



Photo by Sheryl Hagan-Booth

Tom Hunley and his son Evan

# Simply Poetry

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

**TOM HUNLEY FINDS INSPIRATION FOR HIS POETRY IN THE LITTLE THINGS IN LIFE. AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, DR. HUNLEY'S POETRY BRINGS A NEW TWIST TO SOME OF OUR EVERY DAY MIRACLES. FOR EXAMPLE, HIS INFANT SON WAS THE SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR HIS POEM "UNINHIBITED, BABY."**

The words of his poems are simple, yet profound. "A lot of young poets confuse complexity with mystification," Dr. Hunley explained. "Poetry deals with deep mystery and complexity, but that doesn't mean it has to be obscure."

Poetry and books have always been a huge part of Dr. Hunley's life. His mother read to him when he was small, and he once had his picture published in the local paper when he read 120 books for the Multiple Sclerosis

Read-a-Thon in elementary school. He began his college career in journalism, but during his freshman year he was inspired by a Stephen Crane poem titled "In the Desert," and that inspiration eventually caused him to switch his course of study to creative writing. He earned a master's of fine arts degree in creative writing from Eastern Washington University and a doctorate in creative writing from Florida State University. In his career, he has penned more than 800 poems.

"I get my inspiration from reading other poetry," Dr. Hunley said. "Also poets get their inspiration from the smallest things. It comes from random places. I once saw a recliner abandoned on the freeway, and that inspired me to write a small poem in my head. Before I went home, I stopped at my office and wrote it down. I stay sharp by reading and writing."

One of Dr. Hunley's greatest loves, however, is teaching, and he has invested a great deal of time and energy in perfecting the art of teaching poetry. "It is what I knew I would do all along," he said. "When I was in graduate school, many fiction writers were not interested in teaching. As a poet, I knew I would likely be unable to make a living writing poetry, so I invested in learning to teach."

And his career aspirations simply involve more of the same. "I want to write and publish poems and be a serious scholar," Dr. Hunley remarked. "I am currently working on a book about teaching poetry. Normally in a classroom, a teacher might just wing it and spend the entire class period discussing a poem. My book focuses on being more professional and taking more time as an instructor to prepare."

According to Dr. Hunley, in today's normal classroom, students will often sit in a circle, read a poem, and discuss and criticize it. He calls it "a haphazard method" that squanders a great deal of classroom time. "I found a different method by taking the history of rhetoric and looking at the five main parts of speechwriting: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery," he explained. "Using this five-canon approach, I developed a method that limits critique to Blackboard online discussions, class listservs, and one-on-one conferences with the professor. This frees up classroom time for writing and writing instruction organized around the five canons." He plans to follow up his handbook with a textbook that includes writing samples and exercises.

An avid poet, Dr. Hunley recently published a saucy and thought-provoking collection of poems titled *The Tongue*. Dr. Joe Survant, a renowned WKU English professor currently on optional retirement,

writes, "Though nothing is what it seems in this playful debut by a promising young poet, there is no calculated obscurity here, only a gregarious embracing of the endless possibilities of language and life. Tom Hunley entertains, moves, and surprises us."

*The Tongue* was published by Lexington-based Wind Publications, and *Still, There's a Glimmer* was published in October 2004 by WordTech Editions of Cincinnati. Dr. Hunley also has another book that will be out soon: *My Life as a*

### **Interdisciplinary Studies**

*A poet's words could be pulled apart and the letters re-assembled into copy for a beer commercial, and this is called literary criticism.*

*A nation could be taken apart like an engine and rebuilt using imported parts and that is called political science.*

*My house could be broken apart and burned to warm the homeless — which would then include me — and this is called economics.*

*Your emotions could be torn apart, and a shrink could make you paint your severed ear the deepest blue ever seen, and that is called oceanography, or psychology, or art history.*

*Then you could ask me "What is the meaning of all this?" and that's philosophy,*

*and I would reply "God, I don't know," which, some days, is all the theology I can muster.*

Tom C. Hunley

*Minor Character* (Pecan Grove Press, San Antonio). "I'm extremely grateful to the editors who work so hard to publish and promote these books: Charlie Hughes at Wind Publications, Kevin Walzer and Lori Jareo at WordTech, and Palmer Hall at Pecan Grove," he said.

Dr. Hunley also has a keen interest in publishing and runs a small literary press, Steel Toe Books. In his early years of writing, he entered many contests and corresponded with many small press publishers. Steel Toe Books offers an annual poetry competition, which provides a \$500 prize along with the publication of a first poetry collection for the author.

Karen Schneider, head of Western's English Department, called Dr. Hunley a "quadruple threat: an accomplished poet, an innovative scholar, a wonderfully effective teacher, and a generous colleague. Western has been blessed with an unusual number of extraordinary poets, and Tom continues this tradition. At once wise and luminous, his poems sometimes give me the chills."

Dr. Schneider continued: "Of course, he nurtures not only creativity, but academic rigor everyday, in all his classes, where he hopes his students will learn 'to see all writing, even research essays, as forms of creative writing' and, conversely, that 'all writing, including creative writing, springs from research of one kind or another.' Tom is true to this principle in his own work. His students couldn't have a better model of creative productivity."

Above all, Dr. Hunley hopes people are "refreshed" by his poems. "Many people are inspired by poetry, and I hope my poems open the door for them to write. A lot of pleasure can be found in language, and there is a redemptive quality in poetry. It is worth slowing yourself down to take the time to take it in."

