

## Joseph Kleponis

### Vinny Criss's Teeth

*"History has truth, and so has legend." – Victor Hugo*

From the Arborway  
to the Charles River or the Dedham Line  
everyone passing the corner  
of Leshner and Washington,  
whether on foot,  
or by car, truck, taxi, bicycle, or bus,  
has seen it.

White against brick's blood red  
a simple legend:  
    "Vinny Criss  
    has no teeth."

For over forty years  
Vinny's toothlessness has been  
a matter of public record.

But who is this Vinny Criss?  
Does anyone really know?  
Why does he have no teeth?  
Is the statement literal?  
Is he the man who cannot eat a steak?  
Or, is the statement figurative?  
Is he a man with no bite, no juice, no influence?

Who wrote this statement?  
Teenagers insulting an old man?  
Rival gang members issuing a warning?  
An angry, disappointed, bitter  
fiancée, wife, would be lover,  
sorry they ever got entangled  
with a will-less toothless man?

Or, is it merely a simple statement of fact,  
letting us know, that now and always,  
Vinny will be pureeing his lunch?

Regardless of intent,  
Vinny's toothlessness remains  
and his story grows:

"He was a boxer."  
"He came home stinkin' drunk, and  
his wife whacked him with a wooden spoon."  
"He was a goalie, stopped a puck with his face."  
"He fell out of a chair and kissed the table edge."

Our lives progress,  
we graduate, marry, raise families,  
we migrate from job to job  
and leave the old neighborhood  
only to return for a brief visit –

But through it all,  
on the wall of a vacant store,  
there is one constant,  
a legend, a legacy, an epitaph, an historical fact,  
open to interpretation, dispute, and possible revision –  
    "Vinny Criss  
    has no teeth."

**Joseph Kleponis** has taught English and American Literature in schools north of Boston. His poems have recently appeared in the *Aurorean*, *Ekphrastic Review* and *Leaflet: the Journal of the New England Association of Teachers of English*. His work has also been published in *Eucalypt*, *paperwasp* and *Boston Literary Magazine*