found a flat rock to roost upon while he ate a pack of Nabs and drank an RC Cola for breakfast. Not exactly the way to start a job trip, he thought—crawling along the road in some vehicle like a rat with a gut full of D-Conn. And being talked down to

by some gas pumper playing mechanic didn't swallow too easy to a man in his line of work. Even with a soda-pop chaser.

He looked down at the green uniform shirt he was wearing. BANNER INDUSTRIAL & MINING SERVICE appraised him with bold, black lettering from the right shirt pocket, while FIELD TECHNICIAN mocked back from the left one. Field Technician, just a fancy name for a repairman, he thought. Hadn't impressed folks too much around these parts yet. He flung the empty pop bottle into the thick weeds across the creek with disgust, remembering the five-cent deposit he would have had coming to him while it was still in the air.

An hour and one smug service attendant later, the repairman pulled out of Praise and started up the two-lane road of Elkhorn Creek, already behind on his first job of the day at Top Dog Coal Company. Still, the morning sun seemed content to roll along with him, as round and orange as a plum-granny upon the crest of the ridgeline above. A little farther on, though, gray cliffs began to poke out of the hillside in the manner of crooked, broken thumbs, jutting out nearly over the hardtop on occasion like bad top waiting to fall.

At Kettlecamp Fork he turned off onto the slim excuse of a one-lane road, dodging a fat groundhog that snuck across from an underlying bean patch. The blacktop had deteriorated since it had last seen him, and he steered away from the crumbling edges along the creekbank side. As he proceeded up the narrow hollow, he noticed how the dwellings along the other side of the road clung to a desperate sense of decorum against the coal dust that sifted from passing coal trucks. Flower beds and pots bordered front porches and steps. Lily bushes lined the fronts of yards. The foliage of the bushes closest to the road shoulder was caked with mascara-black powder that was still runny from the remnants of the morning's dew. On the lilies farther away by the houses, however, glossy blooms pursed as soft and pink as a woman's lips.

The repairman jerked his eyes back through the side window and jammed the gear-shift up into mid-range, his hands clinching upon the steering wheel. He was already down an hour's charge of daylight. And he wasn't the kind of man who wasted time with foolishness and daydreaming.

"I was just wonderin' what happened to you fellers!" hollered the mine foreman in a friendly manner when the repairman pulled up fifteen minutes later in front of Top-Dog Mining's corrugated office and supply building. "She's on up the hill at Number Four Mine. They've already brought her outside for you."

The repairman spent the entire remainder of the day at Top Dog, tearing down one of the tramming-gear assemblies on a Lee-Norse continuous miner and replacing a main bearing shaft that a novice mine mechanic had scored into scrap metal while attempting to beat off a busted bearing. Late that evening he drove the twenty miles back up 23 North to his room at the LandMark Motel in the county seat of Pikeville. After seeing to his tools and removing the canteen-shaped, self-rescue emergency breathing apparatus from his mining belt, he checked in and stretched out upon the bed, releasing a pent-up breath. He felt lucky; that day's job had been above-ground, out in the light where a man could see what he was working on. And he guessed one completed repair wasn't too bad a day, considering the way things had started. There wouldn't be any sleep lost back at the Banner offices, regardless of whether he got back to his room with one repair receipt or ten in his hip pocket. The company made most of its money on the number of labor hours needed to complete a job, not the number of jobs completed.

Tugging the pillow down beneath his head, he lay and listened to the sounds of a

working coal town. He heard the chug-chugging of compressed air from the braking systems of loaded coal trucks out on 23 South. After a few moments a Chessie System locomotive sounded its lonesome-dog howl as it approached a road crossing or switching system outside Pikeville. The croupy exhausts of old work pickups—one of which had a clanking universal joint or differential threatening to go out from the sound of it—passing on the road outside mixed into the raspy chorus. He knew that some of the vehicles belonged to miners going out on their night shifts, others to miners coming off their evening shifts and heading home to their wives.

Through the narrow slit of the window curtain he could see the front grill of the repair truck out in the parking lot. There was something comforting in looking out and seeing the big, square shape and familiar yellow hood of the International. His lids began to droop as they fixed upon the truck's right headlight. Its encircling ring of aluminum glowed in the light from the neon motel sign, as soft and lustrous as a platinum band.

The following day turned into an opposite of the preceding one as he traveled nearly a hundred-mile radius, completing five jobs before he pushed his luck a little farther and drove all the way back up 23 North to his motel in Pikeville that night, tired as a she-dog suckling ten pups. He had first confirmed and replaced a bad methane monitor on a coal shuttle car at a huge, new operation in Knott County. He had moved on afterwards to install a new swing bearing and pin in the tail boom of a Wabco loading machine at a little ten-man-crew mine just outside the small town of Hyden in Leslie County, where thirty-eight miners had been killed in a nearby mine explosion less than four years before.

Then he had swung back up to a couple of mines not far from Hazard in Perry County, tracing out a grounded condenser relay in the starter panel of a battery-powered coal scoop before moving a short piece up the same hollow to replace a stripped speed-reducer gear in the long chainsaw-like bar of an old Jeffrey coal-cutting machine. He had finished the shift an hour after dark at a mine near Dwale in Floyd County, using his set of eyes like tools to locate a partially grounded harness arcing faintly against steel frame in the blackness underneath an S&S shuttle that had become a rolling hot plate with an operator's seat.

He had felt good about the day as he had driven back to Pikeville that night, having completed the farthest end of his eastern Kentucky route. He had shifts like that sometimes, days when he felt like a well-programmed automaton capable of fixing anything that moved, above ground or below, if he had a blueprint for it.

He felt that he was a repairman who understood the right way of going about fixing things. He believed in holding to a process of patient, careful subtraction instead of the further problems of hasty addition. If a trouble was electrical in nature, he started with the right schematic and went to conductor 1-A, tracing it for a complete circuit before going on to 1-B or jumping the gun and going for a primary conductor. If the problem was a mechanical one, he started with the correct blueprint and began at the base function of the movement—usually just a bearing turning on a shaft—instead of yanking some costly trigger with premature conclusions and beating apart the entire gearing setup with a sledgehammer simply because it sounded suspicious.

Of course, there was no denying that there could be times when there was no discernible answer to a problem, and a man just had to take his best, educated shot at the end of the day. But it had been his experience that the underlying causes of a failure were hardly ever as they appeared on the surface. It paid to become disciplined at waiting to make the correct assessment of a situation. A man would end up being sorry for it if he didn't.

The repairman secured his truck for the night and removed the signed repair receipts from his back pocket, grimacing at a black smudge left upon one of the bright papers by his fingers as he placed the forms inside the glove compartment. His eyes lingered on them for a moment, straying to the larger, unsigned legal document underneath. The folded receipts looked as garish and white as a neat stack of bones lying upon it inside the small, dark enclosure.

Later, after he had cleaned up a bit, he stretched upon his bed and tried to give his tired frame some rest. But his mind kept running like a mining machine with a bad methane monitor, refusing to shut down. He tried harder to still his thoughts and relax as the air conditioning began to exhale from the floor vents with the cool whisper of a woman's sigh.

He turned onto his side and shifted his aching joints, pulling the other pillow down against him. His eyes fastened upon the phone that rested on the nightstand, as square and shiny as a self-rescuer. He squeezed them shut after a moment and listened as a C&O locomotive pulled heavy strings of loaded gondolas out of the railroad yards at Shelbiana, miles back up the road. The big diesel pulsed under duress for a long time from the far valley, the sound thrumming and ebbing softly through the mattress of the bed like a distant, straining heartbeat in the night.

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The next morning the repairman could already feel the back of his shirt sticking to the seat of the International, though it was barely past seven. He rolled the side window down and craned his neck out to look upward. Thin clouds skidded through the narrow stream of sky between the hills like pieces of broken slate skipping across a blue stretch of creek. As the elevation rose farther up the road, a dull-orange ball of sun rolled up from behind the eastern ridgeline in the manner of a suspect bearing that was heating up. Despite the early brightness of the morning, the air seemed to have the heavy feel of rain to it as he headed toward his first repair at the head of Little Mud Creek.

The repairman's jaws set like a pair of vise grips. He didn't care much for rainy weather. Low-pressure systems made it easier for methane gas to seep from cracks in the seams of coal and rock wherein it lurked. High-pressure fronts, on the other hand, tended to keep the methane pushed back inside its lair. But the drier air that accompanied the highs also tended to dry out the airborne coal dust inside of a normally damp mine, making the particles lighter and more explosive in nature. Old-time miners he had known had dreaded the cooler, dry air of late fall and winter, the time of year when most of the major mine explosions had occurred.

But weather probably didn't make much difference, he figured, trying to ignore the heavy, dog-days air that sagged down through the lowered window of the truck like unsound top. Methane, coal dust kindling in the air or in the lungs, alcohol, tobacco—one way or another, every man picked his poison in the end.

As he progressed up Big Mud Fork and began to enter the slimmer confines of Little Mud Creek, thick weeds and bushes began to press in from the narrowing shoulders of the road as the blacktop disappeared into packed gravel and dirt. A short piece beyond the last house, shaded masses of honeysuckle vine draped down from overhanging branches in snarled, sweet-smelling strands, curling in the breeze like unruly tresses of a woman's morning hair.

He stared upward at the dangling tendrils of bloom, transfixed as they teased the passing fender and windshield of the repair truck. Her dark waves had always hung

down over his face when he had lowered it to her before leaving on work mornings, he remembered. He was a tall man, and when he had bent downward his face had seemed to end up just below her ear, against the softness of her throat and underneath the sleepy tangles of her coaly lengths. It had been dark and fragrant there, and some mornings he had never wanted to lift his head from the shelter of that place.

A crashing jolt from beneath his vehicle jarred the repairman's mind back down to the road. He swore beneath his breath as he nudged the steering wheel away from another crater in the pitted surface ahead, his eyes flickering warily over the instrument panel gauges. It paid a man to keep his mind on the road in these parts, especially when there was only one sorry lane of it. And the truck had given him notice once, already. He didn't need another set of walking papers.

"Watch your head—got a squeeze comin' up." The shout from the coal-scoop operator slapped against the repairman's back from the blackness behind him a short while later, and he ducked his head and shoulders in cautious response. The wide, low-slung machine that was his transport to the job site inside the Kimmer-Jim mine slowed to maneuver through the pinch compression in the tunnel, where the roof of the mine lowered and the floor rose due to weight and pressure from the layers of rock above and beneath. He was reminded once more that nature abhorred a vacuum—particularly where there shouldn't be one, anyway, four miles back inside the solid layers of a mountain—and was constantly squeezing from both top and bottom, trying to fill the seam of emptiness that had been left when part of its insides had been removed.

The thick, hot, sweaty-socks smell of deep-mine air began to hit him in the face as the hard rubber tires of the battery-powered scoop jolted along over the uneven floor of the main-entry tunnel, which served as the windpipe of the mine. He glanced at the ceiling from guarded force of habit, noticing the spacing of its roof bolts and timber-supports on a frequent basis. Low-budget operations had been known to place such supports farther apart than was legally permissible in order to save money. Fortunately, Banner employees had the right to refuse to work in conditions deemed to be unsafe, and he had done so on one or two drastic occasions in the past. But he didn't know how long a man could keep his job if he made a habit of it.

While the repairman watched the close ribs of the tunnel wall graze by, his mind drifted into the wary reflection that a coal mine was like a living thing—a hollow entity which sucked in oxygen from the giant ventilation fan outside through a network of air-intake passages stretching like lung tissue to the working face of the coal seam several miles within. Afterwards, the hollowness exhaled its fouled gasps of carbon dioxide and methane that had been released from the mined coal back through an adjacent series of air return tunnels, wheezing them out through the drift mouth of the mine like a bad case of morning breath. And while this heavy breathing was going on, layers of rock in the roof and floor creaked constantly, grating together like bad joints in some bone-doctor's nightmare, snapping and popping like a huge being flexing its fingers in anticipation of something—a being smugly aware that, as much as he and the other intruders who ventured inside might hate its intolerance and fear its fickleness—they would always return because they were also in love with it.

A half hour's time found the repairman at the working face of the mine's coal seam, watching an old Joy Model 14 tram back and forth in front of him. The loading machine thrashed up dust with its caterpillar tracks in the manner of a patient flailing upon a sickbed, trying to rake in coal that had been put down from the last shot.

He rechecked his schematic for the machine and watched from a prone position beneath the forty-inch-high ceiling of the mine as the Joy swung its narrow, lengthy

tail conveyor around at the rear like a twenty-five-foot-long crawdad to discharge coal into the bed of a waiting shuttle car. While the rear of the loader pooped out its lumpy, black stream, two pincherlike gathering arms at the front of the machine continuously raked more loose coal into the wide metal mouth of its conveyor feed. The left gathering arm of this particular Joy, however, was only sweeping through half of its original cycle of movement. As a result, much of the coal lying at the left and front of the machine was not being loaded.

Scrutinizing the loader through the swirls of black its movements stirred, the repairman concluded that the teeth were worn down on one of the cycling cogs in the gearing set up of the faulty arm. Not the first time he'd seen a puny arm on a Joy loader. It was a common problem for such a part that was mostly in constant motion and in continuous contact with abrasive coal dust.

He listened to the faint screeching of the arm's gearing for a moment as it made its final arrangements. It was always the same, he thought, shaking his head. Small-mine operators often lacked trained mechanics and usually called upon companies like Banner to keep their equipment running. Still, many would try to ignore situations and let things go until they completely fell apart. And he had never been able to understand why a man would let a problem endure until it became one that could be fixed only at great expense, or perhaps never.

The repairman folded the blueprint for the Joy and buttoned it back into the shirt pocket of his uniform. Though satisfied with the diagnosis he had reached, he continued to watch the sweeping-in movements of the machine's gathering arms, his eyes drawn to the mesmerizing repetition of their cycles.

He remembered her slim, white arms had used those same motions to gather in clean sheets from a makeshift clothes line in their yard that last evening, when he had pulled into the driveway. Any colors seemed brilliant to a man after he had spent most of his day inside the blackness of a mountain, and her arms and face and the sheets had seemed impossibly white to him. He had strolled toward her with his blackened arms spread wide as if for an embrace, and she had pleaded with him laughingly while cuddling her armload of sparkling whites and telling him about the dryer making a funny noise and conking out that morning. He had repaired it for her that evening, of course. Just a broken drum belt.

The repairman pulled his eyes away from the loading machine and removed his safety cap, mopping his damp hair with a gritty shirtsleeve. Particles of coal dust refracted into minuscule carats of gemstones in the beam of his cap lamp as thoughts of the remainder of that broken-down evening off several months past swirled around his insides, abrading him like coal grit inside of delicate gearing.

He rubbed a hand across his bleary eyelids, seeking relief from the irritating dust for a moment. But wavy lines of typewritten legalities swam into view instead on the murky ribwall of the tunnel, the cursive neatness of a woman's signature floating just above the crumbled coal at the bottom.

The repairman shut his lids against the vision to keep the irreconcilable difference of his own scrawly signature from materializing there. Maybe if he kept them shut, he could figure out some way to fix things, he thought. He wished that he could find a schematic for a woman, could break the circuit of hurt he had conducted between them that distant night.

But the words had seemed to erupt from him like sparks from a naked wire in a damaged machine. It had been as if the slim frame of her had somehow pressed through a deep gash in him with her gentle question and had touched the bareness there.

He looked down to where his feet and mind mired into the black muck of the mine floor. A baby, he thought, shaking his head. He just didn't have any papers on babies. He had never even been one himself, as far as he could tell. There had been only himself and the old man at home when he had been growing up, unless he included the brass-plated frame of empty face that had always been at rest upon the mantle above the coal grate. He had never even touched an infant, though he had sat near a few in church years ago and had liked the soft, powdery smell of them.

He opened his eyes and put his safety cap back on, looking away from where the dazzling lights of the Joy cast its silhouette into the void of the tunnel behind. He'd thought about it so many times since she had first asked him. But he had filled one metal frame with nothingness already, breaking something apart before he had even gotten his own receipt into this world. What would he do if her face ever swapped places with the one he had upon that mantle? What would he know to do if he were left alone with a baby, and it started to cry as though something had gone wrong with it? Put voltmeter leads on it and check it for a frame ground? He shook his head unconsciously once more, pondering the foreboding image he had seen a thousand times before—a bad human still-life in which he was always alone with an infant to care for, or else alone without one and her as well.

The repairman released a long, pent-up breath that masked the stale sighing from the huge ventilation fan a mile distant at the drift entrance. A man might just as well try to repair the shadows inside a coal mine than fix the ones inside his own self. The sagging props of that place had given way somewhere far back inside for as long as he could remember. What remained felt like an old dead-end that had been played out long ago and was best abandoned before anyone else got trapped inside the slow collapse of it. He guessed it was better that she had gotten out in time.

"Have you got her figured out yet?" A friendly voice and hand clamped upon his shoulder, and the startled repairman jerked around to face the beaming light and face of one of the mine's section bosses, who had crawled over from the depths behind.

The repairman nodded. "I can fix her for you, Buddy, if I can find the parts. I think it's the teeth on one of the cycling gears. Can you go ahead and bring her on back for me?"

When he turned away from the glare of the Joy's headlights and began to trudge toward the squawk-box phone mounted on the rib of the tunnel wall some hundred yards back, the rush of darkness from the mountain seemed to open before the repairman like the black wings of a mother hen, and he slowly slipped beneath and disappeared.

That night the repairman looked out over the long hood of the repair truck as he pulled into the crossroads at the eastern town limits of Praise. To his right, 23 South left through the steep Cumberland Mountains and coalfields of southeastern Kentucky toward repair jobs waiting near the Tennessee border. To his left, 23 North meandered off through the lesser hills along the Big Sandy toward the Ohio River for a date with 64 East, which departed toward break-downs waiting throughout the rolling foothills and plateaus of central and northern West Virginia. To his center, out beyond the chrome International emblem on the front of his hood, lay things for which he had no papers.

He switched on the interior light and unfolded a road map on the truck seat. Lowering a finger to the map, he began to follow a red marking as it coiled northeastward like a hotwire lead toward the hills and valleys of southeastern West Virginia. Tracking on through the wiry network of roads, his finger finally stopped upon a thin black line

that spliced from the larger red one and routed off for a while before plugging into a small county named Greenbrier.

His hand began to tremor like that of a man going into the dark of a coal mine for the first time. He knew that it was harder to fix something the more time went by. And he had never been to that distant county before, had never even laid eyes upon the little West Virginia town that she was from.

He switched off the interior light and stared through the windshield at another rush of darkness—the same endless seam of black he stared into every time he stopped at the intersection. He felt his blood pressurize as though there was an out-of-date, mismatched pump inside his chest. Clenching the steering wheel in the manner of a drowning man grasping a float ring, he looked down at his shaking hands and arms, pressing his back into the truck seat as he sat there waiting, waiting for he knew not what.

Then a horn blared from behind the truck and some distant place inside his head as well, like the warning alarm on a machine inside a coal mine. He jammed the gas pedal to the floor and shifted the International into high-range, jerking the steering wheel toward the right and the closer line of Tennessee. There were things down that road that needed fixing, and he was a repairman. His eyes began to trace the highway that stretched before his headlights, following intently as the dark strip snaked ahead like a thick, black conductor in a repair schematic and vanished into the drift mouth of the night.