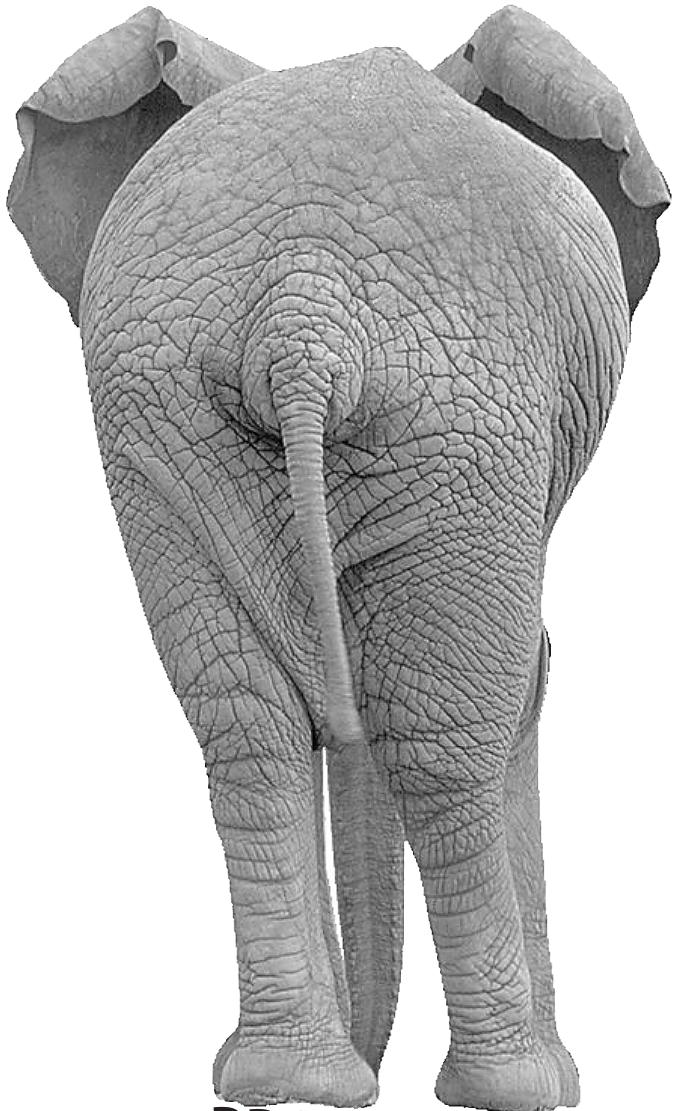
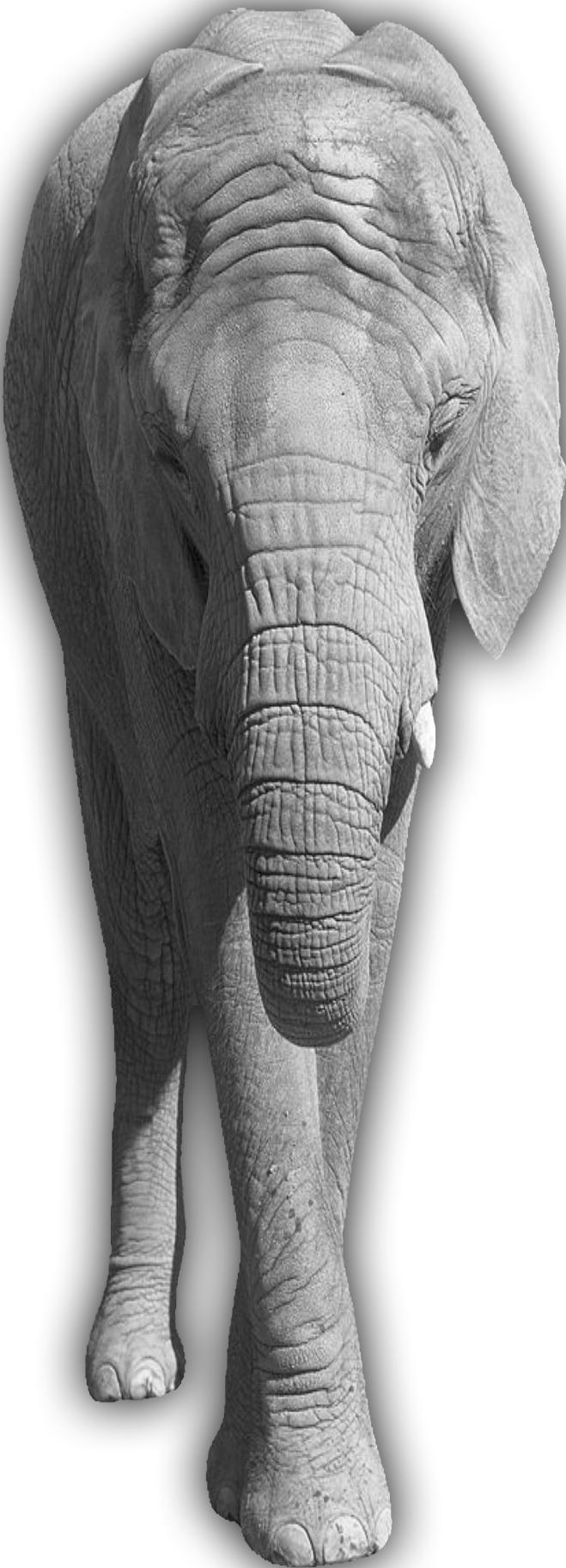


First  
Class

18  
A TWO-TON BALANCING ACT OF KILLER SHORT FICTION AND POETICS



BROCKI CATLIN  
CHAPMAN  
EVERY GALING  
HARVEY HENION  
McDARIS LOCKLIN  
NEWELL PEARCE  
PIETEZ  
PINKERTON





**ISSUE  
EIGHTEEN**

## **NOTICE!**

**DUE TO TYPEFACES EVOLVING, THIS DIGITAL VERSIONS OF FIRST CLASS HAS A DIFFERENT APPEARANCE THAN THE ORIGINAL LAYOUT AND DESIGN, AS TYPEFACES HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH SOMEWHAT SIMILAR FONTS. SO, IF YOU WANT AN AUTHENTIC ORIGINAL, CONTACT ME AT christopherm@four-sep.com.**

**ALSO NOTE THAT THE ABOVE ADDRESS  
NO LONGER EXISTS.**

**WEBSITE : [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)  
CONTACT : christopherm@four-sep.com**



**ALL CONTENTS ©2001  
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS**

FIRST CLASS IS PUBLISHED TWICE A YEAR  
BY FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS.

FOR INFORMATION REGARDING SUBMISSIONS SEE "CATTLE CALL"  
NEAR THE REAR END OF THIS ISSUE. PLEASE ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE, QUERIES, CASH, AND SUBMISSIONS, INCLUDING A SASE  
WHEN APPROPRIATE TO:

**First Class**

**pobox 12434**

**MILWAUKEE, WI 53212**

**[[www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)]**

**ALL RIGHTS REVERT BACK TO AUTHORS**

**SUBSCRIPTION INFO:**

**IT'S SIMPLE. SEND \$6 FOR THE VERY NEXT ISSUE MAILED  
DIRECTLY TO YOUR HOME, OR \$11 FOR THE NEXT TWO.  
POSTAGE IS INCLUDED.**

**CASH OR CHECKS PAYABLE TO : CHRISTOPHER M.**

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.**

# **First class contents**

- 1: **Pigeon Lady**  
*by Anselm Brocki*
- 2: **The 24 Karat Nightmare**  
*by Alan Catlin*
- 9: **Spacezipper**  
*by Gary Every*
- 10: **The French Meteorite**  
*by Gary Every*
- 11: **Conformity**  
*by Ed Galing*
- 12: **Too Late Comes the Light**  
*by Lewis A. Harvey*
- 31: **Belly Tree**  
*by Andy Henion*
- 35: **Doubles**  
*by Gerald Locklin*
- 36: **700 People Dancing**  
*by Catfish McDaris*
- 37: **I Already Gave at the Office**  
*by Michael L. Newell*
- 38: **For Juan Alanis**  
*by Michael L. Newell*
- 39: **Leaky**  
*by Richard William Pearce*
- 40: **The Porcelain Eye**  
*by Richard William Pearce*
- 41: **Anatomy of a Wrongdoing to Children**  
*by Mateo Pietez*
- 54: **For Willie Whose Real Name I Can't Recall**  
*by Matt Pinkerton*
- 56: **Property of Pepsico**  
*by Matt Pinkerton*

*Drawings by Stepan Chapman*

*Photographs by Christopher M*

*This issue is a major departure from the format I have used since First Class #5. Amazingly, in the change from full-size pages to the new format, I can fit as much, if not more, material into each issue. I am eager to hear your responses to the new look. After thirteen issues in one style, it was time for something new. Enjoy the read. - Christopher M.*



# Pigeon Lady

*Anselm Brocki*

"It doesn't make sense," Steve says, looking out at the parking lot through the steamy side windows of the All-Nite just before dawn. "Look at her out there feeding the pigeons pinch by pinch, billing and cooing like one of them. Christ, she can't even talk to anyone like a regular human, and you can see from her clothes she doesn't have enough to feed herself, but she comes in here every morning and plunks down fifty cents for a donut for the birds. That's fifteen dollars a month. It must really make her feel important to spend that much."

"There's more to it than that," Harvey says. "It means she still has feelings for living things."

"Nah," Steve says, "it just makes her feel she's better than they are."

# The 24 Karat Nightmare

Alan Catlin

I was having this dream that I was locked in a bar room at the end of the world, taps leaking a lager drip into my open veins, tubes tied in impossible knots like some kind of horrible Coma thing in another life like this one, the jukebox, that new virtual Internet kind that can plug into any tape in the world available on the Net but the only music playing is *Send in the Clowns* the Ethel Merman version,

then the volume of the drip is increased to a torrent that forms invisible waves beneath the skin, lumps as large as cancerous tumors just below the surface of scream and my eyes are open even though they have been sealed shut by a thousand years of sleep, open to see that I am a marionette behind the bar, arms moving in autonomic response to electrical charges and my limp legs are fractured at the knee and the ankle, bent at impossible angles, limp as a soft plastic effigy behind the el-shaped bar, whistling Sondheim, off-key, while all along the wood the whole sick crew is sucking the suds from the detached tubes hanging from my body as marionette strings would once cut and they are drinking, sucking, drawing out all the vital fluids of my insides, growing more and more bloated, elephant men whose hard boiled egg shaped eyes are swollen in their hollow sockets, hard to see within the coating fog of a thousand burning cigarettes and cigars impressing rings into the polished mahogany surface of the bar, rutted and pitted with broken glass, the pointed edges of long neck beer bottles sticking out, waiting to be held by the balloon shaped, the sausage shaped fingers of the drinkers,

then the ancient industrial clock hands top moving somewhere between two thirty and three but time still accelerates in an unnerving pattern, the whining of the stuck hands of the pulsing clock drowning out *The Clowns* and the sound of boiling tap water overrunning the sinks, knocking the clean pilsner glasses into buckets of filth and ash, the unbroken landing on the black pitted floor mats above the rock thick flooring, cracked from the thundering steps of the drinkers expanding the way helium balloons expand before they begin to float of their own accord or become the zeppelins that are casting unnatural shadows through the plate glass window scratched by the nails of the waiting, line, outside in the vicious windstorm, the wind-driven pellets punching the glass like bird shot propelled from a fusillade of double barrelled guns from across the street of crocodiles, then a voice calls out in the midst of the unholy din, “Bloody Marys for everyone! Make them doubles!”

and I’m packing the pint glasses full of dry ice with my bare hands, nuggets boring holes all the way to the bone but I must keep working, must keep pouring rack vodka over the shards, squeezing the juice of deformed

limes over the thick deep-hued red of the juice distilled from the essence of flesh into cans to ebb released with a whoosh as the sharp points of can openers edged in rust and grime puncture the thin surface separating the juice from the noxious, clouded air and I apply the out-of-round shakers each to each, shaking The Bloodies, spilling the toxic mess on the brunt white cloth of my work shirt pressed into folds by a wedge of hot iron and creased into folds unfit for the wear and tightened at the neck into a noose, a string tie for the condemned and I know it is so far beyond last call there is no use in calling out, of trying to put an end to this human sacrifice, this never ending corridor of pain, the drinkers supply the pain and the barman the fuel for the grease fires erupting in the craters along the bar

I wake up screaming

screaming of a white Christmas, floating in a sea of pain, the knotted sheets drenched with deep night sweats, my heart pounding out an obscene anvil chorus of nightmares on the edge of reason

one foot from the fathomless void all noise, all bodies are lost in

I look over the edge

and what did I see?

the angel of death calling out to me

### **the 24 karat nightmare**

Eyes, blue chips  
of rushed stone,  
face, a mystery  
of tattered scars,  
skin, an eruption  
of subcutaneous  
insect life, rising  
to the surface  
to be expunged,  
poised before  
the cracked surface  
of cut glass  
about to sing,  
a murder of crows  
leaves her lips  
on fire, dragging  
a cloak of darkness  
from inside, out  
into the open  
where it really  
hurts

And it was as if I were somewhere else, in another existence, stuck in that recurrent nightmare instead of where I was

in the black hole of the tavern at the end of the night seeing living visions that fill the lounge like an animated version of invasion of the space invaders

### **meeting for dinner at eight**

The older lady had a class act that lasted about midway into the second extra dry martini. The younger one had moved in upstairs with the understanding this would be a nice, quiet, informal kind of arrangement, topped off by a drink and a nice meal in a fine place to eat. Sherry in the afternoon replaced tea, but there were crackers and cheese to compensate. Dinner reservations were for eight so an informal drink at the bar seemed in order. “How could you know she would turn into this kind of – Creature. I hardly know her, what am I supposed to do now, I don’t drive?” I wasn’t sure what to do with her either but at least she wasn’t singing Irish songs at the top of her lungs at the bar or falling off her stool yelling, “To Hell and Goddamn the English!” the way she would another time, in another place, in someone else’s waking nightmare. I had a cab coming for the younger one to an address she called Home but home, I thought, for her was an isolated place on an island in the Emerald Kingdom of the mind that was an impossible left turn around the huge burial mounds for her empty quarts of gin; for her there would never be a place called Home.

I was lost, as well.

Lost in some turbulent limbo between waking and dreaming all the time, backed into the corner of a locked room with jagged edges, uneven planes, sight lines figured for the eyes of the blind

Body movements, working was some kind of new theory of operations by mechanical rote

or maybe even a virtual remote

buttons pushed cycling the misprogrammed channels inside my eyes

until what I was seeing was a kind of mental astigmatism, a double feature of crossed wires and multiple exposures

twin screens of confusion

### **a nocturne for a fat lady**

“Coney Island is Heaven,” she says, “after dark I’m queen of the midway.” Tight on cheap champagne, she’ll mud-wrestle shore-leave sailors for bottled beers and win nine times out of ten. Her daddy taught her to defend herself and she did until she was too drunk to move. Waking up could take weeks in a strange room, eyes like peach pits rubbing against glass she pulls from between her bad

teeth. "Must have been one hell of a weekend: the one's you can't remember are always the best." Sometimes it took her years to figure out whose blood it was that stained the sheets. Not that it mattered; no one ever went anywhere with her twice. "How was it with the Fat Lady?" bar flies asked. "It was like waking up dead," a man said of her between shots of scotch with beer backs in a low down juke and jive bar. "No, it was worse. I woke up and so did she."

Maybe it was just so much screaming into the void, for all the good it did what you thought and felt,  
it was like being lost on the darkest of plains without light  
or in a wilderness of monkeys  
a convocation of the drowned

### **following the dead**

"We were following The Dead down the East Coast that summer. In transit, we were somewhere in jersey between concerts looking for a case of brews to camp out with. I think Philly was the next show, it was warm and we're saving money sleeping with the stars. They have those combination package stores and bars down there so we blew into this one place and what a sight it was. This huge black bartender was banging this guy's face on a pinball machine. Talk about blood and guts! I mean this guy's face was like totally gone, grossed us out to the max. When the barman realizes we're there he like drops the dude on the machine and walks behind the counter casual as can be, "What'll it be, dudes?" "Just a case of Export to go." "No problem. Be right back." He, like, gets us the beers, we pay the bar guy and powder, like ultra fast. Just before we hit the bricks, we hear the bar guy say to the body, "Now, where were we?" The last thing we heard was him slamming the guy's face against the machine. Makes you wonder what he did to deserve such a beating."

In a way, we're all following the Dead.  
Our heels dragging on the concrete surfaces  
name tags tied about the big toe of our bare right feet  
our names written down on the tags for posterity  
or until the next of kin can be properly notified  
identities checked and verified  
and until that time we rest in the near silence or after  
hours in the dark  
a long-playing soundtrack of our lives being prepared  
by a group called The Possessed  
and the title of our in-flight movie after death is From  
the Waters of Oblivion  
don't bother waiting for the laugh lines  
there aren't any

### **dreaming of horses**

In a communal dream, everyone is released  
from the darkness, whole tribes of ward people  
no longer detained, run wild, stunned  
by their freedom; the cold, enclosing quadrangles,  
symmetrical paths, isolation amplified by silence,  
moon shadows casting a blackness on their being.  
Outside, among others, running without direction;  
they gather a fear of uncontrollable crowds,  
they are struck hysterical by the night; those  
few who escape the hospital grounds run along  
the parkways, eyes wild like thoroughbred horses,  
digging their feet into the soft turf shoulders,  
taking three quarter poles head on, hearing  
sirens closing in.

the sirens singing for the terminally wounded  
the dispossessed

### **the possessed**

They must have  
wandered into the bar  
after missing out on  
a golden opportunity  
to appear as unpaid  
extras in a Woody Allen  
social comedy about  
the emptiness of urban  
existence and the people  
of privilege who attended  
lectures on Existentialism  
and Modern Art or  
audited advanced courses  
in Comparative Literature,  
the way other people looked  
into Home Improvements.  
She orders a "Cosmopolitan"  
and he orders, "dos, por favor,  
senor," laying a platinum  
American Express card on  
the bar as visual proof

that plastic truly was  
the talisman of the present  
future as predicted in  
*The Graduate* much to  
Benjamin's and the rest  
of our dismay.

He pauses in mid-lecture  
to sip the chilled liquid  
in his stem glass, as she  
fumbles for her gold  
plated lighter, tapping  
a Players on the bar top;  
he says, as if continuing a  
recurrent thought, "Well if  
you want to go through  
life as the kind of  
person who's never read  
*The Possessed*, that's your  
problem – which was  
the kind of blanket statement  
that suggested a long,  
Arctic impersonal winter  
facing into an all pervasive  
nuclear winter wind, an  
ongoing clash of wills even  
her ultrahip attitude of  
surface calm and indifference  
couldn't help to dispel.  
I decided to add an extra  
ten-spot to his tab as  
a kind of tip I'd scam  
somewhere else along the line,  
a man who could say some  
thing like that just has to  
be so beyond it all not to  
bother reading something so  
mundane as an itemized bill.

Struggling is a way of living in the mists of fog and  
shadow of every day existence  
doing all we can to keep our head above the rising tides  
trying to avoid the clashing rocks  
the well concealed sinkholes  
the dream and the dead and the living overlap in some  
crazy quilt of perception and there is no telling what is  
real and what is not  
touching the surface of a dream is a wedge of steel a  
knife point  
or a match held up to a face in total darkness  
the distorted face speaking from some place so far  
away, his words sound like echoes in a chamber even  
before they formulate into speech  
there is no turning away  
no avoiding the faces that come in from the rain, that  
populate the darkness and move inside like a separate,  
living skin

and a dysfunctional organ that cannot be removed  
the operation may be successful  
but the patient is dead

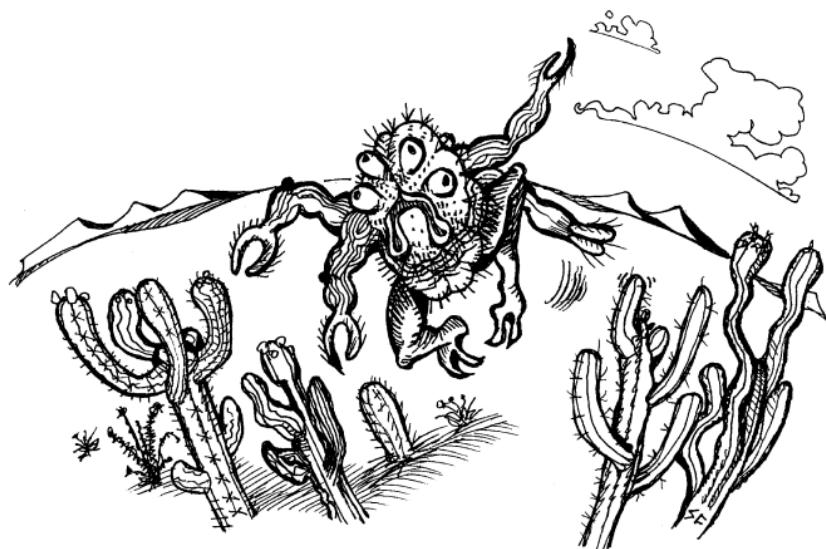
**white evil**

If Death were  
a man wheedling  
a bartender for  
a complimentary beer  
and pocket change  
for cab fare to  
the Greyhound Station  
more than likely closed  
this near Last Call,  
he would be this  
mostly blind man  
sighting the industrial  
wall clock with  
a retractable magnifying  
lens with his good eye,  
the all white one  
rolling nearly loose  
detached in its socket  
as his high pitched,  
pleading voice suggests,  
“Just one more.  
Come on, you know  
you can do it.  
Another one won’t kill  
you. I’ll go away if  
you do.” And it seems  
almost plausible that he might,  
as the beer flows his way  
and his metal guiding  
stick rhythmically taps  
against the brass foot  
rail, a kind of artificial  
heart beating, “This place  
got a juke box? I know  
there’s one in here somewhere.  
You got some quarters?  
I need to hear some Mu  
Zic before I go.” And that too  
sounds almost plausible,  
the barman is so anxious  
to have him gone, so desperate  
anything could be plausible  
“What’s your name?” the blind  
man asks, his wide, featureless  
eyes so grotesque, so unnatural  
it is impossible to look very  
close, “I really need to know.”  
I need to write your name  
in my book.” And the barman  
wonders: should I speak or not?  
but it doesn’t matter much either  
way, he’s doomed no matter what.

# Spacezipper

Gary Every

The word astronaut has gone out of style.  
We should call them something more trendy  
like "Rocket Jockeys" or "Ozone Rangers."  
Even though the International Space Station  
is now visible in the night sky  
to the naked eye,  
still I fear it will be a camel by committee.  
The problem is bureaucratic mismanagement,  
the budget overruns on the Space Toilet  
went from 2 million to 20 million dollars  
when a simple step outside space shuttle  
and a tug on the zircon encrusted spacezipper  
could have solved that problem.  
It could be an experiment.  
Because if the teeth of that zipper  
should happen to bite  
we could test that cliche phrase;  
"In space no one can hear you scream"  
Besides if you think it is fun  
to pee in the snow  
you should try writing your name  
in the stars.



ECTOIDS DELIGHT IN SHAPING THEMSELVES TO RESEMBLE LOCAL BOTANY. JUST EAST OF THE TUCSON DESERT MUSEUM, I SAW THIS SONORAN CACTUS MONKEY PROPELLING ITSELF ACROSS THE TOPS OF THE SAGUAROS.

-REDUCED IMAGE FROM STEPAN CHAPMAN'S LATEST COLLECTION OF ILLUSTRATIONS  
*COMMON ECTOIDS OF ARIZONA*

# The French Meteorite

Gary Every

The cathedral spires reach towards the heavens,  
aspiring architecture grasping skywards.  
The 15th century peasants toiled,  
working hard to barely stay alive.  
It was their hands and aching backs  
which built the towering gothic cathedrals; monu-  
ments to God  
even if they were never allowed to enter  
and worship inside.  
Still, they believed  
with all their hearts.  
So imagine their surprise  
the night the meteor  
fell from the sky,  
a blazing ball of glory –  
which for a brief moment  
even outshone the sun itself.  
It landed in a wheat field,  
with a loud boom,  
killed a cow,  
and set the countryside ablaze.  
The illiterate peasants knew it was magic  
but whether it was the weapon  
of avenging angels  
or the tool of Lucifer himself,  
they had no idea.  
What they did know  
was that some day  
the meteor might want to go home,  
returning to the sky  
with the same disruptive energy  
it had crashed with.  
To prevent such a calamity,  
the French peasants chained the meteor, imprison-  
ing it to the surface of the earth  
with bonds of superstition.

Meanwhile Galileo  
stood before the Catholic tribunal,  
accused of heresy  
for claiming that the earth  
revolved around the sun  
and no one thought to ask him  
about the history of meteors.

# Conformity

*Ed Galing*

I am one  
of those  
who cannot  
often  
tie a shoe  
lace,  
without  
missing a  
hole,  
or finding  
the exact  
screw to fit  
the nut;  
I am one of  
those who often  
sleepwalks through  
life  
wondering what it's  
all about;  
I have always been  
this way,  
it seems,  
taking short cuts  
to nowhere,  
discovering that  
patience is not  
always a virtue;  
playing lottery  
numbers when the  
odds are 80  
million to one;  
hating conformity;  
looking for the  
unexpected around  
the corner;  
when I find it,  
I rejoice.  
Hallelujah, I say,  
I am human after  
all,  
we have something  
in common with the  
world.

# Too Late Comes the Light

Lewis A. Harvey

Whoo! Man! I'm gone, man!  
I'm sick!  
I don't think I can take much more of this!  
What's happ'nin' to me, man!  
Somethin's cold! What's cold!  
Good God.  
Thick wet stuff. Oozing.  
All over me.  
Yeah, like there's this stuff all over me.  
Good God! Where's it comin' from!  
Can't tell.  
Outta me??!!  
Huh??!!  
Can't see too good. Things kind-a blurry. Real blurry.  
That ain't good, man.  
Bernie, man. Help me.  
Brother. Dead brother.  
Floor. That's what's cold. Under me. I'm on the floor.  
Yeah. I'm on the floor. Lyin' on the floor.  
Bare floor. No rug or nuthin'.  
I'm cold.  
Yeah.  
Me. Cold. Cold on a cold floor.  
Can't get up.  
Push.  
Push yourself up.  
Can't.  
Too much - . Too much - . Can't.  
Hurts.  
Hurts when I push.  
Can't get up.  
Fall back down.  
On the floor. Cold floor.  
Head hurts.  
Woozy. Dizzy.  
Everything blurry. Room swirlin' 'roun' me. In a blur.  
Two guys - not old but not so young any more - in frayed clothes and beat-up boots out on the street in a desolate area of town real late one night in freezing cold winter. Nowhere to go. And nothing much to do if they ever happen to get somewhere.  
One of them - short, chubby and hungrily eager to grab for anything - hopped around in a frenzied dance to shake off the cold and get some warmth into his chilled bones. "Hey, man, it's freezing out here tonight, ain't it!"  
The other guy - tall, thin, worn out and quietly desperate - pulled his tissue-paper jacket with the bullet hole in the heart tighter around his bony frame. "Cold? Whoo, man, sure is!"  
He and the short guy hanging out with him ambled

on down the street, both hunched over, hands in their threadbare pockets, clouds of breath freezing in front of them in the icy air.

The flickering streetlight at the corner didn't do much to dispel the darkness. Beyond the frozen black earth of a vacant lot sprouting clumps of dead foliage and heaps of putrid garbage, a yellow glow shined out of a window up high in the dark shadow of the hulk of a burned-out apartment building.

Shorty noticed the dim beacon in the night. "Somebody must be livin' up there."

They stopped and stared over toward the light in the window. All over the vacant lot fat, red-eyed, long-tailed creatures with sharp teeth protruding from quivering mouths scurried over the cold earth on quick little feet, darting in and out of the piles of garbage, foraging for the nightly feast.

"How can they?" Skeleton squinted through the darkness toward the ravaged ruins. "Place burned couple weeks ago. Everybody had to move out. 'Cept, a-course, for them what burned up alive."

"Somebody's livin' there."

"Yeah, well, at least they got themselves a place to live."

"More than we can say." Nervous, envious laughter erupted abruptly from both, and then Shorty gave another glance – longing and wistful – at that light from up high coming through the darkness. "An' prob'lly food to eat."

Skeleton was staring in awe across the dark vacant lot toward the shadowy ruins. "That was some fire!"

Fire.

Need some fire.

Warm.

Want to be warm.

Something under me. Wet. Sticky.

Oozing all over the floor.

Real dizzy.

Can't hold my head up.

Help me.

Somebody. Please.

Shorty said, "That fire was set, man. That weren't no accident."

"People evil."

They stopped at the corner looking around, no place to go, nothing to do. Destination: nowhere.

A gas station across the street, the spectral pumps in the deserted islands lurking in the shadows of the faint light from a distant streetlamp like visions of the dead, had no customers and one nervous, scared attendant sequestered within a squat little triple-locked concrete hut staring out wide-eyed and anxious through a double-paned window toward the would-be intruders.

"Maybe we stick up that gas station over there."

Shorty's pugnacious bravura had come up with a Mr. Bigshot scheme.

"Get caught, man."

"Nobody around this time-a night. Ain't no cars over there."

"You know that dude's got a gun. He'll use it on us. Already got one bullet hole in mah jacket. Jacket belonged to mah brother. He got the bullet. He's dead."

From behind them a muffler roared, and a beat-up blue Buick bedecked with flashy oversize chrome fenders and a bent radio aerial came zooming down the street, white sidewalls a spinning blur of shimmering arrogance.

Looking down at his jacket, Skeleton laughed sadly.

"This is what he left me. Jacket with a bullet hole in it."

The Buick careened toward the intersection, and as it whizzed through the red light, the window on the front passenger side rolled down, an arm stuck out, and a heavy, lumpy brown bag shot through the air toward the two guys at the corner like a missile on dead-aim toward its target.

The two guys at the corner jumped back, erupting with a mean and vile "Fuck you, man!" from their fiercely contorted faces toward the oblivious occupants of the jazzed-up car speeding away from them on down the avenue in a deep, rumbling "Fuck you, too!" roar from the muffler.

The bag hit the pavement with a heavy thud reverberating loudly in the suddenly quiet night and then a squishing splat and the clink of breaking glass and the bag split open, and cans and broken bottles and scraps of food spilled out all over the sidewalk right on up toward the feet of Skeleton and Shorty.

"Fucker threw his garbage at us!" Skeleton eyed the mess on the street indignantly.

"Let's get him! He's dead, man!"

Blank-eyed and far away, Skeleton stared out numbly at the shadowy, deserted streets and the sequentially blinking green, yellow and red traffic lights and the crumbling, abandoned buildings. "So's we."

Dark in here.

Can't see none too good.

Where am I?

House?

Yeah.

Somebody's house.

"We gotta get those bastards, man!" Poised tense and eager, eyes shining darkly in his tightly drawn face, Shorty burned fierce for revenge on this serious affront to his dignity and honor.

Skeleton, much calmer, stood loose-limbed and relaxed. "No, we don't."

"What's gotten into you? You ain't got no guts?"

They started down the street, skipping and jumping around a little to shake off the cold, to fend off the icy air biting right into their bones and souls.

Shorty was wide-eyed. "They tried to kill us, man! And you don't wanna go get 'em?!"

"They got a car. We just got our feet. That's all we got. We can't catch 'em."

"We oughta try at least."

House.

Yeah.

Somebody's house.

Whose house?

Where the...hell...am I

"Let's get 'em."

Giving his silent answer, Skeleton scurried away, and Shorty, reluctantly forsaking the chance for revenge, followed. Hunched over and woebegone, they hurried along. Shorty gave a longing glance back toward the gas station, the deserted pump islands and squat little attendant's hut giving off their irresistible siren call from the shadows. The attendant stared right back up the street toward them, the wary and suspicious eye of an unkind Fate watching their every move.

Shorty grabbed roughly at Skeleton's bony shoulder.  
"Hey. Hey."

Skeleton was annoyed. "What, man?"

Shorty held on to him and pulled him to a stop.

Skeleton angrily pushed Shorty away. "Getcha hands off my jacket."

"Look."

"What?" Skeleton glanced reluctantly over toward the gas station.

"That guy. See that guy in there. He's watching us."

"So what?"

"Let's get 'im."

"Get yuh ass in jail."

"What you so scared of, man? He got money. He got lotsa money in them cash register drawers in there. It's money for us. Just waitin' for us."

"Get killed."

"Uh uh."

"My brother got killed."

"Fuck your brother. All you talk about is your brother. Your dead brother. Your brother is dead. Dead brother. Forget 'im."

Scared.

Yeah.

I'm scared.

Real scared.

Oh, God. I rolled over on somethin'.

What's this stuff?

Little pieces of somethin'.

Ow!

Sharp.

Bit me.

Pain.

Stinging me.

All over the floor.

Something broken.

Scattered. Pieces. Little pieces.

"I can't forget my brother. He was all I had left."

"You ain't got nuthin' left."

"True, man."

Shorty said eagerly, "Let's do that gas station."

"You do if you want. Leave me out."

Yeah.

Let me go, man.

Let me get outta here. Outta this place. 'Fore it's too fuckin' late.

"Scared of your own shadow," Shorty said as they ambled on.

"I ain't castin' a shadow. I'm nobody."

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

On the sidewalk near the curb smoldering, red-dish-gray embers in the heaps of ashes of a dying fire in a dented, charred-black barrel were giving off thin wisps of lonely smoke. Hurrying past, their noses wrinkled at the acrid, stale and cold burnt smell, but their souls yearned for any leftover warmth still down there in that outdoor fireplace.

Gotta get outta here.

Get up.

For God's sake. Push! Up! Push! Up! Up!

Oh, God. My lungs.

Can't breathe.

Can't lift myself up.

Can't get up.

Fall back. On the floor.

Lie here.

Something wet. Under me. All over me.

It's me. Oozing.

Ow! These sharp things on the floor. Cutting me.

"So what'chew wanna do tonight?" Shorty was looking up inquisitively at the taller one.

"I dunno."

Shorty started hopping around in nervous bursts of anxiety. "Well, come on, man. We gotta do somethin'." He jumped around in circles, exhaling thick white clouds of icy breath.

Skeleton's expression was somber. "Gotta get me somethin', man." Skeleton sounded nervous and apprehensive now, on edge and real anxious about something.

"Now you talkin' ."

"Don't know what, though."

Another burned-out relic of human habitation loomed up at another corner, windows on the upper floors boarded up. Lower windows empty shells where once there had been panes of glass. Now nothing but charred wooden window frames in blackened, crumbling, sagging brick.

"Wanna spend the night in there?" Shorty was pointing at that derelict abode. "Resort hotel, man." He let out a raucous laugh singed with bitterness.

"Uh uh."

Shorty felt the cold stinging his skin through the hole in the knee of his pants. "Place to sleep. Climb in through those windows. Nobody find us."

"Uh uh."

"Ain't got no place else to go."

The windows.

The windows.

Came in...

Got in somehow.

How did I get in here?

Glass.

Broke something.

Glass. Broke the glass.

The window. Broke the glass in the window.

Got in that way.

Window. Through the window.

Head.. .goin' 'round.

Won't stop.

My head.

So weak.

I'm so weak....

They had gone another block or two of burned-out rubble and garbage-littered vacant lots.

"Never had no place to go, didja?" Shorty giggled mockingly.

"Nuh uh," Skeleton said quietly in a moment of realization that you may as well admit to the reality you cannot deny. Nagging anxiety creeping to the front of his consciousness, Skeleton suddenly turned real serious. "I gotta get me somethin' tonight, man."

"What'chew gotta get yourself?"

"Dunno. Gotta get sumpin'. Some bread. Maybe."

"Where you gonna get that?"

"Dunno. I gotta get me some bread."

"Me, too, guy. I mean food bread. I'm starving. Ain't had nuthin' to eat in two days."

"What'chew mean you're starvin'?" Skeleton's eyes narrowed as he stared at the plump, anything but thin Shorty. "You got too many pounz-a flesh as it is."

"Don't always get to eat, though. I like to eat. Ain't eaten for two days." And conveniently, as if to help him prove his point, just in case his friend didn't believe him, his stomach rumbled loudly. "Hear that?" Shorty was grinning with triumph, almost pride.

"Yeah. I hear."

But Shorty's grin and the sense of triumph didn't last long. "Ain't got a cent neither. To buy no food with."

"Me, neither. Gotta get some bread. I mean money bread."

Desperate hunger shined brightly out of their somber, flickering eyes as they stood shivering on the sidewalk, hovering in the darkness as if becoming rooted to that one place on the concrete.

"Yeah. I know what'chew mean," Shorty said. "I ain't stupid. Huh."

"Yeah, right, you ain't stupid."

"I ain't, man. So where you gonna get the dough?"

"Dunno."

"Huh?"

Skeleton's eyes shifted vaguely and evasively. "Somewhere. Do sumpun'." He gave Shorty a peculiar blank, unnerving stare.

Wary now, Shorty felt the stirrings of apprehension and dread. "You gettin' in your crazy mood tonight?"

Distant streetlamps shined limply in the blackness of the cold night. Deserted streets surrounded Shorty and Skeleton, without any cars or people, populated only by decaying remnants of abandoned buildings and overhead traffic lights repeating their endless cycle of green, yellow, red.

"Yeah, I'm crazy, man." Skeleton's eyes twitched nervously. Poised taut and tense on his skinny legs, he was ready for sudden takeoff. Desperation was gnawing at his guts like a mouse biting ferociously at a piece of cheese. "I'm always crazy."

"Yeah, you can say that again."

"Just able to hide it sometimes."

"Ever since your brother -."

A dead-serious glare of "Shut the fuck up, man" from Skeleton that stabbed into Shorty's insides made him shrink back from that tall, fierce and angry apparition and change the subject. "Hey. Let's go back and do that gas station."

"Too obvious. Somebody see us. Do somethin' nobody see you doin' ."

"Hey. That's smart. You got a brain."

"I got smarts."

"So what'chew gonna do?"

House.

Yeah.

Street. Wandered here. Walked a long time. Took a long time to get here.

Door. Front door. Locked.

Dark around the house. Lot of shadows. No street-lights. Nobody on the street. Nobody see me.

They don't see me walking around the house. Looking. Real careful.

Looking real careful at everything.

Checking out the place.

No lights on inside.

Everything dark.

Everybody asleep.

Looks okay to me.

Good setup.

Yeah.

That's what you need.

Good setup you don't get...caught. Don't getcha ass in jail.

"Huh? What'chew gonna do?" Shorty rubbed his hands together, shivering and trembling in the gust of wind howling around them.

Shorty and Skeleton had walked another couple of blocks. They were far downtown. The ghosts of board-ed-up department stores and movie theatres still with pieces of lettering clinging to precariously drooping marquees announcing the titles of movies from years ago stood silent vigil in the emptiness and stillness of the night punctuated by the flickering of half-dead streetlamps and the overhanging green, yellow, red flashing in computerized, mechanical succession from their high spots over the broad, deserted avenue

stretching on for miles in the darkness. On a dark side street of run-down apartment houses and worn-out single-family dwellings bright lights of an all-night fast-food fried chicken joint beckoned enticingly with food and warmth.

Shorty felt hunger pangs gnawing in his stomach.

"Let's go in. Get somethin' to eat. Good idea, huh?"

"Yeah, but that costs money," said Skeleton.

"Not if you do the right con."

Venturing along that side street and giving the joint the once-over, they gave up the idea of perpetrating any kind of a daredevil con in that place and kept on walking.

---

Through the wide front window they had seen too many people inside. And a cop car parked outside.

"Man in blue is havin' his midnight snack." Shorty smacked his lips at the thought of the succulent fried chicken and the biscuits and the french fries or maybe thick, juicy bacon cheeseburgers

and french fries the man in blue was enjoying. And the steaming hot coffee to warm you up on an icy night in winter.

"Why so many people in there this time-a night?" Skeleton asked wondering. "Sump'in' goin' on? Some big event maybe? They're celebratin'?"

"Whole town got the midnight munchies."

"An' a damn cop!" Dismayed, Skeleton kicked angrily at the sidewalk, then he glanced disgustedly down at the worn heel of his boot and the thin spots in the leather. "Shit. Scuffed mah boot when I did that – kicked the sidewalk. Shit. Gotta be more careful. Gotta take care of the things you have."

Shorty laughed mockingly. Skeleton's boots looked just as bad as his. Kicking the sidewalk hadn't made Skeleton's boots look the way they did. And Shorty knew neither one of them owned anything worth taking care of.

"Ain't got no money to get new ones with," Skeleton said. "Got maybe a nickel in my pocket."

"Doubt you got even that."

Shorty waited for some sort of smart-ass rebuke from Skeleton, but none was forthcoming. Hard to deny the truth, Shorty knew.

Glancing back at the fried chicken emporium shivers

### SKELETON'S BOOTS

LOOKED

JUST AS BAD AS HIS.

KICKING THE SIDEWALK

HADN'T MADE SKELE-

TON'S BOOTS LOOK THE

WAY THEY DID. AND

SHORTY KNEW NEITHER

ONE OF THEM OWNED

ANYTHING WORTH

TAKING CARE OF.

---

went through them. And not only from the cold, either. It was that blue and white cop car with the array of white and blue and red strobe lights spinning in a dizzying blur that gave them the shakes. But in the cold wind whipping around them in a whistling howl they could smell the tempting aromas of delicious food – the chicken, the french fries, the hot biscuits – all the way across the street and on up the block to where they hovered hunched up and freezing at the beginning of a low hill, both of them starving and desperate, hungrily watching those people on the inside warm and satisfied.

Shorty glanced around, doing his little dance to shake off the cold, then broke the silence that had settled upon them. “Man, ain’t nothin’ hap’nin’,” Shorty said dejectedly. Then with a puzzled frown he spoke cautiously, “Why those lights on the cop car blinkin’ like that? He in there arrestin’ somebody?”

“Nah. He just wants everybody to know he’s Mr. Big the Cop. So he flashes his lights and ever’body gets real scared of Mr. Man in Blue. If he was arrestin’ a dude he’d’a come outta there before now.”

“Hope you’re right ‘bout that.”

Suddenly, with mysterious determination, Skeleton announced, “I’m gonna split.”

“Where you off to?” said his companion in something of a high-pitched whine, stunned to find that he was about to be left alone, abandoned, deserted, in the middle of desolate downtown nowhere.

“Got somethin’ to do.” He’d had an idea. He didn’t want a partner. It would be his alone and all for him.

“Ain’t this awful sudden.” Mouth wide open in disbelief, Shorty stared dumbfounded at the traitor, thinking how you can’t trust nobody to stick with you when things are rough.

Walked.

Walked for miles, seemed like. Blocks and blocks.

Freezing.

Don’t know how far.

Got here. Somehow.

Tired.

Cold.

Feet hurt.

Cold.

Boots ‘bout worn out.

Need new ones.

Get some bread. Get me some new ones.

Fancy boots.

Look real sharp then. In new boots.

New shirts. New pants. Yeah, man.

Warm winter coat.

Get me some money. Get me new stuff. Look real good.

“Hey, you bastard!” Alone and abandoned, Shorty screamed out his anger and resentment to the tall, skinny figure hurrying away from him, running down another side street, retreating quickly into shadows and darkness. “Don’t leave me here!”

Yeah. I got here.

All by myself.

Did sumpin' all by myself.

That makes you proud of yourself.

"You bastard! Where you gone to!" Huddled into himself, Shorty had his arms wrapped tightly across his chest against the cold. Alone on the cold street now, he gazed wistfully toward the fried-chicken place, those smells – those tantalizing smells of delicious food in the cold night air – teasing him unmercifully. A hypnotic, irresistible siren call.

Bright lights. Warm refuge from the cold. And food. And a con waiting to happen if the man in blue would just hurry up and eat and get on his way.

Looked in a downstairs window.

Got up real close.

Put my face up to the window real close.

Nobody inside don't seem like.

Can't see nobody movin' aroun'.

Hard to tell. Dark in there. Must be sleepin'.

Front door.

Went back to the front door.

Turned the knob.

Locked.

Kicked it.

No good.

Won't open.

Back to the window.

Hit it.

Yeah.

That's what I did.

With my fist.

Hit the window.

Glass broke.

Something stinging me.

Dark.

Too dark to see anything.

Climbed in.

House looks rich. Bet there's lots of stuff inside.

Grab it for myself.

Stuff just waitin' for me.

Don't have to share with nobody.

Get some bread.

Get some bread bread.

"Come on, man in blue." Shorty growled out the words in anxious impatience. "Come on." He was crouched down low to the sidewalk, a little further up the hill, smacking his freezing hands together, watching those flashing lights of the enemy and waiting. "Hurry up. Eat." Waiting. Desperate waiting. Waiting for the man in blue to eat his food and come out of there and get in that car with those flashing lights and go on somewhere.

Climbed in the window. Sharp stinging pain slicing through me. Fell down on the floor.

Got up.

Something wet on me.  
Room's empty.  
What the hell – empty?  
Cold in here.  
Fireplace.  
No fire.  
Room's cold.  
Look around.  
Room's empty.  
Where is everything?  
Little bit-a light comin' through the windows.  
Shadows everywhere.  
Walk through the room. Footsteps loud on the wood floor.  
Sound-a my footsteps echoin' real loud off them walls.  
Somebody gonna hear me.  
What is this? The dining room?  
This where they eat their food?  
Yeah. Must be.  
Kitchen that way. See it through the open door.  
Went into the kitchen.  
Got a stove.  
Got a refrigerator.  
Open the refrigerator.  
Bright light shines out. Kitchen gets bright.  
Glance around real quick.  
Nobody see me. No curtains at the window. No face peeking in.  
Hope nobody's at home next door.  
Maybe they're all asleep.  
Won't see me.  
Won't nobody see me.  
Time for everybody to be asleep anyway.  
No food in the refrigerator.  
They done hidden it. Hidden all their stuff.  
Red stuff dripping into refrigerator.  
Shut the door.  
“Can’t wait no longer.” Shorty stood up a little, hunching over in a crouch like a runner at the starting point, staring stealthily down the hill toward the fried-chicken emporium, impatient, anxious, desperate, his growling, empty stomach taking over for his brain, making the decision for him.  
Upstairs. Everything must be upstairs.  
Nothin’ downstairs.  
Find the stairs.  
Walk through the dining room.  
Feeling a little dizzy. Things kind-a blurry.  
Stumble against the wall.  
Can’t see in all this darkness.  
Hall. Little short hall.  
That’s where I am now.  
Stuff dripping on my clothes.

Stairs.  
Yeah.  
Here.  
The stairs. In the hall.  
Oh, God.  
I feel weak.  
Goddamn.  
Stuff seeping out of me.  
I done hurt myself.  
Gotta get up those stairs.  
Far, far up to the top.  
Can I make it?  
Gotta have strength.  
Stair railing.  
Grab it.  
Yeah.  
Grab it.  
Okay. Here we go. Up. Up.  
Yeah.  
Climbing these stairs.  
Sinking. Falling back.  
Grab the stair rail.  
Yeah.  
Grabbed it.  
Hold on.  
Hold on tight.  
Pulling myself up.  
One step at the time.  
Yeah.  
Made it.  
Heavy sigh.  
Out of breath.  
Fall down at top of stairs.  
Lie there for a while.  
Feel wet stuff all over me. Sticky.  
Grab the stair railing.  
Pull myself up.  
Standing now.  
Dizzy. Real light-headed.  
Can't stand up too well.  
About to fall down again.  
No, don't fall down.  
Look around.  
Doors closed. All the rooms got their doors closed.  
Anybody asleep in there?  
Ain't got no weapon. Can't defend myself.  
Brother, wish you was here with me. You could handle  
this. You knew how to do it. 'Cept for that one time.  
I need help.  
Feet heavy. Real heavy.  
Stumble through the upstairs hall.  
Fall against a door.

Door opens – big crash – when I fall against it.  
Stumble into room.  
Empty.  
No furniture.  
No curtains at windows.  
No nothing.  
Whole house must be empty.  
Damn.  
Whole house fuckin' empty.  
This ain't real.  
Dripping.  
Sticky stuff dripping.  
On my clothes.  
Dripping on the floor.  
Light comin' in through window.  
Light.  
Must be streetlight out there. Somewhere.  
Shinin' in here.  
Cop light? Shinin' in on me?  
No. No. Streetlight. Gotta be streetlight.  
Still nighttime.  
Sunlight soon?  
Daylight. Daylight comes. They come for you.  
They come for you to help you.  
Nobody comes for me.  
Where is everybody?  
Where you all gone to?  
Why you got nothin' in here for me?  
Could hock your stuff, man.  
Get me some bread.  
Room empty. Forget this room.  
Stumble out into the hall.  
Weak.  
Too weak.  
Stumble to the stairs.  
Feet so heavy.  
Feet don't want to move no more.  
Feet don't want to go nowhere.  
Grab the railing.  
Got to get out.  
Got to get help.  
Oozing.  
It's all comin' outta me.  
Need help.  
Stumbling down the stairs. Weak and dizzy. Head heavy.  
Nearly toppling over.  
Feet heavy.  
Can't see nothin'. Dark. Everything dark.  
Downstairs now.  
Back in that little ball.  
Front door.

Where's front door?  
Living room.  
Yeah. This the living room.  
See the front door.  
Gotta make it, man.  
Gotta make it all the way across this big room to that  
door and get outta here.  
To the door.  
The door.  
Stumbling.  
Don't...fall...  
The door.  
Oh, God.  
Getting closer...  
Fall on the floor.  
No rug.  
Floor is hard.  
Hurts when I fall.

Hurts real bad.  
Bones. Ache.  
Get up.  
Can't get up.  
Push.  
Push, you bastard!  
Push yourself up off this floor.  
You fell down.  
You can't fall down.  
You gotta get up and get out – go get help.  
Put your hands on the floor and push up.  
PUSHHHH!! UPPP!!  
OWWWW!  
God!  
Chest heaving.  
Too much – took too much outta me.  
Get to my feet. Gotta...  
Hard to breathe.  
Dripping.  
Take a deep breath...  
Yeah...  
On my feet.  
On my feet now.  
I'm standin' up.  
Dizzy.  
Head spinning.  
To the door.  
Yank the door knob.  
Won't turn.  
Door sealed shut.  
Pull on it. Pull on the door.  
Won't open. Won't give.  
Kick it.

No strength.  
Can't kick it.  
Can't get out.  
Window.  
Window where I came in.  
Gotta get ta that.  
Yeah.  
Then I can get out.  
Stumble out the room, through the hall.  
Lean against the wall.  
Hard to – can't breathe good.  
Don't fall.  
Brother, don't let me fall down! Bernie!  
Into the dining room.  
The window.  
It's there. Across the room.  
To the window.  
Got to get to it.  
To the window.  
The window.  
Oh, God.  
I can't.  
Sink down to my knees.  
I can't.  
Giving out.  
Window. So far...  
Breath – big heaving gasps.  
Head turning up toward the ceiling.  
Eyes...can't see...  
Everything black.

"Getcha – getcha– " Shorty was kicking and jerking and jumping, struggling fiercely, nerves taut and energy bursting, to break free of unwanted confinement. But he couldn't get loose. His hands were tight behind his back, and the more he jerked and twisted the more the metal dug into the skin of his wrists. "Get'cha – fuckin' hands – offa me!"

He pulled and jerked and yanked, writhing in an epic struggle – the unlucky fish caught on the hook desperate to escape back into the waters of freedom.

But he was held in a tight grip, and the grip wasn't letting go.

"I ain't had nothin' to eat in two days!"

The grip wasn't paying any attention to Shorty's desperate pleas. The grip had him. And that was what counted in the general scheme of things.

Three teenage counter clerks in their uniform blue and white counter-clerk outfits huddled near the grill watching the action. One of them giggled nervously and mockingly at the fierce fight against defeat and apprehension. Another one yanked mischievously at the boy's red paper cap. "Cut that out!" he yelled at the girl, swatting at her. "Shhh!" said the third one, and they all three became suddenly quiet, silently eyeing Shorty and the man in blue with half-smiles of derision and tense, awed and fearful anticipation.

"Some food, man!" Shorty screamed out.

Outside, those white and blue and red lights whirled blinding flashes in through the wide window, and inside the fried-chicken emporium everyone stared at him right up there at the counter, in view of all of them, caught in the trap his desperation had led him to create for himself. The diners were ignoring their food to watch Shorty handcuffed and held tight by the man in blue.

"I just wanted some food, man! That's all I wanted! Somethin' to eat!"

A perfect-postured young woman poised immobile behind the counter at the cash register, prim and proper and bland like a good little employee of the month, starched and pressed in her black skirt and white blouse uniform complete with little black bow-tie and white, red-trimmed paper cap angled forward on her head of shoulder-length, straight black hair – looking like a stewardess who's permanently missed her flight – stared in frozen blankness at scruffy Shorty struggling against the grip. She was too scared to tremble.

"You want somethin' to eat?" a man's voice from the crowd in the place yelled at Shorty. "So hand over the money!"

"That's what it's all about, bro'!" another mocking voice yelled out, and derisive laughter rippled through the joint.

And yet another one vented his caustic view of the true nature and reality of existence to Shorty: "Hand over yo money and then you, too, can enjoy some delicious fried chicken like the rest of us fine, upstandin' dudes!"

Waves of howling, derisive laughter rumbled through the place like the shock waves emanating out from an atomic explosion.

On the floor.

I'm awake.

I'm on the floor.

Lying here.

Too weak to move.

Wet stuff all over me. All over the floor.

It's sticky.

It's me! It's me!

It's me that's sticky and oozing!

Oh, Bernie! You got a bullet in you and you left me.

I ain't got nuthin', Bernie!

Look at me!

Oh, no! Eyes wet.

Tears.

Oh, God no, don't let me cry!

Don't let me be a crumpled-up, crying heap on somebody's cold floor!

Help me.

Desperate.

Can't breathe good.

Breath comin' out in tight bursts.

Lungs on fire.

Chest caving in. Ribs hurt.

Moving a little on the floor.

Hurts to move.

Lying here.

Can't get up.

Darkness.

The man in blue was dragging the twisting and squirming Shorty in his ragged clothes and beat-up boots away from the counter and the traumatized, catatonic cashier and the huddled, giggling, maliciously mocking counter clerks as all those people eating out this late night, with all that food on their plates, now sat at their tables immobilized, not eating the chicken and the biscuits and the french fries, just staring zombie-like at the downfall of the humiliated and starving Shorty.

And then with restless, uneasy stirrings and rustling movements the zombies began coming to life as the man in blue resolutely pulled the writhing, twisting Shorty through the aisles and past their tables all that long, long distance all the way from the counter and the clerks and the cashier on over toward the front door so far away.

"Next time," said a young bushy-haired guy snappily attired in a brown suit and white shirt and highly-polished shoes seated at one of the tables, as the scuffling Shorty and the fierce man in blue passed by him, "when you do a stick-up, use a gun. Not a fist in yuh coat pocket."

At a table near him, a smartly coiffed girl in a white blouse and pink skirt giggled demurely.

"And get a better coat. That one's pathetic. Who's your fashion consultant, anyway?"

The girl stared blushingly at the bushy-haired guy, hoping to be noticed.

Holding tight to Shorty as he dragged him along, the man in blue gave the snappy guy a hard, cold stare that said keep it up and you'll be next. The guy flinched noticeably, not so brazen now, wanting desperately to shrink away to invisibility.

A guy muttered, "He ain't got a gun. He ain't got nuthin'."

Staring down at that black-tiled floor to avoid seeing those penetrating stares, Shorty heard him, and the pain seared his soul.

"An' nex' time wait 'til there ain't no cops around." Faint, nervous after-shock laughter rippled through. An elderly woman held up her ragged Bible. "There ain't gonna be a next time for him. His soul is done lost." A rough yank from the man in blue sent Shorty's head jerking upward in a spasm of pain. Those lights on the man in blue's car seemed to be flashing brighter than anything Shorty had ever seen before in his life.

From a far corner, "Man, you are one dumb fucker." Shorty twisted and jerked and dug the heels of his scuffed-up, split-almost-to-pieces boots into the black-tiled floor, but the grip pulled harder, and Shorty was yanked on along toward his doom-laden fate. Destination: the backseat of that blue and white car with those flashing strobes and a handcuffed ride to the precinct house and the holding cell.

"And with a cop in the place!" an elderly man with a

hoarse, gravelly voice said in disbelief as he bit into a piece of juicy golden-brown chicken.

The man in blue pushed the door open, gave a rough yank at his apprehended quarry, and shamefaced, downcast Shorty was propelled outside.

"He was robbin' the place for food!" a man exclaimed in wonder and disbelief.

"Not money?" someone else asked, equally in wonder. He glanced toward the window. He saw the man in blue shoving the kicking Shorty into the backseat.

"Hell, no!"

Two car doors slammed shut in loud succession.

"I heard him. I heard him. I heard him say to one of them girls up there...one-a them girls behind the counter... 'I got a gun in my pocket.'"

And a girl behind the counter at the deep-well stove looked up from the wire basket of french fries sizzling in the cooking oil and glanced over toward the one who had said that.

The man in blue's siren revved up in a shrill scream, and the blue and white car with the flashing strobes and humiliated, frightened and hungry Shorty locked in the backseat zoomed off into the night.

"He had his hand in his coat pocket...pointin' it at the girl like he really did have a gun. 'Gimme five pieces of chicken and a large soda. And three-a them biscuits!'"

A deep voice yelled out, "Did he ask her to supersize it?!"

Little waves of murmuring, sarcastic laughter rippled through the place, then they all began turning their attention now from Shorty to something much more important.

"Such delicious food," someone murmured.

A thin woman in a white ruffled blouse and blue skirt, her hair a thick bouffant of black curls, was shaking her head as she solemnly contemplated the awesome event of the evening and the monumental plate of food before her on the table. "Umh umh umh." She picked up a biscuit from her plate. "I love the biscuits they have here."

Next to her a spacey-eyed gray-haired woman was lost in a vacant fog. "Soft and creamy."

Coming to.

How long I been here?

Little sharp things on the floor. Biting me.

The wet stuff. Under me. Sticky.

All over the floor.

All over me.

It's all over your jacket, Bernie!!

Guts hurt like hell.

Push.

Get up.

Can't push no more.

Too weak.

Giving out.

Bro', I'm all alone.

Help me.

Bernie!

Oh, God, Bernie!!  
Bernie. In a poor man's grave.  
House is empty, man. They didn't leave nothin' for me.  
They must-a done moved out and took it all with 'em!  
God help me, man.  
Hell.  
God don't give a damn.  
See the window?  
Crawl.  
Crawl, man, crawl on your fuckin' knees if you got to,  
and get your ass outta here!  
Can't.  
Can't move.  
Stuck.  
Like I'm stuck in this sticky stuff that's me.  
I'm stuck in myself, man.  
This stuff won't let me move.  
Lying here.  
Everything oozing out of me.  
Faint.  
Cold.  
Shorty?  
You still outside that fried chicken place?  
That food smells so good, don't it?  
We'll get some-a that food, man. Don't worry.  
Let's get a fire goin' in that fireplace. Get this room  
warm.  
Lying here.  
On the floor.  
Can't move.  
These sharp things on the floor. Biting me.  
Blades of glass.  
Stinging.  
Hot. Feel hot now.  
Skin burning.  
Hot.  
Somebody lit a fire for me...?  
Can't move.  
Weak.  
Light. Light in the room.  
Light before my eyes.  
Morning?  
Room – brighter. Seems like.  
Must be – morning.  
Real dizzy.  
Room spinnin' 'round.  
Blurry. Everything blurry.  
Gettin' dark.  
Dark. Everything dark now.  
Real dark.  
Can't see nothin'.  
Man, I'm dead.

Bailey forgets to wash his belly button for thirty-three years and ends up with a nasty infection. He discovers this late one Friday night over the glare of a particularly compelling Springer rerun and a heap of butter lover's corn. *Ain't that a kick in the ass*, he thinks, slapping home the footrest and heading for the bathroom to get a closer look at his inflamed navel. But he forgets about his gout-stricken big toe, steps down painfully and throws himself off balance, pitching headfirst into the old pine door frame. The collision is enough to shake the tiny house, for Bailey is an awfully solid man, and he knocks loose the ceramic plate from directly above the bathroom door. It falls like a weighted knuckleball and cracks into three pieces on the back of his skull, opening a small wound. A line of blood begins winding its way through Bailey's thinning hair as he lies there dizzily, cheek on carpet, in nothing but his greasy blue plumber's pants and a black plastic wristwatch.

From the television the Springer crowd roars to life as a three-hundred-pound black woman pummels her skinny white stepsister, who, it turns out, is sleeping with the fat woman's Puerto Rican gangsta cousin/husband. Bailey's sputtering brain recalls how the Spandex-wearing blonde eventually gave as good as she got, just the way her six brothers had taught her. He hears women grunting, chairs clanging, Jerry saying 'Oh my,' and mentally curses himself for missing the tattoo-exposing finale.

Head wrapped like a drunken mummy, Bailey idles his car along the neighborhood streets fully aware of the faces in the windows. He can't help himself but to look: dozens upon dozens of mugs pressed up against glass with bulging, hungry eyes. He recognizes them as the studio audience, a gaggle of pot-smoking, welfare-draining ruffians anxious for the show to start.

Bailey dips his head to wipe his runny nose, sneeze, spit – for the late spring pollen is playing hell on his allergies – and doesn't see the host standing at the intersection. He looks up just in time to slam the brake, sending jolts of pain through his bulbous toe, but he can't rewrite the script. The suit-and-tie figure is hurled backward as if slammed in the gut with a cannonball, outstretched arms and legs reaching for Bailey like a frantic cartoon character. Bailey watches the man's head bounce off the pavement in a brilliant red spray, then forces himself to glance back at the faces. Foot easing off the brake, white knuckles ready on the wheel, he expects a mob enraged at the slaying of their golden-haired king.

But what he sees is exuberance and fist-pumping from behind the windows. Mouths of jagged, yellow-brown teeth open and close, open and close, and he strains to hear the building chant: *Bai-ley, Bai-ley, Bai-ley...*

Perched on the aluminum seat of a swamp boat, Bailey grimaces at the passing green water and scratches his bare tummy. The only sound louder than the slapping tide is his overactive intestines snapping and popping like fireworks. He chews on his algae-coated tongue as he fights the intense bowel pressure, then gives up, as he always does, and releases air with enough force to blow up a stone courthouse. Schools of x-eyed carp bob to the surface.

Momentarily relieved, Bailey looks over at the driver and realizes that he knows this person. His name is Fredrico or Geraldo and he's a *Hollywood Squares*

champ straight out of Hoboken, via Nuevo Loredo. Are you taking me to the emergency room? Bailey shouts above the watery din. He reaches up and pulls a six-inch pine splinter from atop his noggin. Stuck to the tip is a wedge of gray matter soft and dense like feta cheese. Bailey retches, reminded of the rotten, misshapen food he dredges from the endless sink drains and garbage disposals for a living.

---

BAILEY STOPS  
SCRATCHING  
LONG ENOUGH TO  
LOOK DOWN AND  
NOTICE THAT A  
SAPLING  
HAS TAKEN ROOT  
IN HIS  
REDDENED,  
PUCKERED INNIE.

Fredrico/Geraldo doesn't seem to notice the gooey splinter. He looks at Bailey squarely and says,

without accent, that lost airline luggage is more likely to wind up in Cairo than any other place in the world. A bell dings. Bailey stops scratching long enough to look down and notice that a sapling has taken root in his reddened, puckered innie. It's growing out, straight out, but has yet to branch or bloom.

In Canada, Fredrico/Geraldo enunciates, Saturday is the most popular day of the week to die.

*Ding ding.*

Bailey, joints screaming, lugs his heavy belly tree up a seemingly endless flight of steps that reaches into the clouds. It's a maple tree! It's twelve feet long and growing steadily with huge green leaves that make him feel safe and young. But the tree can't stop the pain, and a mile or two up the stairs he begins to sob. Oh, this goddamn lupus, he whimpers, feeling the sky-high pulse pounding against his compromised skull like the Grim Reaper clamoring to get out.

At that moment Bailey feels a soft hand at his elbow and is escorted off the stairs by a short, stubble-haired woman in a baggy toga. He takes in her modest profile and understands that this is Glynnis, the Capricorn

dog groomer he replaced with disease and misery. As she guides him toward a gleaming stage, the toga eases away from her body, revealing heavy breasts with taut brown points. The belly tree grows another foot.

Glynnis helps Bailey down onto the stage and begins massaging his aching limbs as the emcee, a tall man with domino teeth, addresses the gathered crowd. Ladies and gentlemen, he says into his microphone, this is a wonderful tree, a fabulous buy. Just think of the shade it will provide during family picnics. Host a robin's nest in your underarms. Hang a tire swing for the kids. Bailey realizes that he is Item #323 on the home shopping network. Which is fine and dandy as long as the hostess keeps working that skin-kneading magic. Oh, *right there*, Bailey thinks, *right there*. And the foamy maple syrup erupts from his trunk like a geyser.

"So suddenly you have a nice size maple tree growing out of your lap and you decide to fertilize the neighborhood. Is that not the case, sir?"

"I wouldn't touch that BLEEP with a ten-foot pole, Jerry. She's *baad* dadgum news, you ask me."

Bailey doesn't understand the censored words flowing from his mouth. But somehow they fit the script, and he feels a certain satisfaction at stoking the audience's voracious appetite for sleaze and confrontation.

"Uh-huh," says Jerry. "And I suppose that *wasn't* your seventeen-year-old sister-in-law locked in that broom closet with you for fifteen minutes on the very day of your own wedding?"

"BLEEPIN right it was," says the nose-ringed sister-in-law, sitting beside Bailey with a hand over her visibly growing belly. "And I got the evi-dance right here to prove it, Jerry."

With that Baby Bo is born, right there on the stage, all tiny limbs and roots in a rush of milky topsoil. Already, Bailey notices, he's wearing a miniature flannel shirt with the sleeves cut out. Half-naked girls and colorful tigers cover his pudgy sunburned arms. Between his cheek and gum: a pinch of Skoal.

"Well now," says Baby Bo, with a wink and a grin for Bailey. "Ain't I a kick in the ass."

The beret-wearing producer tells Bailey he's too freakish for prime time and relegates him to fifteen-second insecticide commercials. For a local exterminator nonetheless. Even so, Bailey can't remember his one line – *Take it from the Belly-Tree Man, your termites have met their match!* – for all he wants to do is eat dirt, drink water and soak up the beautiful, beautiful California sunshine.

Who's he kidding? Bailey's no West Coast boy. The towering redwoods sneer at his flash celebrity, the hip palms call him a simpleton, a loser. So he high-tails it back home, where he's just one of the hardwood fellas again.

Life as a Midwest maple is wonderful at first, for Bailey never imagined his autumn leaves could be filled with such electric color: fiery reds, glowing oranges, sunshine yellows. He beams like a proud new father, spreads his arms like Jesus welcoming all sinners. But soon the razor-clawed squirrels come, burrowing painfully in his hollow knots. The hungry worms invade like a fuzzy death blanket. Woodpeckers chip away his armor, bore into his nerves. The six-month winter freezes him to the core, the frostbite deadening his once-healthy limbs.

When the thaw comes Bailey realizes he's sick and lonely, oh so lonely, and then the firewood men appear with their chainsaws, seeking out the weak, and Bailey feels the metal teeth rip into his diseased pulp, feels himself getting dizzy, nauseous from the oily smoke, and then he begins to lean, lean, and he's falling toward the ground, heading toward death as a rotting, pathetic specimen known only by the three or four Mountain Dew-chugging tree-huggers along for the publicity ride.

Back home, Bailey peels his face off the crusty carpet and realizes instantly that something has changed. *Everything*. He's throbbing and light-headed but awake, all synapses firing, for the first time since Glynnis scooped up her faded peach panties and squaking Pomeranians and paraded out the door.

He rises to his feet, claps his hands like a spunky Irish dancer, shakes out the cobwebs. Marches over soggy yellow kernels to the cordless, snatches it out of the cradle and punches in the still-familiar number. Gonna get himself a little somethin-somethin. Gonna do it right this time.

As he waits for her to come on the line, he glances down at the television and listens to a twinkle-eyed man tell him how to get rich with minimal time and investment. Bailey sees right through him – *right goddamn through him*. He steps back, cocks his leg like an overweight Bruce Lee and kicks the set to the floor. The get-rich man and his infomercial evaporate into a shard of glass and a jumble of sizzling components.

Bailey rubs his wondrous belly and lets loose like a rascal hound. *Harr!*

## Doubles

Gerald Locklin

they seemed to come in pairs,  
the jazzmen,  
coleman hawkins and prez young,  
benny goodman and chick webb,  
louis and the duke,  
miles and chet,  
ella and billie.

some would say it's just the way  
our brains make sense of things:  
kantian categories, binary oppositions.  
others would say only western man's brain  
has been hardwired in this way,  
by history, culture, and survival.  
a rhetorician might consider it  
an arbitrary but effective strategy.

it's argued that the eastern metaphysic  
is monistic, transcendental:  
there's but one reality –  
brahma, the oversoul –  
and all the rest is maia, mere illusion.

all i know is that theme/variation,  
being and becoming,  
essence and existence,  
permanence and change,  
tradition and the individual:

these seem to constitute  
the structures of the consciousness,  
of jazz, of all the music that  
i've ever heard.



GODDESS MELT by christopher m.

# —700 People Dancing

Catfish McDaris

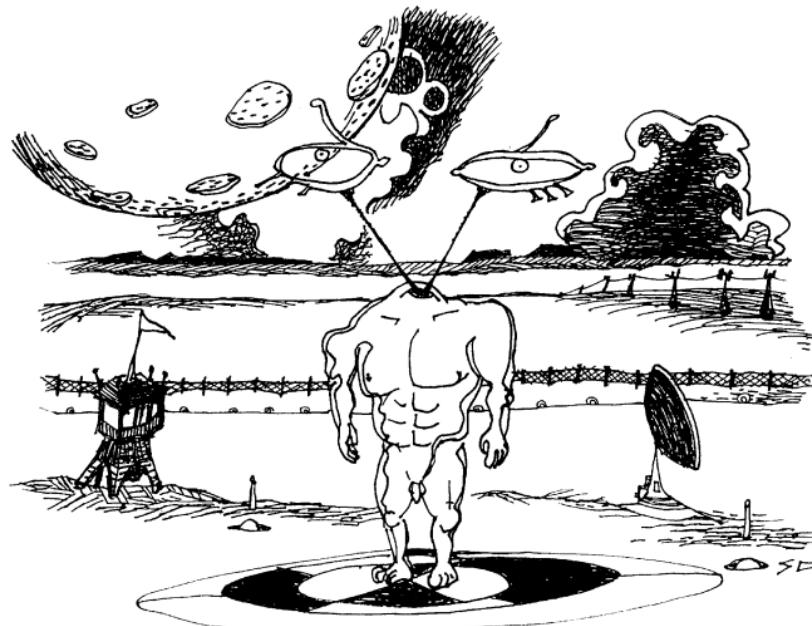
The voices from all over earth come through a little radio. 35 people dead in Jerusalem, so far.

The fog rolls in over Scotland, elections coming in England, devolution in a fortnight.

Races in Monte Carlo, Sean Connery on the front page. Building collapses, crashing onto a wedding in the City of David. More dead being dug out.

51 dead found in graves in Russia. Oklahoma bomber of 168 dead to die. Macedonia minus Alexander battles Albania. Beirut against Israel.

Japanese lepers apologized to. Wow! What a world! I sit in my basement and smoke a cigar and thank God and ask why?



ONE OF MY COLLEAGUES ALSO TELLS ME THAT NASA HAS CREATED AN ECTOPLASMIC SPACESHIP, WHICH WILL SOON BE BOUND FOR MARS ON A COVERT MISSION FOR THE SECRET GOVERNMENT.

SOME PEOPLE WILL BELIEVE ANYTHING.

-REDUCED IMAGE FROM STEPAN CHAPMAN'S LATEST COLLECTION OF ILLUSTRATIONS  
*COMMON ECTOIDS OF ARIZONA*

# I Already Gave at the Office

Michael L. Newell

Bah, scolded the ragged man, open  
the door, I hear the t.v. cackling, and know  
your wee ones and your spouse lie scattered  
chair and floor in dumb amusement.

Don't abuse my intellect by silent  
neglect of my rap rap tapping on your  
dwelling's door; I know you're there, and can  
share warmth, food, and lodging, if

you'd but dare to fling open  
your house to a thing poor, diseased,  
and ill at ease in polite company;  
what blight might I inflict

on ones who have so much and I  
so little, whittled to bone and scrimped  
flesh by my lack, my lackluster luck,  
my lost days on wandering streets

where I scavenge with others of my ilk  
for what scraps can be found, moldy  
crusts a la carte, milk curdled  
and garnished with rotting fruits and vegetables.

Don't leave me banging away out here  
too long, a throng like me might gather  
and wreck this place altogether, the anger  
unleashed might reach the length

of the block or further, might  
detonate other explosions all over town,  
then no one would be around to enjoy  
your creature comforts, your casual caresses, to employ

your language of plenty, of control, of disdain  
for the very notion of pain, open I say  
before time decays these walls and all within  
to thin stalks of despair like those

of us who wander lost outside, who slog  
through day like it was night, and wear  
the night like it was a shoddy suit too familiar  
to discard, too worn to be seen in.

Open or I'll huff and I'll puff  
till the neighborhood is filled with air  
unfit to breathe. Open or I'll smear  
your doors and windows with fecal matter

left by your pets who feed better  
than I do. Open or I'll rip your garden  
out and plant decaying asphalt under your windows.  
Open or I'll tell your neighbors we're related. Open...

# For Juan Alanis

(night watchman at Colonia Mirador de la Huasteca)

Michael L. Newell

blind in one eye – corneal hole  
and no money for transplant

job demands eye  
and all who rely

on his work  
ignore his plight

polite in refusals  
of dinero

dinner they'll give  
but spare pesos

not for peons  
buy peonies bye peon

is this different  
from elsewhere – where else

is difference – nowhere  
wear your poverty with dignity

in silence – slyness dug in  
on rich faces faced elsewhere

than your blind eye  
ay he says ay ay ay



SPANISH CART by christopher m.

Uh-huh, everything leaks now.  
Tub. Kitchen sink.  
Sink in the bathroom leaks, too.  
The days when I sleep,  
my poems leak out.  
They spill from my head  
to who knows where.  
I don't think they leak  
through the walls or the floor.  
No neighbor complains about them.

Night before last, I passed by the man  
who lives directly above me.  
He's old, fat. Never buttons his shirt;  
his stomach hangs in full view.  
From a corner of his mouth leaked  
a thin stream of blood. (I wondered  
what other leaks he might have.)  
He seemed not to know what was there  
on his chin and smiled at me  
as always:  
that smile that begs me don't hurt him,  
explaining I'm too weak to stop you,  
too scared to report you.

The dumpster, it leaks.  
The dumpster leaks piss.  
I know this because  
every morning  
there are several  
wide puddles  
of piss  
right beside it.  
I wish the super  
would fix that leak –  
the smell wafts through  
my window.

# The Porcelain Eye

Richard William Pearce

belonged to great great grandfather,  
who was a corpse before great grandfather's birth;  
and how the loss of the real eye,  
the flesh eye, occurred, is wholly suppositional. Per-  
haps a thief in an alleyway with  
a rusty knife claimed the eye  
in addition to my ancient relative's purse.  
Or perhaps it was some mishap on  
the midwestern farm, the dust  
and sweat of that day's work  
making panic more immediate,  
dispossession more theistic.  
Perhaps the loss came at the hands of  
his Union brothers of the Civil War,  
a war in which he briefly fought  
and then fled from, a deserter.  
Or perhaps I'm descended from  
a gambler with hard debts.  
Perhaps the eye was lost to disease;  
perhaps, lost to mere horseplay.  
Perhaps a gun was aimed true,  
but there occurred a tragic backfire;  
perhaps, it fired aright. Whatever the scenario,  
an eye was lost.  
Such an integral piece,  
and such a personal one.  
The replacement, though serving no utility,  
is nevertheless stunningly beautiful,  
a creation deserving a museum case  
more than an empty socket.  
Who is the artist? What is his name?  
I am tempted to say his work is more lovely  
than any living eye of God's conception.  
Down through the generations, this item  
has come to me. I laugh as the cat nervously  
bats it across the rug. My toothless baby daughter,  
who sucks the eye like hard candy,  
will marvel, as she grows, at its flawlessness.



GLORY EYE by christopher m.

# Anatomy of a Wrongdoing to Children

Bradley L. Farandello as told to Mateo Pieteza

To be fair, I should say I singled Lucian out in the donors' waiting room that first Wednesday because I thought he might be wretched. Before he arrived, I couldn't see anyone worth listening to in the fat crowd that smothered the orange and yellow plastic chairs, and boredom had driven me to start memorizing the posters that flatter the consciences of waiting donors. By explaining how plasma helps intrepid lab technicians and scorched children, the tender propaganda framed in faux teak helps each of us to plausibly misremember he is desperate enough to sell liquid from his body. Hammy phrases like "Give a Part of Yourself: Give the Miracle of Life" were making my desire to hear a story so oppressive that I was about to break down and talk to a college student, when I caught sight of an old man limping into the dark thicket of heads. Of course I offered him my seat.

Now plasma donors are largely unclean people. You get a few broke students, alcoholics, users of drugs light enough to pass the screening test, welfare mothers shackled to swiftly dilapidating children, alley flotsam and displaced persons – and then you have old folks. This last group loves to talk, nobody wants to listen to them, and they've lived long enough to have, on average, two or three devastating experiences apiece. I love them for that. Driving to Neffer City, that monument to industrial waste, so I can park in its armpit and rot in the Plasma Alliance for three hours – for a payoff of twenty bucks – doesn't in itself gratify me. I have a girlfriend who needs more time to think, student loans, a fear of open spaces. These are facts.

But I kept myself in check. Once the old gimp was down, I counted to fifteen before asking:

"Did you hurt yourself there?"

And the sight of him creaking toward me was delightful: there was no doubt I was about to be satiated. Yes, the wrinkles shelving his forehead cast shadows like rows furrowed in farm dirt; his eyes brimmed with water, yes, and their whites were sawdust-colored; his pants and beige overcoat were fraying into lint, and a couple stains puddled the band of his fedora; craggy, neglected fingernails; but the invigorating mark of misery was the cufflinks. Emerald-encrusted and polished, they drew a feeble twinkle from the fluorescent lights. He was still trying.

The smell of wine pursued the word "What?" from his creased throat.

"You looked hurt when you came in. You okay?"

The old man smiled a smile that let out a yellow light, and it alarmed me; but I took comfort in the thought that it couldn't be so striking were it not girded by dentures. Pulling up a trouser leg, he leaned forward to push down his sock. His ankle was not quite the color

of human flesh. "Prosthetic leg," he said.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I didn't smile. I started counting to fifteen.

On gray afternoons, the Alliance windows milk a concrete glow from Neffer's decaying practicality and siphon it into the waiting room. Bathed in this light, the old man's face looked like a footprint in slush. I felt certain he'd seen combat. Vets have stories that make Depression-era tales of eating household pets seem like petulant letters to the editor.

"Did you lose it in service to your country?"

He replied with a squint that contracted my throat. No longer feeble, in a sudden moment his eyes were powerfully intelligent: I feared my motives were obvious, a forehead tattoo.

After a few days of this moment, his cheeks relaxed and let his lips flap loose: "When I was 36 I was sent to prison, to a hard labor camp, for eight years for helping somebody sell a bunch of stolen cars. The sort of thing you see on the funny pages about the chain gang – digging ditches, shoveling gravel. Enough to make a man hate sweat, I'll tell you that. But there was a way to get a few days' vacation, and that was if you had boot rash. Boot rash was easy enough to get – you take beard remover and shoe polish, mix 'em together, and spread it on your ankle. Gets ripe. Boot rash." I nodded. Beard remover I'd never heard of, but boot rash was clearly easy to get. "Now I was fairly lazy then, laziness being what – well, the thing that landed me there, in the first place. And I was out for a nasty case of boot rash." And now he had a prosthetic foot. My knee was bobbing. "I mixed up a big batch of the muck, put it on my ankle, and wrapped it up, let it get ripe overnight. When I woke up, gangrene was rotting my ankle away. They sawed it off before breakfast that day." I exhaled. "Breakfast was a raw potato."

The heel of my hand went to my brow and I shook my head, concentrating to conceal the thrill that rocketed down my throat. Such a tragedy – at 36! Kids, no doubt, detailed plans on how to hammer a new life together after his release; and because he falls prey once again to the – the only too human! – sin of sloth, he's condemned to hobble through doorways for the next 40 years. The facts (noncommittal girlfriend, student loans, menacing broad spans) were snuffed by the peace that blew through me.

"You glad you asked?" Grimness hung on his face like stubble.

"No – I'm sorry." Had I let a grin slip out? "What's your name, again?"

"Lucian Grant."

"Brad Farandello."

"That's a weak handshake there, Bradley. Try that again."

For calling me weak I throttled his palm; but the residual bliss settling in the bottom of my stomach would float me through dinner and well into evening. Mandy's indecisiveness was a joke.

Abruptly wracked by a volley of coughs, Lucian made no effort to cover his mouth. Wine-stinking air hit me, and I wrinkled my nose at him. He regarded me with a softer squint. "I had a Cyprus crepe this morning. Really, they are delectably matched" – one watery eye un- and re-squinted, cough – "delectably matched by an herbaceous Pinot Grigio. And the Stag's Leap is nothing, if not herbaceous."

Wine for breakfast: Woe leaked from this man's skin to stain furniture. And for someone his age to be donating plasma, I knew, there was likely either a forsaken-by-the-family or a sudden-poverty story. After months of practice I'd pared down the perfect segue: "Do you drive here?"

"Stop it! Gimme back!" We turned to see a little boy stomping circles around his sister a couple rows over. Sis held an antennaed robot just out of his grasp. The white-blue of fluorescent bulbs rained down on the two, shellacking their heads.

"If you stop being such a baby, I'll give it back."

"Give it!" Many sets of eyes judged the mother, a blond stuffed into a silver tracksuit with a total of four children in tow. Cuddling number four in her lap, she'd apparently learned long ago to tune out the larger, baser children. I jangled the change in my pocket and tried to stare furiously enough to make the woman feel heat on her cheek. I'd been the target of inch-out-of-reach baiting well into high school. I'm 5'1".

When the game grew boring, Sis sent the toy sailing backward over the chairs that separated us; it bounced off my sternum and onto the floor. Mom never looked up.

Little Brother wasted not a second in tracking the robot's trajectory to our row, and scurried to snatch it up from before my feet.

"Just a second there, young man!" growled Lucian. The mango-scented young woman next to him half-closed her Spanish textbook; conscious of this, Lucian bowed

---

UNTIL SIX-SIXTEEN  
TOMORROW NIGHT,  
YOU MUST NEVER LOOK  
AT THE CLOUDS – NOT  
ONCE! IF YOU SEE ONE  
CLOUD, YOUR HEART  
WILL TURN TO ROTTEN  
GARBAGE.

---

forward until only the paralyzed kid and I could hear.  
“That toy hit me,” he breathed.

“I’m sorry,” mewed the boy. “She threw it.”

“Sorry? I am a ghost snatcher, young man. Do you know what that means?” Arcing his head back to stare down his nose at a sharper angle, Lucian let his words tumble out in a charcoal whisper. “I place a curse on you. Until six-sixteen tomorrow night, you must never look at the clouds – not once! If you see one cloud, your heart will turn to rotten garbage.”

Clutching the plastic figurine to his breast, the kid staggered a step back.

“Now go!” hissed Lucian, which the kid did, with all speed.

“You are a monster,” I said.

“Little details are the key,” he replied, eyes glistening. “You’ll notice I said six-sixteen exactly.”

“His mother’s going to wonder why he’s staring at the ground all day.”

“Yes! Yes, she’ll get the idea. Needs to be a more attentive parent.”

“Well I don’t think your motives are so – so trying to be helpful. With a lie like that.”

“Oh,” his laugh like air escaping an inner tube, “take a bow, Mr. Richard Burton. Gracious me. Now who’s to say what’s true? Do you know more now than you did when you were his age?”

“Of course I do,” I said. “I know enough not to be afraid of ghosts.” I have a mature, catalogued fear of open spaces.

“But children’s heads are full of lies their own parents tell. Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy. And it’s because they know that kids not only like stories, but they need them, helps them, uh, come to see who they are. It’s our duty. And, it’s tradition.”

I was silent. A sudden gust from the open front door plastered a rent phonebook page to my shin. I was trying to recall the distinct face of the border collie we had when I was a kid. An archetypal border collie came to mind, panting a smile, with some kind of frame around it, but I couldn’t conjure Thor’s face. I could distinctly recall the face of my mom saying. “Brad, we’re putting Thor to sleep.” And sleep sounded nice. For three years I waited for him to wake up.

“And I tell you what, adults live on lies too,” Lucian continued. “We spend years believing in the ‘facts’ until the men in lab coats come along and prove them wrong all over again.”

“Don’t pull that absence-of-an-objective-truth crud on me.”

“Someone’s had too much book-learning,” he sighed, taking a couple chews of nothing. “Education is no

substitute for stature.”

I sniffed. “Stature?”

“A man needs stature to be able to spin these stories, and to tell them well. It’s confidence that inspires confidence.”

There could be no doubt he was sneering at my size. For a moment I felt the same apprehension as when he’d first dealt me that squint from the orange chair, but my internal critic roared in response: This man is not superior to you.

“I can’t expect you to understand,” he drawled.

That did it.

From a moral standpoint, I know, a dissertation describing the growth I felt in my spine during the weeks that followed, the lucid calm with which I began to accept Mandy’s ambiguity, the way I began to see clouds connecting to form a sort of stable ceiling overhead that might seal me in from the leering black void – volumes written on the subject wouldn’t amount to a sentence of tenable defense. The facts are simple: I sought a way to shame Lucian. Uncertain how I was going to do it, I nevertheless used children to try.

After a couple weeks of improv and testing lines, we grew into a routine in which Lucian played my philanthropic grandfather. Grandpa, I explained to the moms, demands that I drive him the four hours from our enormous estate to Neffer twice a week, so he can donate his plasma to burn victims. We found that the appearance of generosity engendered trust in a room so fetid with greed. And I think the perennial moisture in the old man’s eyes was an asset.

From months of eliciting sad stories in the waiting room, I was well-armed with conversation openers targeting the mothers, and we’d alternate: one would spark and hold a conversation while the other, incidentally introduced, spoke to the child.

At first I intended to show Lucian his wickedness by example, to teach him that lies needn’t be terrifying. To my first mark, a wee pink girl named Jessica who kept ripping and resealing her four Velcro shoe straps, I began by trying to bestow hope: “The President of Spain can’t tie shoelaces either,” I said. “And look how far he got.”

“I can tie shoelaces. I just *like* Velcro.”

The readiness and even impudence with which Jessica was prepared to fire lie back upon lie made me resolve to floor her. I spoke slowly.

“Do you like sugar?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sugar comes from the horns of unicorns. Ground-up unicorn horn.” Drool escaped the girl’s slack lip. “Most of the farms are deep under the earth. But don’t worry, the horns grow back.”

I heard Lucian giving Mom an offhand list of the reasons behind his marriage's disintegration. Jealousy pricked me.

When I later told Lucian about the Jessica session, the noise he made sounded like the deliberate enunciation of the word "guffaw."

"That's weak, Branford."

"Weak?" Biting back my automatic anger, I flexed and fisted the fingers of one hand. As I replayed the session in my head, though, I realized I'd abandoned the story about Spain's president at the first sign of resistance. Mandy, loans, open spaces.

"It had nothing to it. I could tell you a lie like the one you told her." My gaze, adrift for a second in the fluorescent glimmer of his cufflinks, rose to rest on his rifled nose. "That boy in the Bears jacket, he now believes cough syrup is poison, that it's keeping him from getting any bigger. See, that's a change in belief, which'll cause a real change in behavior. I've changed the way he lives his life. There is a lie."

This was horsefeathers: the emaciated wino only wanted to snicker to himself. He didn't conceive, as I did, of the life sprawling ahead of the child, during which there'd be scarce room to carry memory stills. Short of doing something traumatizing, one can brand one's image into the long-term library with a story that's fantastic yet somehow plausible – and above all, relevant enough to the child's life to be thought of regularly. If repeatedly drawn from the vault to the fore of the mind, the memory will wear down a track and gradually mole its way into the permanent gallery. Thus the image of Bradley goes forth and is multiplied.

I will admit that I enjoyed being believed as much as Lucian did. The whole thing helped me appreciate myself as a source of wisdom: petty obstacles like student loans cannot blunt the edge of a trenchant intellect. More than anything, I cherished the conversations with the kids who disbelieved me at first, as they let me bring in lavish logic like a Möbius strip. Victory over the child was certain, always. Victory over Lucian seemed only a matter of time.

Maneuvering to lasso Mom's trust and keep her leashed while Lucian vomited lies let me collect scores of stories, which was gratifying, at first. As the campaign wore on, however, the welfare moms' prevailing themes of delinquent alimony and the irreparable education system – specifically, the service school buses provide everything from strep throat to black death – lost their power to eclipse the facts, and began to annoy me. Relief lay only in their brood.

Tom paused, seized by the moment of awkwardness that always arrests the hematologist when, guiding me to a donating recliner, he sees that the elevated chair will be tough for me to mount. Pushing past him, I leapt up into it. Tom is married to Helen, who works

the pre-donation medical screening booth, and who let me in that day with a temperature of 96°, even though anything below 97° is supposed to keep you from donating. The Alliance is lucky to have her.

An alarming number of old men filled the donating chairs that Saturday, but when I saw the day's film was a one-good-cop suspense-thriller with Steve Gutenberg, I realized they couldn't possibly enjoy it, and felt gratified. The film seemed to complement the other charms of the room: its rare fugitive flies, paint the color of dandruff the sourceless buzz that slums at the border of one's consciousness, the swampy indifference miring donors' faces. Even the young men looked old.

Tom stuck me at one tip of the lizard-tongue scar on my left arm, now almost as long as the scar on my right. Steadfast, monolithic, the blue plasma filtration system stood sentry at my side, eager to process my juice. I began flexing my hand to expedite the first cycle.

Gutenberg saw that the coffee pot in his charmingly disheveled bachelor pad was warm, had recently been switched off – *someone was waiting for him*.

When the first filtration cycle finished, I closed my eyes to savor the delicious sensation that follows: the hollow prickling in my elbow and fingers liquefied at a creeping pace, quenched by the influx of plasma-free blood through the tube. Five more cycles to go. Would Gutenberg save the girl in time?

"They showed this on Sunday, for Pete's sake." Craning my neck around the filtration system, I saw Tom helping Lucian into the next chair. The tip of the old man's tongue hung out of his wine-marinated face.

"How the heck do you always pass the medical screening?" I said.

Lucian laid his hat on his knee. "That Helen, knows more about work ethic than most women twice her age," winking at Tom.

I felt betrayed by the wench. Gutenberg found a bullet from the same gun as the bullet they found in that girl by the lake.

"What did you tell that redhead girl this morning?" Lucian asked after Tom left.

"Told her carpet feels furry because it's alive."

"Oh, that's just silly."

"Excuse me," said a brittle voice. A woman was looming over the foot of my recliner. Fresh from her own donating chair, she held a cotton ball against the needle wound. Sandy hair draped a face rather fine for middle age, and pink smudges not unlike a Kool-Aid mustache ringed her lips.

"I'd like to have a word with you," she said to me.

Immediately Lucian and I divined what was about to

happen.

Mom never broke her gaze from mine. She dropped the cotton ball to raise one fleeced forearm in Lucian's direction, as if she could only speak by first blotting him from her awareness.

"Do you know what your grandfather said to my daughter Joline last week?" Were it not so firmly set, the upturning of her lips might've been mistaken for a smile.

"Stop, look and listen?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Stop, drop and roll."

"He told her, he said that old men are in charge of who gets into heaven, and that she should give them any money she can find. Even if she has to take it from other people. My Jol – your grandfather – said that."

"That's outrageous!" Lucian barked, compelling a few donating heads to turn.

"I might say that his being a tycoon already doesn't help explain it. And," Mom continued to me as she walked to Lucian's side, "Joline said that he smells like her Uncle David. Uncle David," nodding weightily, "is an alcoholic."

"Now that's merely a mistake." As Lucian's cement eyebrows fell to the edge of his forehead, his voice grew erect with indignation. "Just having a distinguished knowledge of wine, in no way means I have a dependency on it."

"Well why is your face so red?" retorted Mom. Gutenberg's unorthodox methods left the Chief no option but to put him on temporary probation. With grave apologies, he demanded Gutenberg's badge and gun. "And it smells like you had five white Zinfandels before coming here."

"I've often said the wine community might never recover from the sins of Robert Mondavi," Lucian said, enunciating a bit pretentiously now that he was talking about wine. It made my toes curl. "He and his sons, having decided that the common consumer can't be expected to appreciate proper wine, gave birth to that – hideous candy in a glass, that peasant's syrup they called white Zinfandel. Now to imply that I –"

"You're a raging alcoholic," I blurted. I couldn't take the film any longer. So many deadbeats and debtors were roused from their state of lethargy to glare at me that I added: "-grandpa, and we're checking you into a home."

Lucian's eyes dried. Anger evacuated bone crevices and blood vessels in which it had been lying dormant throughout his body, to collect with the speed of heat in his purple face. Bulbous knuckles curled over the brim of his fedora and clutched it against his breast with such violence that its shape could never recover.

"You," he growled, "are out of the will."

"Well," said Mom, and slipped away like a child who's shattered a department store mirror.

"Our acquaintance is over," Lucian said, swinging his legs over the edge of the recliner. He tore the needle out of his arm. Renegade blood dripped off his elbow as the tube it was meant to enter turned clear. Unruffled by – or perhaps deaf to – the screech that his filtration machine belted out, Lucian hobbled over to me. A recollection of the pain that hobble represented trilled peace beneath my ribs.

Inundated as I was with one-good-cop dialogue, I couldn't resist saying, "No, we aren't finished yet. When I've outdone you, then we can be finished."

Lucian's lips crooked. "What?"

Tom was now behind him, so I spoke quickly. "You bring a kid, I bring kid. We each have a session with the other's kid. Whoever's is more – superior... is superior."

"Yes," he nodded. "Less than nine years old."

Tom laid his hand on Lucian's shoulder.

"Hey," said a man in a chair quite near us. "Hey." We looked. "You two a couple sick freaks, is that what I'm hearing?"

"We can't have it here," Lucian said to me.

"You got that right," said Tom.

One evening last November I was babysitting Mandy's niece, Camilla, and I threatened to call Santa and have her put on the naughty list if she didn't stop taking the batteries out of the remote every dang time I left the room.

"Okay, call him," she said. "Can I listen on the other line?"

I had to tell Mandy a lot of bullpuckey, but in the end I was able to secure this precious child for an afternoon.

In an attempt to overcome two of my defects at once – inferiority to Lucian and fear of open spaces – I'd insisted that we meet at the zoo, but when I parked the car on the appointed morning, the magnitude of the place's oppression flattened me. It was as wide as the ocean floor. Camilla's clenched hand helped me make it through the gates.

Propped on a bench under an oak leaf canopy, with Monkey Island forming a barrier to our left, and the indoor Swamp World off to our right, I felt a little better; a further wall was added by the bill of the baseball cap pulled down on my head. But the twenty minutes before Lucian appeared with his kid were agonizing.

"Can we sit somewhere that doesn't stink?" He was hatless, forehead and cheeks wet, crewcut boy in an Astros t-shirt behind him. "Hello, honey!" he smiled at Camilla, "Here, you'll want to meet Rudy, my neighbor's boy. How old are you, Rudy?"

“Four and a half.”

“Rudy here likes Dolomax Wizards. Do you like Dolomax Wizards?” I felt gratified by Camilla’s short reply.

“I’d like to go first,” the old man said to me.

“All right, Camilla, my friend Mr. Grant wants to tell you something –”

“Enough.” He held a palm at me. Monkeys screeched at this signal, reminding me that we had agreed not to interfere in any way with each other’s stories. Spotting the striped umbrella of an ice cream cart on the brick path next to the emu pasture, I excused myself.

“Rots their teeth,” Lucian said to my back.

Two chocolate-shell-coated ice cream bars with vanilla and strawberry filling were appallingly expensive. As I returned the bench, I noticed Lucian’s trouser cuff was pulled up to his shin. I began to trot.

“– a disease called gangrene. And there’s no medicine, so the prison doctor had to cut my leg off, below the knee, before breakfast that day. Breakfast,” his watery gaze nudging me, “was a raw egg.”

“Wow!” said Camilla. Rudy, playing at Lucian’s feet, apparently hadn’t been listening. “Did it hurt?”

“Oh, yes,” the wizened wretch nodded. “Hurt like the dickens.”

“Ice cream,” I said, holding it out to the kids. I was unable to stop staring at that craterous nose. Vitality and confidence were fleeing through holes in my feet – even my anger was hollow, eclipsed by stupid shame: I’d reaped hours of gratification from that lie. Fraudulent gratification. I felt shorter than Rudy.

“Of course I’m not finished, Camilla” Lucian wagged his hand at me. “Remember, I was telling you this story to tell you how Bradley and I met. Do you know about seeing-eye dogs for blind people?”

“Of course I do.”

“Well they have a new program like that for people who have trouble walking. It’s called Human Canes.”

“Dis strawberry part is yucky,” piped Rudy.

“Do you know how much that cost?” I snapped. A family throng began to sludge past our bench, huge, a reunion amassed from several states. Swarms of children skitted between the khaki legs of aunts and uncles; eyes trained on Monkey Island, not one of the adults spoke. They were all fat.

“You see, a regular cane like this wooden one can’t help you drive, or get your socks on. So the doctors find very, very short men and women to be human canes. Their shoulder has to be the same height as their owner’s hand.”

I put my hands into my pockets and turned my back.

“My doctor found me Bradley. But it didn’t work out.

He's certainly short enough, but he's just not good at doing simple tasks."

I saw the shadow of Camilla's head tossed back into the sunlight. She was gasping with giggles, waving her ice cream stick to express a desire to speak that was frustrated by torrents of laughter. Eventually she managed, "Uncle Brad is a seeing-eye dog!"

Rudy, the only object in which my eyes could find relief, was planted half in the shade at Lucian's odious feet, half in the buttery sun. Most of his ice cream remained in one hand, neglected as he plucked at a piece of tar. With an evenness that resembled streaks of a whirlpool, his yellow hair swept a spiral; a sun-lacquered vortex, twisting a hole into his brain, ready to swallow anything.

After sending Camilla off to buy film from the gift shop, I sat on the ground next to the boy. "Rudy? I have something very important to tell you." A chocolate goatee glazed his chin; his eyes fairly begged me to speak. "I'm going to give you an early birthday present."

"My birsday is in August," he said.

"Well usually, when you turn five, you get to know all the secrets that adults know. The secrets nobody would tell you before, because you were too young. But I'm going to tell you now! These are big secrets!"

"Really?"

I took his shoulders in my hands. A few yards behind the boy, a brown-clad zoo worker scoured concrete with a broad broom, clouding tree debris into fluffy piles. She stopped to roll her sleeves up. I lowered my voice. "Rudy, there is no Santa Claus, no Easter Bunny, and no Tooth Fairy. There's no such thing as any of them."

"No Santa?"

"No. It's a lie Mommy and Daddy told you." A fly hopped from continent to continent on the boy's head, unnoticed. Rudy was stone. "There's also no such thing as magic. It's just tricks, all of it."

A procession of lethargic wildebeests, the reunion family began to file past us from the other direction.

"How do you know?"

"All adults know. Your mom and dad will tell you all of this on your birthday in August. Okay? But it's an early gift from me. Also, there's no such thing as monsters or ghosts. You don't have to be afraid because they don't exist. Isn't that great? And, Rudy, there's no such thing as heaven or heck."

"Huh?"

"There's no such thing as heaven," I pointed skyward, "or heck," pointing to the twig-cluttered cement on which we sat. "They're just stories that people from

churches made up a long, long time ago. They don't really exist."

After warming his lower lip up with a few tremulations, Rudy began to gush tears. A monsoon of tears, an exploded tear reservoir. I heard Lucian snickering.

"No, don't cry. There's no heaven, but there's no heck either!" Attendants hosing down poop in the depths of Penguin Peninsula must've heard the screams that came from this kid's slender throat. "You won't go to heck! You can do whatever you want. Aren't you happy to hear that?"

Camilla returned, a plastic bag wrapped around her wrist. She helped me bring the kid down to a level of crying subdued enough to allow speech, but this seemed to take forever. We sat in the sun.

"Now why are you crying?" I asked in a merciful lull, hands on his shoulders.

"If dere's no heaven, den where's Wolfie?" Lapsing into more sobs, it took him ages to spit out: "Daddy said we should help him go to heaven, 'cause now he's looking down on us."

And assurance resurged into my gut. Leaning against the bench's edge, I stretched my legs. I knew firsthand, after all, that deceiving children about the death of pets is immoral, and I pictured myself explaining it to Lucian a few minutes hence: "Being lied to about Thor taught me that the longer the realization of the truth is delayed, the worse the pain," I would say. No, "agony" instead of "pain." My original aim in coming to the zoo seemed amusingly petty, and watching the zoo custodian shuffle toward the garbage cans, I smiled. I had boosted one child several rungs up the enlightenment latter. From this day on, the rate of Rudy's intellectual growth would always exceed that of his peers.

"No, kiddo," I said in a milky voice. Rustled by a sudden breeze, overhead leaves flitted their shadows over our skin. "That's just a lie for little kids. I'm sorry, but Wolfie isn't anywhere except in the ground. He can't see or hear or think anything. That's how it is when you die."

Rudy undertook another operatic series of shrieks, drawing broad laughter from Lucian.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," he said, grinning with grotesque broadness.

"Not only is the truth the best thing for the kid, it's an incredible story. How's that for changing his belief?"

"You're right, you're right." He nodded with lips pursed. "And if Rudy's older brother Wolfgang were alive, I'm sure he'd agree."

When I tell you what happened next, please try to understand that the sky burst wide just then, a voracious span to suck me into the black vacuum beyond, shrinking all shelter to dust – I had to focus on something small and immediate while escaping from the epitome

of small immediacy I reviled in myself.

"We need to get back, Camilla," I whispered, taking her hand as Lucian bent to pick up Rudy. The boy wailed with no regard for breathing.

"We haven't even seen any animals!"

"See you Wednesday," the old man chuckled to my back. We heard him singing to Rudy, trying to patch the wound left by the clumsy midget. His voice dimmed as we grew closer to the zoo custodian.

"I'm telling Mandy we didn't even see any animals," said Camilla.

Anyone can warp the worldview of a child, I was telling myself. Children put more stock in fantasy than in reality to begin with. To gain the confidence of an adult demands prowess.

Telling the zoo worker about the stench of alcohol on Lucian's breath, describing the physical and emotional abuse I personally saw him heap on the child, and pointing out the delight he took in doling out that abuse (obvious in the expression we could both see) didn't seem enough. "So then he starts talking about how they're going to be late for the Price is Right," I added. "It comes on at eleven, and he says they'll have to drive twice the speed limit to make it home in time." Little details are the key.

As the brown uniform rustled off toward security, I felt an absence of vindication. If I'd known then what I now know – that revenge is as fruitless as eliciting tales of woe from the elderly, or spinning stories for little children; that nothing brings relief from the facts like disclosure – maybe I wouldn't have been disappointed that the air didn't shrink to fit me a little tighter. Still, it was my skill that won the day, I reflected, leading Camilla toward the exit gates.

"Why did you say that to the zoo lady? About Mr. Grant?" Camilla asked.

"Drinking and driving is wrong, that's why."

She shook her head. "I didn't see him hit Rudy."

"When people drink and drive, people get hurt. And that's the truth," I said. And it was the truth.

I believed it.

# For Willie Whose Real Name I Can't Recall

*Matt Pinkerton*

Willie whose real name I can't recall  
Assuming I ever knew it  
Lived in our town, drank each day,  
And slept wherever he fell.  
He had no home or family  
But was familiar to all.

Willie whose real name I can't place  
Wore dirty clothes and a two day growth  
Of stubble dotted his face.  
He was fat and ripe apple red  
And in love unrequited  
With my mom's friend.

Her name was Alice. She was tall  
With big legs and bigger hair  
Coldly disposed with a stare  
As icy as the diamonds her bland  
Husband bought for her to wear  
As often as possible.

While Willie smelled of alcohol  
Drunk from a paper bag,  
Alice always stank of same  
She sprayed from an atomizer.  
Which one smelled worse?  
Don't ask me. I never could decide.

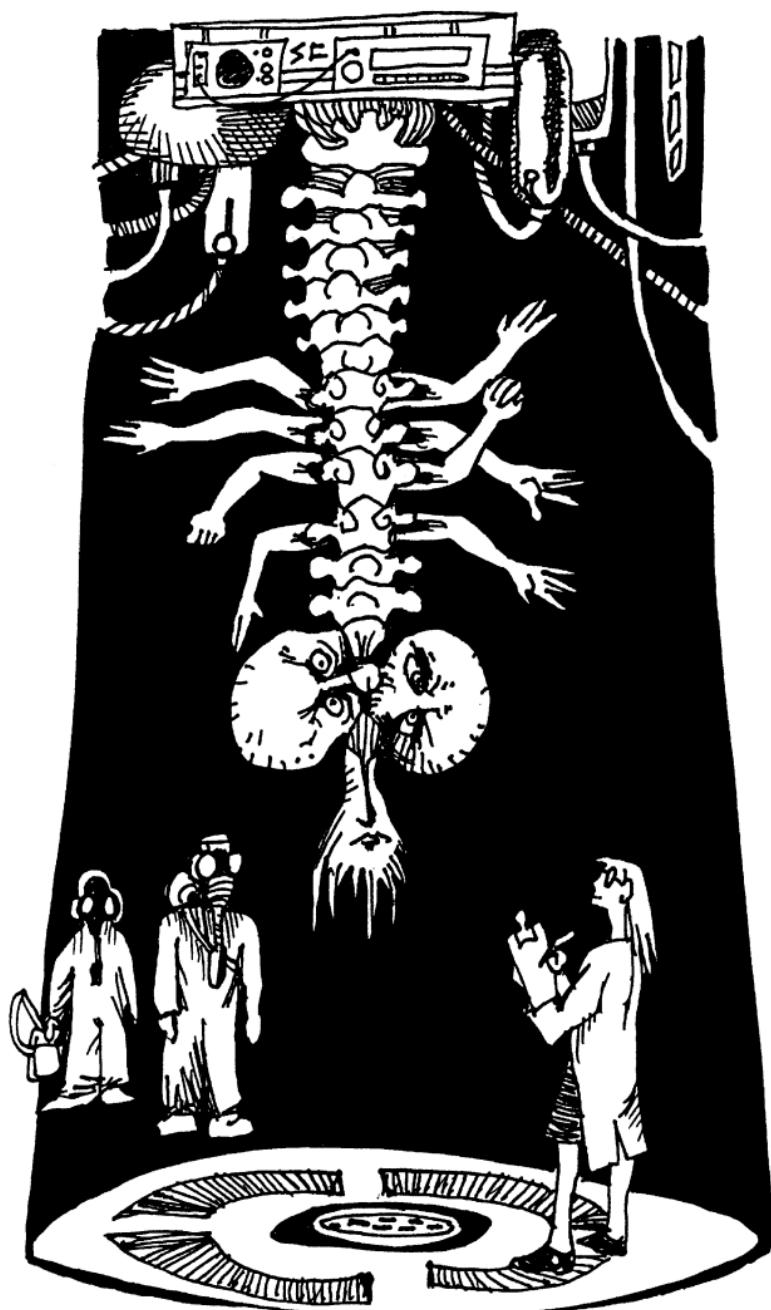
And I thought she looked pure menace.  
Though, of course, this was before  
I was taught to find hard legs, big hair  
And ice cold stares desirable.  
Some men, it seems, like to play  
At Arctic explorers when it comes

To love. The more solidly frozen  
The fossil, the more they want her thawed.  
I saw him one time looking at Alice  
With a huge grin on his face.  
Even now, I remember,  
He stood rigid as a soldier.

Waiting for... Inspiration, maybe, or luck?  
He was, it's true, no one's idea  
Of a good catch. Each year  
On Christmas Eve, my dad told me years later,  
Willie had ways of making sure  
He got a room and holiday dinner.

That night he'd show up at the steps  
Of St. Francis Xavier Church  
And expose himself to the elderly  
Parishioners exiting mass.  
Few could stifle laughs,  
Including the padré, said dad.

They'd call the cops.  
The Sheriff and his deputies  
Some years got there early.  
They made their arrest and Willie  
Whose real name I just don't know  
Would spend his Christmas Eve  
With dinner and bed in jail.



PARANOID RUMORS ABOUND IN THESE DARK DAYS. SOME OF MY COLLEAGUES BELIEVE THAT THE UNITED NATIONS HAS SECRET UNDERGROUND LABORATORIES IN ARIZONA, WHERE ECTOPLASMIC WEAPONS ARE BEING STOCKPILED. THE STATE IS RIDDLED WITH SECRET UNDERGROUND LABORATORIES, SO WHO CAN SAY?

-REDUCED IMAGE FROM STEPAN CHAPMAN'S LATEST COLLECTION OF ILLUSTRATIONS  
*COMMON ECTOIDS OF ARIZONA*

# Property of Pepsico

*Matt Pinkerton*

No one would help him,  
The poor beached whale  
Lying in the middle  
Of 16th Street Mall.  
Blasts of explosive diarrhea  
Issued from the man.  
One dude, PROPERTY OF CU,  
Hid his date's eyes with his hand.  
High-pitched laughter came from  
Brothers in Adidas gear.  
While two decrepit Burger Kings  
Backed away in fear.  
McDonald's was sucking on his thumb.  
I think he was in shock.  
Two girls sporting Bebe shirts  
Kept screaming for a cop.  
Virgin Megastore just gaped.  
She couldn't believe her eyes.  
Starbucks walked away quite fast.  
He looked pretty high.  
CD1, Rockies and Raiders  
And even John Elway  
Dropped in a faint as I stepped up.  
Yeah, me, St. John's Bay.  
I crouched down carefully and lifted  
Up the massive head  
That once might have been human  
And now looked fishy and dead.  
I could hardly stand the stench and  
Apparently neither could he.  
He wrenched his head from side-to-side  
Puking spontaneously.  
I could just make out  
Through the filth and the fat  
His Taco Bell sweats, KFC tee  
And his Pizza Hut cap.  
As the rest of the crowd was herded  
Into the nearest store past  
The grisly, grotesque corporate scene,  
The beached whale breathed his last.  
He looked me in the eye and spoke.  
I try not to think myself cursed.  
“Property of Pepsico,”  
He breathed and then he burst.

# wordmakers

**Anselm Brocki** » *Prolific poetic appearances in the small press. "Mornings at the All-Nite" published in 1996 by Alpha Beat Press. Currently runs his own editing business. Santa Monica, CA is home.*

**Alan Catlin** » *Barmaster in Schenectady, NY. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. "Killer Cocktails" is available from Four-Sep, as well as its fine successor "Hair of the Dog That Bit Me."*

**Stepan Chapman** » *Lives in Cottonwood, Arizona and his illustrations have appeared all over the small press. He also writes short fiction, appearing in The Baffler, Analog Science Fiction, and The Comics Journal.*

**Gary Every** » *Has graced these pages numerous times with words from his home in Oracle, Arizona.*

**Ed Galing** » *The famed Poet Laureate of Hatboro has appeared all over the small press with a dozen chaps under his belt, including "Tales of South Philly" from Four-Sep Publications.*

**Lewis A. Harvey** » *A member of the Dramatist's Guild in New York, he has produced his plays off-off Broadway.*

**Andy Henion** » *An award-winning reporter, now writing for the Lansing State Journal in Michigan, where he lives with his wife and two pugs.*

**Gerald Locklin** » *Long time, far-reaching presence, with an abundance of publishing credits. Teaches at CSU-Long Beach and has lectured on Hemingway in the land of cigars: Cuba. His books are available on popular bookstore websites.*

**Catfish McDaris** » *Influenced by Hendrix, van Gogh, and Jose Cuervo. Also seen in the pages of Prying from Four-Sep Publications.*

**Michael Newell** » *Currently residing in Egypt, he offers wry insight into various cultures he visits while teaching English.*

**Richard William Pearce** » *Lives in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, published often and active in his local scene.*

**Mateo Pietezi** » *Former publisher of a Kathmandu traveler's newspaper, an erstwhile monk in India and a shark cage enthusiast, he currently teaches English as a second language in Hawaii.*

**Matt Pinkerton** » *Resides in Glendale, Colorado, experimenting with many literary forms. Published in the Writers Journal and Whirligig.*

A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who have the balls to submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions. — Christopher M.

# killer reads

## Four-Sep Publications Chapbooks

**PRYING** - Prying is a special edition of First Class featuring the words of Jack Micheline, Charles Bukowski (unpubbed), and Catfish McDaris as well as images by Sinisa Dugonic (Belgrade), Jouni Vaarakangas (Finland), Carlos Serpas (Mexico), and Mike Tolento (USA). *Glossy cover/bamboo paper/28pp - \$5ppd*

### John Bennett

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE** - a sweet collection of John Bennett's finely honed style of 'shard writing': stripped away convention beating like a pulpy red heart. The very sharpest cutting edge of his talent, and a most eloquent assault on post-modern sensibilities. *Perfect bound/finest offset multi-color cover/72pp - \$9ppd*

### Alan Catlin

**KILLER COCKTAILS** - each piece in this collection of thirty is a portrayal of a character or event inspired by a particular cocktail. Persona and event become imbibables. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

### Alan Catlin

**HAIR OF THE DOG THAT BIT ME** - what you get the morning after indulging in Alan Catlin's earlier release, Killer Cocktails. Once again, plenty of deadly drink recipes that are indicative of the accompanying poetics. Another killer collection that belongs with the pleasure inducing prequel in everyone's bar (or bathroom). *High-end slick cover/linen paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

### Stepan Chapman - NEW!

**COMMON ECTOIDS OF ARIZONA** - a romp through the field drawings and notations of the eminent Stepan Chapman, Doctor of Etheric Zoology. A superb collection drawn from the freakish menagerie dancing in Chapman's skull. A truly awesome work of art. *Gloss cover/24# guts/44pp - \$5ppd*

### Christopher Cunningham

**SCREAMING IN SOME BEAUTY** - poetics from a strong new voice in the small press merging anger, urge and the quest for art into gritty clarity and words that will ring the psyche's call to contemplation. The book feels as good in the hand as it does in the head. *Deluxe linen cover/linen guts/36pp - \$6ppd*

### Ed Galing

**TALES OF SOUTH PHILLY** - chronicles the sights, sounds, smells and action on the streets and in the homes of a long-since-gone South Philly. Hard living turning out the best people, leaving behind a few and struggling in the crossroads of a city and growing up. *Offset slick cover/24# paper/28pp - \$5ppd*

### Albert Huffstickler

**IN THE CLEARING** - a wandering collection which merges into a fragmented cohesion. Disturbing and fearsome, yet the most brutal aspect of this journal of poetics is the impact of frank self-examination. Albert Huffstickler is one of the best, period. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

### Errol Miller

**THE DRIFTER TAKES ANOTHER LOOK** - pieces from the late 80s, Miller's mind ripe, the pen in his hand, once again, after an 8-year dormancy. This is the sweetest, most well preserved fruit plucked from the sealed cellar of the mind of Errol Miller, one of the more prolific writers on the scene today. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/50pp - \$6ppd*

### Michael Newell

**COLLISION COURSE** - draws from the years Newell spent in Uzbekistan in the late '90s. These 37 observations reveal the confusion, anticipation, dirt, and beauty of the land and people wedged in the deep seat of the Slavic/Asian crossroads of ex-USSR. Invigorating. You may reconsider your own situation and stance. *Matte cover/linen paper/46pp - \$6ppd*

### Michael Newell

**MILES OF HIGHWAYS AND OPEN ROADS** - features 42 poetic slices of the exotic loaf from which the well-travelled Newell nibbles. Never presumptuous and hyper observant, whether it's a glimpse of Jordan or Oregon, these poetics are tight and full of precise, earnest imagery from the perspective of full cultural immersion. *Matte cover/24# paper/50pp - \$6ppd*

### Robert Roden

**THE SCOPOPHILIAC** - the latest release from one of the Long Beach area's strongest voices. This collection stirs Lee Mallory to state that 'one could mount these poems, or like a greedy voyeur, just watch and listen'. Gerald Locklin observes that he 'blends the ineffable of the Symbolists and the cacophonies of Southern California rock into a music of his own'. *High-end slick cover/linen paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

### Wade Vonasek

**STARTING TO END IN THE MIDDLE** - pulls together 30 pieces of Vonasek's best poetics revealing somber introspection, consistent speculation, and often a glimmer of hope. Featuring artwork by Lori Dale. Vonasek was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *High-end slick cover/linen paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

### A.D. Winans

**PEOPLE, YOU THINK YOU KNOW?** - short fiction and poetics from one of the long-standing greats in the small press. This is Winans at his best with short fiction and gritty poetics. Get into Winans' head! Features fotos of San Fran folks, through the eyes of A.D. *Offset slick cover/linen paper/28pp - \$5ppd*

# cattle



# call

First Class is very open to submissions. Especially sought after are pieces of short fiction, but poetics are, of course, accepted as well. I am now also very interested in illustrations and some stark photography for both cover art and internal pages. I seek the very best words and images you have available for me to read. I don't pay myself, so I certainly won't pay you, but you will receive at least one copy, maybe more.

There are a few important things to make sure that you do when you submit your work. Please, please, make every attempt to print/type your copy as dark as possible. Also, for the computer users, please do **not** justify or force-justify your text. Left-justification is preferred by my scanner and deleting all those extra spaces created by justified text sucks. Name and address on the first page of each piece only. Send along a SASE when appropriate. Lastly.....drop me a letter with your submission, it sure beats the hell out of a chunk of submission text and a SASE dropping out on the table without at least a brief greeting.

I make it a point to take advantage of the technology I have available to keep track of everything that comes in and leaves First Class. You can expect timely responses and notifications. I know from experience that it is disturbing not to know the status of your words.

Speaking of technology » » » stay up to date at: [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)

[www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)

-Christopher M.

## need a chap?

Sickened by the rape of your wallet at the copyshop?

Feeling locked out of the publishing loop?



Tired of the unending **hassles** encountered while attempting to present your words with the utmost of aesthetic appeal?



I am overjoyed to announce that Four-Sep Publications is able to produce chaps-for-hire under the imprint "Lockout Press". There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design with the option for partial distribution through Four-Sep/First Class. The foremost concern in this venture is to communicate your work with the layout and design matching the scale of your message. Professional layout along with crisp laser output will be combined with experience, skill and text-crafting ability. After dropping too many paychecks at the copyshop, I want to share the ability I now have to reduce the costs associated with this wondrous obsession, and increase the quality of the finished product. Plus, I'll be able to read more of all of your fine words. Nothing is impossible to work out, and I assure you that you will reel in amazement.

Drop me a line and I will work up a quote based on the info you give me.

### Sample rates:

Quantity	Pages	Paper	Price	Each
50	32	Royal Linen	\$156.13	\$3.12
50	36	24# White	143.98	2.88
75	24	Royal Linen	166.28	2.22
100	32	24# White	183.50	1.84
100	36	Royal Linen	227.53	2.28

The Royal Linen refers to a paper that has a nice rugged texture, a dull yellow/ivory tone, and minimal show-through. 24# is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include a cover printed on gloss stock. These are samples and subject to change. Some special projects and various cover options may entail a greater commitment from both parties.

For additional information, a glossary of terms, sample cover art and more, please check out [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com) and click on the "Lockout Press" link.

[www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)  
**Check out [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)**

[www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)  
**for the latest information and details!**

# try these

A complete collection of all reviews can be found on the Web site at [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com).



## LIT-MAGS

**DRIVERS SIDE AIRBAG:** Comics, short fiction, poetics, killer illustrations and sometimes a dirty picture. Usually around 50pp, letter-half, loaded with edgy, biting, and intelligent, sometimes sardonic pieces. Issue 42 is \$3 and submissions should be sent to pobox 25760, Los Angeles, CA 90025.

**HEELTAP:** Mostly poetry, excellent production. This long-running mag is extremely selective and the poetics have the rhythm of a wicked blues jam. Send \$4ppd for a sample to 2054 Montreal Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55116.

**THE ICONOCLAST:** A mag loaded with intelligent, strongly crafted poetics, short fiction, art and reviews. Editor Phil Wagner manages to consistently cull killer material for his pages. A good long, thought-provoking read. Issue #68 out now for just \$3. Send submissions to: 1675 Amazon Road, Mohegan Lake, NY 10547.

**LUMMOX JOURNAL:** The ambitious Raindog carries out his mission every month, "examining the process of creating." Mostly a west coast hub for the west coast scene, the mag is always provocative and also the best place to keep up with who's dissin' who in the twisted side of the small press. Fearlessly self-promoting, always consistent. Try it, 12 issues/\$20 to: pobox 5301, San Pedro, CA 90733.

**NERVE COWBOY:** I always look forward to a great read when I find the latest Nerve Cowboy in my pobox. A sweet gathering spot for over 60 writers and artists. There is a good mix of style, but the bias is toward accessible work that depicts the absurd nature of human experience. Send poems, short stories (up to 5pp), and b&w art and/or \$4/sample to pobox 4973, Austin, TX 78765.

**THE SILT READER:** A crisp, clean quarter-page-sized collection of lean poetics that provide a quick, energetic and entertaining read. Elegantly and precisely produced by Robert Roden and Barton Saunders. Just \$2 to Temporary Vandalism (checks to Robert Roden), pobox 6184, Orange, California 82863.

**SPUNK:** Rather than envy, I'm in awe. There are a handful of gifted artists bounding through the small press that deserve our accolades. Joshua Bodwell, champion of the letterpress, comes to mind. Violet Jones' latest issue of Spunk (#7) is a durable, kraft-paper, silkscreened achievement of artistic endeavor. So much killer content, in such well-crafted clothing, drops the jaw. A zine gallery, letters section, political/ethical challenges and even (lest she not share) a guide to silkscreening. You're a fool to pass this by: pobox 55336, Hayward, CA 94545.

## CHAPS AND BOOKS

**THE REGULARS by Lori Jakiela:** "How lucky we are to be talentless, / the ones who will disappoint no one." The talent to turn an image, scene or idea into poetics that grip and shake roils through the pages of this First Prize winner of the Nerve Cowboy chapbook contest. Talentless was a mere taunt, rejected and denied by this collection. Quite a fantastic, well crafted chap, with a couple short-short fiction pieces at the end. *Carry On*, about a legless man aboard a flight who needs to use the toilet with dignity neither panders nor belittles, but shines a light on courage, calm and discovery without being sappy or poetic. The words (of which none are wasted or superfluous) rub the mind into thoughts about our own conditions and how we react to challenges. Great writing and the treat of Joshua Bodwell's silkscreening and letterpress on the cover demands \$5 to Liquid Paper Press, pobox 4973, Austin, TX 78765.

**SLIGHTLY USED POEMS by Ira Gustavson/Oyvind Molbach:** A whopping 135-page collection of work that was previously published in scattered collections throughout the small press, peppered with drawings, some of which are hand-colored. Religion, romance and meandering thoughts course through the pages. The work is best digested in large doses, taking in a series of poetics as a larger work. The chap is loaded with thoughtful short-shorts, brief quips and humor. Send \$10 to Painted Press, 1411 Divisadero #2, San Francisco, CA 94115.

**ART & LIFE by Gerald Locklin / FOUR JAZZ WOMEN by Locklin with SHOOTING THE BREEZE by Mark Weber:** *Art & Life* is a brief collection of Locklin's astute observations of art: paintings and life-style. Unpretentious as always, the pieces are engrossing in that they connect art, modern circumstance and Locklin's years of experience and perceptive analysis. Cool and mellow, relaxing and thought provoking. Much like *Four Jazz Women*, which captures the vital essence of four distinct jazz voices and performers. Coupled with Weber's *Shooting the Breeze*, a rambling, humorous, rolling and opinionated digression of sorts, it makes for a well spent half-hour. *Art & Life* is \$5 to Pariah Press, 604 Hawthorne Ave. East, St. Paul, Minnesota 55101 and the double chap is available from Zerx Press, 725 Van Buren Place SE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87108.

"TRY THESE" HAS BECOME MY FORUM FOR PROMOTION OF THE WORKS OF WRITERS AND PUBLISHERS WHOM I, FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER, HAPPEN TO APPRECIATE OR ADMIRE. I CANNOT PROMISE THAT EVERY CHAP OR BOOK OR MAGAZINE SENT MY WAY WILL BE MENTIONED HERE, BUT YOU CAN BE DAMN SURE THAT THOSE THAT ARE HAVE PLEASED MY EYES AND BRAIN. TAKE A SHOT AND SEND YOUR BEST CREATIONS MY WAY. THEY ARE IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER.

*A complete collection of all reviews can be found on the Web site at [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com).*