

Fall 1987

Those Dying Generations

Jon Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Davis, Jon (1987) "Those Dying Generations," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 29 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss29/10>

This Poetry is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Those Dying Generations

It began last Sunday, or—if truth be told—
 Began ten weeks ago when we moved in. My wife
 Works north, in Naugatuck; I write for *The Bridgeport Post*.
 We chose this valley town to split the drive.
 But ten weeks now the woman who shares
 The ground floor with her forty year old daughter
 Has wheezed and whined that ingrate daughter's sins.
 Ten weeks now they have drummed their goddamn anger
 Against the stairway wall. "Such is the torment,"
 I tell my wife, "five bills a month
 Can buy these days." I'm a reasonable man; my wife
 More reasonable still. When irrationality
 Is required, she relies on me.

Sunday last, I stirred my whiskey sour with my finger,
 Sucked it clean, sat on our second storey porch.
 The daughter wheeled her mother out
 Next to the garage, lifted her—
 Hands under both her arms—and set her
 Bouncing in a green, spring-steel chair,
 Hands flopping into her lap, a particolored
 Afghan spread across her thighs.
 The mother watched the ground a while, then
 Raised her head to screech some childish
 Nonsense. Or perhaps she made some sense;
 The daughter seemed to think so. My wife was out
 Taking photographs of our new shopping mall.

She's a journalist, a photojournalist,
 Which means she's eying you and me
 And hoping—in the name of art—
 For public mutilation. I thought of her
 On Sunday when those two women—mother nearly
 Dead, a victim of the constant pain she'd wanted;
 Daughter tangled in her mother's dreams for her—
 Turned to almost face each other.
 And then they nearly spoke. I framed that scene
 That seemed to speak, obliquely, of some great
 And human failure—white garage, a pear tree,
 Bed of pachysandra, the concrete walks
 From house to shed, garbage neatly bagged and stacked.

The daughter shook her head. The mother kicked.
 The daughter gestured to the house
 As if it were some miles away. The mother
 Stomped her feet. The daughter sat down on the stoop
 And wrapped her arms about her knees.
 I was about to pour another drink, but stopped.
 I watched the mother's face scrunch up,
 The water pool, then run along the drive.
 The daughter yelled and fussed
 And waved her arms. The mother stared.
 Like a child, she watched as though
 What was running down the drive was nothing
 She had done, was, in fact, some act of God.

The daughter rose and stomped into the house. The screen door
 Screeched and slammed. The mother
 Watched the urine flow toward Maple Street.
 Something in her face—some mindless glee—made me
 Turn away. I went inside and made my drink and heard
 The daughter's music—loud, a big band tune, a bland
 Romance, a crooner coming nearer polka
 Than to swing. I thought right then
 Of Coltrane playing Truth, the bitter truth, his
 Face turned to the wall, and those famous
 Starving Sikhs in '47, who—though dying—
 Marched and posed three hours for Bourke-White.
 She might have said, "Let's see more bone

And bloated stomach." After all, she had
 A Pulitzer to win. And win she did. And yet
 That photograph confers some grace—Sikhs
 In their stately, staggered death waltz,
 Captured calmly in their fates. It lends
 Their suffering magnitude. And that is all
 We ask. All, perhaps, we ever ask. Those Sikhs
 Bourke-White froze in a fine despair
 Gave me a luscious feeling, but it passed.
 But now I see more clearly that old woman
 In her chair: Old and sick, the night's cold
 Settling down, a cold mist raised—the indefinite,
 Sad beauty of a Monet. A way of looking that

Could force a quiet corner in the warring world.
 A week ago, that was. My wife will not
 Forgive my watching. It was she who called
 The ambulance at midnight. The daughter's music
 Gently filtered through the ducts. Red lights
 Flashed across our faces. Officially, I'd
 Been reading and had the stereo up.
 "I'm not much," I told the driver, "for snooping
 On the neighbors." I laughed a little
 There; my wife coughed and looked away
 The woman nearly died, but made it. I insist
 She wanted it that way. Her daughter hovers now
 Like a vulture over her (a visual simile—

Her head hangs forward—but there's truth
 Inside that sight). Yesterday, I
 Told my wife that it could have been
 Much worse—I might have had a camera. She scoffed,
 But I recalled her fellow journalist
 Who won prizes for his sequence of a man
 Who'd caught a sniper's shot while wheeling boxes
 Past a store. The first photo shows the man
 Stumbling to his van, pleading to the camera,
 Trailing blood behind him on the street. He's driving
 In the second shot, but swerving towards a car.
 By the third, he's smashed into a stanchion,
 And, banging wide the door—now this

Is why the sequence won awards—he
 Falls, clutching at the steering wheel, and dies.
 Or how about, I said, that gallery of photographs
 We spent one Sunday in. The pale, puffy body
 Of the murdered boy, face up, his mouth
 A kind of hopeful blossom under water;
 That shape repeated artfully in
 The wound's ironic smile. The boy's
 Hand across his eyes as though made
 Bashful by something said, too intimate.
 Okay. I'll say it straight: I
 Despised that woman and her daughter.
 And though I never wished them ill, I

Let them have their ills. It seemed
A small thing to indulge them in their pettiness,
Since pettiness is what their lives have been. And
Had the mother died? Not much to change.
The daughter'd dance her screwy waltz
To Montovani, Lawrence Welk. She'd walk
To Tony's Market every Tuesday noon, her head
Wrapped in a scarf. I suppose she'd have been
Lonely and regretted what she'd done.
I'd have been relieved (not openly)
To have just music climb our stairs.
But after all this talk, I'm left with this:
Each night my wife brings home her job

As if it were another man with his demands.
She'll wake and sit straight up in bed
And cry *Look out!* then pat the sheets
As if to find a lens. And it occurs to me
What irked me most about her friend
Was not his prize, but that dry champagne
We shared at forty bucks a throw, the joy he'd wrought
So far beyond that blood encrusted day,
The way he raised his glass to toast the prize
And our complicity—not to spoil his
Momentary joy—in clicking glass to glass.
My wife moved to the couch last Sunday night.
A week had passed; she'd slept there ever since.

Last night, I half awoke and, waking further, thought
I'd heard a stifled sobbling in the bath, or heard
A suitcase packed and finally shut. I felt as much as
Saw the wash of light that was my wife's
Warm body in the middle of our room.
Softly, with an unbearable resolve, she said
or seemed to say, "I'm leaving you." And that
Threat, coming out of sleep and silence, coming
After hours of darkness, a voice controlled,
Stretched tight across the drum of grief,
Sounded sweet and warm. I stood, walked to her.
We touched, trembling, and began to sway
In a kind of slow and aimless waltz.

Jon Davis