

First Class

CLASS OF 19



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BOILARD » BRANDEL » CATLIN
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FOWLER » GRICE » HAMMOND
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ISSUE
NINETEEN

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First Class #19 is dedicated to the life and words of Albert Huffstickler, a friend of First Class through his submissions and chapbook "In the Clearing," and a friend of mine through letters and correspondence ranging over 6 years. A man of no pretension and one of the very best. Period.

The response to the format change last issue was favorable enough to continue the "back-pocket reader" style. There are a few more stylistic tweaks this time around. But, most importantly, First Class #19 is another killer collection of the very best words that flow into my pobox. So, enjoy the read.

- Christopher M.

Albert Huffstickler

In Memoriam

Consider the words of author John Bennett, founder of *Vagabond Press*, taken from the 1998 essay “Great Poets Do Not Do Great Things.”

Albert Huffstickler is like a character in an Edward Hopper all-night diner, suddenly coming alive, finishing off his coffee and slapping a quarter down on the counter (in a Hopper painting, coffee never costs more than a quarter), swiveling off his chrome stool and walking out the diner door, lighting a cigarette, blowing a jet of smoke into a wide sweep of New Mexico sky and then drifting off on a current of reverie and dream. Huffstickler’s language is balm to the downtrodden. His quiet insights reconstruct shattered lives. He is a man whose dreams and aspirations never quite gelled, a man who has learned the art of spinning isolation into solitude, a man who much of his life rode a horse with no name thru dark canyons of mental anguish and physical pain and came out the far side cloaked not in bitterness but in muted compassion. He is a healer who, without Smiley Faces or Pollyanna mumble-jumble, restores hope. He’s traveled the high road between life and death, and over coffee in either Burger King, the Cactus Cafe or Austin’s Ruta Maya Coffee House, he smiles at the waitress, taps the ash off his cigarette, and quietly informs us that death’s no big deal, it’s sort of like returning home after a long absence. He reduces death to plausibility without removing it from the realm of magic.

Consider Huff’s last poem, written in a hospital bed:

Tired of being loved,
tired of being left alone,
tired of being loved,
tired of being left alone.
Gonna find myself a new place
where all I feel is at home.

Now, consider *Maverick*, submitted to *First Class* in July, 1999 and probably printed elsewhere as well:

Maverick

Maverick - n. (After Samuel Maverick, 19th c. Texas rancher who did not brand his cattle) 1. An unbranded animal, especially a lost calf, formerly the legitimate property of the first person who branded it; hence 2. (colloq) a person not labeled as belonging to any one party, faction, etc., who acts independently.

-Webster’s New World Dictionary, 1960.

I love that word. It’s a spacious word, a tolerant word, a human word. There’s a final beatitude, lost somewhere in history, that says, “Blessed are the mavericks for they shall come home.” But, Webster’s notwithstanding, there’s a further meaning to the word, perhaps never clearly stated but nevertheless implicit. The maverick is one who doesn’t fit in but is nevertheless

of value. And it is this meaning that gives vitality, scope and direction to the word. It is this meaning that makes the word a badge to be worn with pride.

The word maverick is an all-inclusive term that embraces the loner, the nonconformist, the artist and the renegade. It includes the bank clerk who builds violins in his basement at night, the moonshiner who runs for state legislature, the country girl who won't work in the fields but sings at every gathering till she finally becomes known. And it goes on to include those who accomplish little or nothing: the wanderer on his way from nowhere to nowhere with all his worldly goods on his back, the kid who sits on the sidewalk, his back against a building, staring into nowhere. And it refuses to shun or in any way impugn, the shiftless, the crazy, the incompetent.

It is a Christian term in the very deepest sense of the word because it turns no one away for lack of merit and it is a creative term because it allows a person to be where he is regardless of social biases and hence gives him a point from which to start to develop his potential without compromising that identity that is uniquely his own.

It's an expansive word, as wide and deep as a west Texas sky at sunset, a word designed to continue expanding as people continue to alter the ways in which they manifest their variety and eccentricity. It's a democratic word. It refuses to leave anyone out, refuses to deny anyone the right to his basic uniqueness.

And further, it's a Texas word but because, by it's very nature, it cannot be contained, it becomes Texas' gift to the universe – a term designed to include and contain the unincludeable and the uncontainable and bring them home, make them a part of things without ever infringing on their basic identity.

Lastly, it's a compassionate word, a forgiving word, a word I'd be honored to have on my tombstone. Let my epitaph read, "Peace to his bones. The maverick has come home."

A couple poems:

Fifteen Minutes of Fame

Caught in the glare
stunned by light
Loneliness isn't grey
It's bright
bright.

She walks along
talking to her
cellular phone
while the guy
who talks to the air
is called crazy.

Interpretations

She told me
death was a
butterfly--
black wings
spotted black.

I told her
death was a
playground at evening
after the children
were gone.

**This is one of my favorite pieces,
reprinted from First Class #7:**

What Ever Happened to Kitchens?

*"I haven't seen any of those people in years.
Everybody I know has drifted away."
-Old Plantation Restaurant habitue*

*"So be their place of one estate
With ashes echoes and old wars--
Or ever we be of the night
Or we be lost among the stars."
-Calverlys, by Edwin Arlington Robinson*

Places people come to in the evening after work
to eat and drink coffee, then wander back later
with the dark coming in and the loneliness on them.
Day in and day out, that little core of regulars
meeting in clusters, each cluster aware of the others,
nodding to each other. And the waitress of many years
knowing just what to bring when someone sits down.
Weary with the day, they come, ready to mingle hopes
and needs, voices tinged with boredom, a furtiveness
about them,
the furtiveness of one who has no place else to go.

"What ever happened to Kitchens?"

They find their places and they stay, year after year,
a new face appearing from time to time, an old one vanishing,
the loss absorbed slowly after endless discussion of
the manner of his going, his new estate;
the light in the room a quality of their lives, a condition
more familiar than the rooms to which they return
to fall exhausted across the rumpled bed and sleep
till morning draws a damp and cheerless hand across the
drugged face.

"What ever happened to Kitchens? Where did he go?"

The one who left unannounced, the one who broke
all the rules
and vanished without a word--
the brawler, the bruiser, the banger against lives,
who fought and cursed and spoke his mind and embarrassed
them
to a man,
who was ugly and graceless and knew all their flaws

and flung them in their faces and laughed at them
and was dragged out more than once drunk,
cursing the world and the cops and all of them individually
and returned unrepentant to their subdued midst
to continue as though he'd never left, haranguing,
mocking them—
And then vanished one night with a wave and a curse
to return no more,
black jacket flapping, bald head shining, beak-like nose
plowing through the darkness like a ship at sea, big Harley roar-
ing.

“So long, Motherfuckers!”

The shadows of the room converge, the talk goes on.
The shadows listen and do not comment. The waitress
moves from table to table, filling salts and peppers, wiping
catsup lids.

Voices sound from the parking lot, shrill and despairing.
Lights flash against the window then vanish to the engine's roar.
They huddle closer in the close, still room.
The night grows. They are dreams without a dreamer.

“What ever happened to Kitchens?”

They slouch in their places, humble before his absence.
“He shouldn't have gone away like that. He should have said _____
something!”

Lonely and dissatisfied, they talk desultorily, watching the clock.
“Somebody oughta call the shop and ask.”

“Maybe he's there and don't want to be bothered.”

“Maybe he's—” the word never comes out.

They crouch over their coffee cups; the shadows draw closer.
His absence as bulky and menacing as his presence – but less
acceptable.

The waitress refills their cups automatically, her
boredom a texture
of the space

like the shadows in the corner and the night that swirls in
with each opening of the door.

“Hell, he could write! He could send us a postcard here.

They'd get
it to us!”

They sit on, later than usual. The talk turns to other things
but no

one is fooled;
they're waiting.

They think of seasons past: Kitchens stomping in in the cold,
jacket zipped tight, gauntlet gloves encasing his forearms,
cursing the cold in his high, venomous voice;
or shirtsleeved and sweaty summers, bald head glistening, curs-
ing the heat.

Now nothing.

The silence descends like a shroud. They smoke and wait,
gathering their courage, not meeting each other's eyes.

Finally, one stands, glancing furtively at the door.

“You leaving?”

He almost sits down again, then straightens, nods.

“Yeh, I gotta get an early start in the morning.”

Another shifts uncomfortably, settles back, then rises slowly.

“Me too,” he mumbles.

One by one, the others rise, stand hesitating,
then slowly, one by one, move down the aisle and out the door
to stand there in the night.

“I guess he's gone,” one says.

“Yeh, he's gone.”

“Gone without a word.”

One by one, they move off down the street, heads bent,
a dread on them – of the night, of the silence,
of the musky rooms with their rumped beds and the darkness.
One stops and stares upward, mouth agape.
“What happened to him?”

A car screams around the corner, then vanishes in a
spray of light.

He stands a moment longer, then trudges on,
homeward beneath the clear, unanswering stars.

-October 14, 1982

**And lastly, an image from one of
Huff’s sketchbooks, originally in
burnt orange, brown and
black hues:**



Café du Monde

David Apostolico

The first thing you noticed was the tall, slender dark-skinned man who could have been any one of a few of the different ethnic heritages that went generations back in New Orleans. Or he could have been a new arrival to the city. It was impossible to ascertain because you could not rely on his dialect since he was not speaking. He was stationed along Decatur Street across from Jackson Square just outside the café, wearing an Uncle Sam outfit and stilts that only exaggerated his height. He would take turns mimicking the passing tourists, then posing completely still like a mannequin. It was hard to tell if he was working for tips or if he was employed by the café.

The next thing you noticed was the waiter in the middle of the café. He was seated in a chair tilted back against a pillar with his eyes closed. He was apparently sleeping. The patrons wondered how he could sleep in the middle of such activity. They also wondered why the other members of the wait staff, who were working at a furious pace, didn't break his neck. At one point, one of the waitresses passing by balancing a loaded tray kicked him in the leg and yelled for him to get to work. He opened his eyes for a second and then resumed his previous position, trying hard to ignore the surrounding noise. He was stuck in that precarious zone where if full consciousness was achieved, there would be no going back. It was not that he was tired. He had gotten a good night's rest. Rather, it was out of another necessity that he ached for sleep.

Café du Monde was the epicenter of New Orleans tourism on a summer Sunday morning in the French Quarter. It was going to be a hot and humid day but not as hot and humid as New Orleans typically is in July. And, it being only nine in the morning, it was still comfortable. The café was crowded with tourists, most of them drinking café au lait and eating beignets, since the café hadn't served much of anything else for close to a century. Still, most of the tourists were told that while in New Orleans they had to try the beignets which were nothing more than puffs of fried dough rolled in confectioners' sugar that were served hot and came three to an order. And Café du Monde was the place to try them.

Café du Monde was in a pleasant location on Decatur Street across from the gardens of Jackson Square and up against the Mississippi River. At this time of day, which most visitors never see, a golden morning light shone on the buildings facing Jackson Square, casting a hue on the French Quarter that stood in stark contrast to the neon of the nighttime.

Inside the café, there was the young couple that arrived the night before from Baltimore. They were to have arrived mid-day, but after experiencing a

cancelled flight and several additional delays, they didn't arrive in New Orleans until after 10 p.m. Shortly after their arrival, they learned that her luggage had not made the trip. Then, to make matters worse, when they arrived at their hotel, they were informed that it was overbooked and there were no rooms available. Yesterday had been the second anniversary of their first date together and he had planned on proposing. The delays had spoiled everything, but now he was hoping to propose today. He knew exactly how he wanted to do it.

Even though he was a practicing accountant, he harbored a not so secret ambition to be a writer. They had both just finished reading *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole, which had prompted this trip to New Orleans.

He thought it would be romantic, and in line with his literary ambitions, to propose next to the statue of Ignatius Rielly outside of what used to be the old Holmes department store and was now a Sonesta Hotel. He still wasn't sure about the timing, however. While his girlfriend seemed to be in good spirits despite wearing the same clothes as the day before, things were not going according to plan. He also suspected that she sensed he was up to something. While he had hoped to take her completely by surprise, now his only wish was that she would say yes and that all of their travails on the trip thus far would add to the romance of the story when they recounted it years from now.

There was the stocky red-haired woman from outside of Chicago traveling with her husband and two teenage sons. They had just come from a gift shop down the street where she had purchased a half dozen refrigerator magnets with what she thought were great depictions of old New Orleans. The magnets were caricatures with some of the worst clichés of dialect imaginable. This was the third day out of four that they would spend in New Orleans. She had been having a wonderful time sightseeing, shopping and eating a variety of Cajun and Creole food, so long as it was fried. Her two teenage sons, ages 16 and 14, had been spending most of their time hatching plans to get away from their parents so they could peer into the open doorways of the strip clubs located throughout the French Quarter until the bouncers made them move on. Her husband enjoyed the restaurants but shied away from the shopping. Yesterday afternoon he had begged off in the middle of one of their shopping excursions saying he wanted to go off on his own to buy her

THERE'S SOMETHING
ABOUT A NIGHT OF
HEAVY DRINKING THAT
MAKES THE BODY
CRAVE
CAFFEINE AND FAT.

a gift. Instead, he had spent an hour and a half inside a sports bar before buying a jar of local pepper sauce in the lobby of their hotel. Now, he was working on his excuse for this afternoon as they were all heading into Café du Monde.

The red-haired woman stopped to admire the dark-skinned man dressed in the Uncle Sam outfit posing completely still and bent at a perfect right angle from his waist. She thought he was there purely for her amusement so she tried to get him to flinch even going so far as to try pouring her soda on top of his head. When he finally broke out of his pose and chased her away, she thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

The four olive-skinned college boys from New Jersey found the chicory-laced coffee and fried beignets of Café du Monde to be the perfect hangover food. There's something about a night of heavy drinking that makes the body crave caffeine and fat. They had spent the previous night, their first in New Orleans, on a drunken mission to give away as many beaded necklaces as there were women willing to flash them their breasts. While they didn't give away nearly as many beads as they would have liked, they did cross paths with a group of sorority girls from Georgia. While these girls were largely uninterested in the boys from Jersey, a couple of them did agree to meet them at nine this morning here at the café. As they sat there on the lookout, they continued the previous night's debate as to which two would stay and which two would get lost assuming the girls showed up.

The husband of the red-haired woman from Chicago started complaining that the bright sunlight and humidity was giving him a headache, which was not entirely untrue. What he was hoping to do, however, was lay the groundwork for later on when he would have to excuse himself from that day's shopping excursion in order to get some rest back at their hotel which was conveniently located near the newly opened casino. Meanwhile, the two sons were conspiring on their own excuse. They were tentatively in agreement that they would say they wanted to buy their mother a gift. What it lacked in originality, they hoped to make up for with sincerity.

Out front, two of the girls from Georgia, wearing white cotton shorts and blouses with harsh suntans, were admiring the remarkable dexterity of the man in the Uncle Sam outfit who had ditched the stilts and was now posed motionless in a running position on the balls of one foot. The sight of Uncle Sam provided an amusing respite from the uncertainty they felt about agreeing to meet the boys from New Jersey for a morning spent exploring the historic open-air French Market located a few blocks away. At least there were four of them so they could keep each other company. One of the girls searched her purse for a dollar bill to leave at the adorable Uncle Sam's feet before heading

into the café.

Back inside, the sleeping waiter distracted the man contemplating an engagement proposal. The man was fascinated by, and jealous of, the waiter's ability to sleep in the middle of all this hubbub with such an apparent disregard to the fact that he should be working. He desperately wanted to know the waiter's background. Who was this man? Where was he from? What was he dreaming of? He knew there was a story there, but he wasn't quite sure what it was.

His girlfriend knew exactly what was on his mind. It was so cute how nervous he was about proposing. She had known of his intentions ever since that day last month when she had accidentally played his answering machine while he was in the shower and had heard a message from the jeweler that 'the ring was ready.' She knew she would say yes but she had not yet completed the rationalization stage that would allow her to feel she was doing the right thing.

The waiter, who had never stepped foot outside of Louisiana, was thinking of his brother's taxicab. Lately, he had become more successful at convincing his brother to let him drive the cab on his brother's off nights. He found the job a welcome break from the café. Once, he even drove a passenger as far as Baton Rouge. And if hadn't been his brother's cab, he would have continued west on Route 10 all the way into Texas.

Outside, Uncle Sam began to move his arms and legs ever so slightly in what was the very beginning stage of that part of his routine where he would run in place oh so slowly. And, then, he would gradually increase his speed over an extended period of time until he was finally running at a feverish pace, yet still not moving forward at all. The red-haired woman from Chicago ignored him this time as she marched her family out of the café and towards the open-air French Market in search of more souvenirs.

The man from Baltimore sat admiring his girlfriend thinking how he had never been so sure of anything in his life. It didn't matter how he proposed or if she suspected and so what if they had lost her luggage. It only mattered that they would spend the rest of their life together.

The waiter was momentarily awoken when one of the college boys knocked over a coffee cup in his haste to get out of his chair and greet the women from Georgia. The waiter looked around for the offending culprit and then closed his eyes hoping to get back to sleep and dreams of people and places far, far away.

View of the flaccid bathers,
view of Marty's Clam Shack
and the ocean's hydraulic wreckage,
of that phosphorescent teeming smashing itself
against the shore and what doesn't
long to smash itself against some shore,
the flayed human heart
and its interminable pulsing,
the sky carrying on
with its riotous masks of doom.
Who knew it would come to this,
wandering the gridlocked parking lot between bliss
and despair, overcooking the rice,
hoping for a tax break or a decent
deal on tires while above us
the timorous gods intone "Add more soy sauce."
"A little to the left."
A million years ago,
this winch was a hunk of shale.
A million years ago, we were in love,
wandering a strip of beach beneath
the badly-choreographed clouds.
We were given the gift of vastness
but the vastness is impossible.
What I've learned here mainly
is that anything can be eaten.
The ruin of our breath.
This gyroscopic sky.
These nodules at my shoulder
where the flippers used to be.

Out the Back Window I See A Dog

Ronald Baatz

walk across the bridge with an overcoat on.
at first i am a bit shocked but then i figure
i shouldn't be since it is extremely cold out.
and this dog seems to be so deliberate
in its walk. i swear it looks as though
it is on its way somewhere, on some
mission or involved in some chore that
has to be done, or maybe it is on its way
to work, to a job, usually i don't see
people walking with such deliberation
across that bridge, after all, this is
a quiet little nowhere mountain town
and not much goes on here.
actually, i don't know what
i find to be more curious: the fact
that the dog has an overcoat on or
the fact that it walks the way it does.
i guess in the end it's a combination
of both that attracts my attention.
i almost feel like throwing my own
coat on and following this dog to
see where exactly it is rushing off to.
it could be that it truly is on its way
to a job, perhaps it is a watchdog
at one of the wealthier big homes.
more than likely that is the case.
so, that dog lives in town here
and every day it goes back and
forth to its job at a big home?
how did this ever escape me before?
yes, the lucky stiff. it probably
works in very nice surroundings
and gets paid well too
for doing next to nothing,
but i shouldn't be jealous, a dog
has to live too. i just wish
it didn't walk with such deliberation.
it makes me feel guilty, standing
here in underpants at the back
window of my dump, eating
a peanut butter sandwich on
the worst kind of white bread.

My father showed me the cows across the street behind a fence that was electric. He showed me the apple tree with an old tire for a swing and the garden around back where he planted pumpkins and sunflowers and corn. A creek ran crooked through the far end of his property and we piled our shoes and socks by a buttonball stump and rolled our pant legs up. The water was slow and cool in whirlpools around my kneecaps. He savored a single Marlboro cigarette and blew smoke rings that came out his mouth like unbroken halos.

He showed me the horses and we rode them into Shelburne Falls. He told me stories about English settlers fighting local Indians and the French from Canada. He showed me the room that was mine and said, "use the fan if you want."

Then a policeman called Kellogg arrived with his coiffure wet and black and said, "come with me boy."

I was sleeping because it was nighttime. He shook me by the shoulder until I woke up.

I said, "what?" and he said it again.

I was not surprised that he knew my name. The window was open and the cows across the street were being milked by a big machine that hummed.

He said, "come on boy."

He brought another one called LaPinta who was downstairs talking to my father who had his shirt off and kept saying "this is bullshit."

I put everything into a pillowcase. Grinning through heavy hands, Kellogg watched me and chewed on the end of his round thumb.

We went downstairs and LaPinta held onto my father across his furry red chest who was saying a lot of things but mostly, "this is bullshit. Crazy bullshit."

There were ten empty and tall Budweiser beer cans on the kitchen table. A black plastic ashtray was upside down and oozing sooty entrails all around. The rotary telephone was in pieces on the floor. There was a foldout chair flipped on its side. My father told me over LaPinta's shoulder not to worry. He had scarlet rings around his eyes. His sullen face was melting wax. His hair was mussed and erupted from his skull in the shape of two indeterminate ivory horns. He told me that he'd make everything all right.

He said, "not like before." He said, "be like the Williams boy in the story I told you about."

She was sitting in the backseat of the policemen's shiny Chevrolet and she pulled me by the wrist until it hurt and she said "he is a sonofabitch," she said, "a no good sonofabitch."

Kellogg jammed a key into the steering column and started the engine and talked into the radio. The back of his collar was darker from pomade. His partner LaPinta was in the headlights with my father who still had his shirt off and was talking and pointing at us and making a fist. LaPinta was writing things on a pad of yellow paper and moving his head up and down. Kellogg looked at us in the rearview and then away fast like we had just caught him spying.

My mother made false and terrible accusations to the folds in his neck and her lap smelled like a strong pot of coffee.

We backed out of the dirt driveway and my father got smaller and smaller. Stones crunching beneath us could have been myriad insignificant hearts breaking. The smooth blacktop of Settright Road was a welcome change and the radials chirped with the shifting gears. Then some other life went by in dark fields of alfalfa and cabbage and bell peppers down Route 116 and across 5 & 10. Kellogg stopped in front of the tall white building designated town hall. They parked and walked us to the brown Ford Pinto she got from Bill Pelham in Springfield who put his hand on her knee when there was trouble. Kellogg said, "take care now," and she said, "you lousy bastards should throw away the key," and Kellogg said, "please lady." Then he looked at me and winked.

LaPinta mumbled something under his breath and shook his head like a bobble doll. They waited until we pulled away from the common. The fountain was gurgling and I wished for a penny. Our muffler rattled. She said out the window that it was kidnapping and he could not get away with it.

She said, "over my dead body," she said, "who in hell does he think he is?"

A shooting star scurried across the sky like a waterbug. The moon was a perfect circle above Sugarloaf Mountain, bluely illuminating the Connecticut River and the rest of that far corner of Franklin County. Then I told her about my father's horses. I told her he kept them in a barn that was red and white and leaned to one side. Despite a light summer fog they had worked up a sweat that was foamy. So we hung their Western saddles in the tack room and I calmed them with a whipsaw comb and they ate grain and carrots from my hand. I told her they had warm breath

HE SAID,
"NOT LIKE BEFORE."
HE SAID, "BE LIKE
THE WILLIAMS BOY
IN THE
STORY I TOLD YOU
ABOUT."

and fat tongues. And they drank from a man-made pond that had catfish and bull frogs and would ice over come winter. And their playful eyes were so wide I thought I might fall in.

I told her that hundreds of winters ago Abenaki Indians attacked a settlement in Deerfield. They left their sleds and dogs near the foot of Wantastiquet Mountain and forged on, shod with moccasins and snowshoes.

Smearred with war paint, they climbed wooden palisades and fought with tomahawks and French muskets. My father said when the wind is just right you can still hear their bloodcurdling death whoops echo in the trees of the valley. They captured a boy and took him up north through the Green Mountains to Lake Champlain where he lived among them for a year. He survived cold, hunger, exhaustion and despair. And eventually he was rescued by a search party and returned home to safety. My father said that it was just a matter of time.

My mother slapped me hard with her open hand while steering with the other.

She wanted to know what the hell kind of a thing that was to say. She said that I was a no good sonofabitch too. She said, "after all this," she said, "after all I just went through."

When we got to our apartment over the Bloody Brook Bar she stood me up and walked me in because I was getting too big for her to carry. She said I was growing like a weed. She said, "get some rest little man. You had a long day. Everything is all right now. Don't worry, that will never happen again."

She said, "I will never let them take you away."

Then the jukebox music from downstairs drowned her out and I went to sleep again, closing my eyes tighter to salvage a piece of the day in a dream.



BLAM by *stepan chapman*

Journey to Hopeful

Christine Brandel

First stop:

The church. The doors are locked.

Second stop:

My grandmother's. Simultaneously she is baking rye bread, darning a sock, translating a book from Russian to English, pruning a rose bush, organizing a photo album and burying my grandfather. I get back on the road.

Third stop:

A bathroom. Everything comes out okay.

Fourth stop:

A university. Students are rioting because the school has a library. I am hit with a shoe.

Fifth stop:

A hospital. I wait for three and a quarter hours. I eat a moon pie. I read a hospital bulletin with articles on patient satisfaction and urinary incontinence.

Sixth stop:

A bathroom. Thumb's up.

Seventh stop:

The post office. I send myself express mail, no insurance.

Eighth stop:

Paris. I've always wanted to see Paris. I see Paris.

Ninth stop:

A cemetery. A headstone with yesterday's date. One headstone for twins. A headstone for my grandfather. An open grave.

Last stop:

The cemetery's bathroom.
When you've got to go, you've got to go.

Crime and Punishment

Alan Catlin

I hate the Russians.

The whole stinking lot of humorless, moralizing, obsessive compulsive lot of them.

That doesn't mean I haven't read them.

As many as I can stand anyway.

Like *Crime and Punishment*.

Guilt, poverty, misunderstanding, axe murders, just like everyday life now.

It was inspired to choose John Hurt to play Raskolnikov in the PBS made for television dramatization.

That man looked depressed when he was born, a fully formed neurasthenic.

Bags like that man has under his eyes don't appear overnight, you have to earn them and, man, has he ever been doing something wicked bad overtime to get bags like those.

He probably could have played the Elephant Man without the makeup and been convincing but, just to make sure, film director Lynch had him sit through hours of makeup everyday, when he made that movie of a freak's life.

My life would be a lot simpler to tell on film but you would need someone much better looking and more well spoken than Hurt to play me.

Yeah, right.

Probably Hurt's most memorable role, for me anyway, was the first one I recall seeing him in; as Caligula, in that riveting, multi-part serialization of R. Graves's novel, *I Claudius*.

When Caligula suggests that there will be a horse in the senate, ritual murders and suicides, orgies among consenting adults, in the immediate family, you believe.

I know I did.

I would have been among the many to join in and pull a Brutus on Caligula, as a member of the praetorian guard that installed Derek Jacobi as the next emperor too, but that conjuror's up a completely different set of memories and associations.

Seeing Hurt sweating bullets and blood, as a guilt ridden, striving to better himself student, starving to death, and, killing his repulsive landlady, a woman who deserved to be shot everyday of her life like a character in a Flannery O'Connor story, more or less without real premeditation, and, then, becoming obsessively guilty, almost begging to be punished made real sense to me.

I'd been there and done that.

Metaphorically, of course.

Only the starving, and the resentful part was true.

Maybe the latter part of the equation, begging to be caught also, as well, though I didn't know that when I sat down and wrote the story that would be the bane of my life.

But that was later also.

In the meantime, I was making a meager living pushing beers across a counter and listening to the one-line life stories of a bar full of losers, stretching that one line into epic histories, full of sword and sorcery, fantasy and science fiction.

It didn't take long for me to develop an expression that could be described as, "Obviously you have mistaken me for someone who gives a shit," if anyone had been paying attention to anything I did besides keeping the shots and beers coming, and making, more or less, accurate change.

If someone was paying attention it was news to me.

I wasn't the most fascinating person alive, no matter what I said and thought of myself, as more than one potential companion had pointed out.

Mostly, I was indulging my own rich fantasy life, occasionally writing down snippets of dialogue and the occasional idea and fleshing it out on cocktail napkins I wouldn't be able to read when I stumbled into my crib and turned on the lights half a lifetime later in the day.

Sometimes I interacted with whoever turned up in the bar though usually, they wished I hadn't bothered.

Young Guinness Jim, some half-assed, born in this country, Irish quality control dude, guzzling our finest pint, probably fell into that category.

I say probably because you can never be sure if the dim light actually glows in the brain of the test subject for one of my esoteric routines indicating that they Got It, no matter how belatedly.

Sometimes the dawning happens right in front of you and it's a lively afternoon of insults and other forms of bitter repartee.

More often than not, nothing happens, though on the rare return visits, you can see the subjects looking at you from the corner of their eyes as if they expect you to sneak up behind them with a blunt object, wield the cudgel with vicious intent and quietly remove their personal belongings at your leisure.

That's definitely not my style but, of course, they don't know that.

It's half the fun of the game; the knowing and the not knowing.

So I said to Guinness Jim, out of the blue, "Raskolnikovs, aren't they the weapon of choice for the IRA?"

And, he not wishing to appear uninformed, thought quickly, said, "I'm not sure. It sounds right though. Russian-mades?"

"Raskolnikovs are definitely Russian-made."

"Then, they must be the ones."

I sure as shit wouldn't want him to be on my weapons inspection or, more importantly, sub rosa weapons purchasing team.

I almost wondered out loud, what he thought of Kalishnikov the killer but that would be pushing the envelope and the punning business just a wee bit too far and could, potentially, spoil all the fun.

For me, anyway.

Having established Guinness J was not a comparative lit major or particularly astute, I could become a victim of some latent brain cells not coated with stout screaming out for recognition.

Kalishnikovs are the weapons, dude, who the fuck knows what Raskolnikovs are! Who indeed?

It has been my experience that people who have been jerked around for no apparent reason are the most violent ones and who needs them?

I certainly didn't.

"RASKOLNIKOVS,
AREN'T THEY THE
WEAPON OF CHOICE
FOR THE IRA?"

That's why I applied myself to filling several napkins and the backs of more than a couple of guest checks with ideas, sentences and, eventually an outline, for a satiric story centering around an axe murder with deeply confused notions of religion, conversion, appropriate dress, sexual contact and bloody

murder at loose in an urban park area highly identifiable with one in downtown Manhattan.

My mistake was not so much in writing the story but in sending it to a once well-known small, esoteric fiction journal in New York.

The editor, I was to learn later, incidentally, was in the midst of a painful affair that would lead to a bitter divorce and the dissolution of everything she held near and dear to her, including the magazine.

I'm not sure if it was in a fit of pique or whimsy, but she penciled in between the address lines of the journal, the address for One Police Plaza and forwarded it on to them, without (I like to think, anyway) considering potential consequences to the addressee.

Whoever eventually got to review the story at One

Police Plaza had not majored in any of the Arts, much as Guinness Jim hadn't.

He didn't see the grotesque humor or the clearly, satiric, parody that is the nature of the story, instead, like a clear thinking detective logician, he chose to see the story literally and forwarded it to the local police department upstate for further investigation.

Imagine my surprise when the phone call came from local Detective Sergeant Hughes asking for an interview about a certain, unspecified matter.

I tried to recall anything potentially felonious I had done recently or even not so recently and came up short.

Evil, downright nasty things I had done, no question about that.

Recently, even.

But none of them should have attracted the attention of a plain-clothes cop.

No doubt about it, this interview would become the strangest oral exam of my life.

Once he produced the story and showed it to me, I was so relieved I began babbling nonsensically about all kinds of bizarre shit, ranging from prejudices against Russians, Fyodor D., bad complicated literary puns and God knows what else until I noticed Sergeant Hughes was actually taking notes.

Forget satire, just try and explain parody to a grim faced cop with better things to do in a windowless office on the second floor of the you-might-not-be-leaving-here-if-you-don't-shut-up-soon, police station.

Go ahead, I dare you.

I must have been relatively convincing.

After about a half an hour, he made a big show of copying all the pages of my story and filing it for future reference in case a rash of axe murders in our own Central Park were uncovered.

And handed me back the original.

It would have been hilarious, a bitch of a payback for my evil ways if he hadn't filed the story.

My mother always said I would get in trouble if I kept up with this writing nonsense.

That would be neither here nor there, though there appeared to be a certain element of truth in what she had said, this time.

All I knew for certain, was that I better not let me hair grown unreasonably long, carve a swastika on my forehead or take an unnatural interest in the logging industry anytime in the near future.

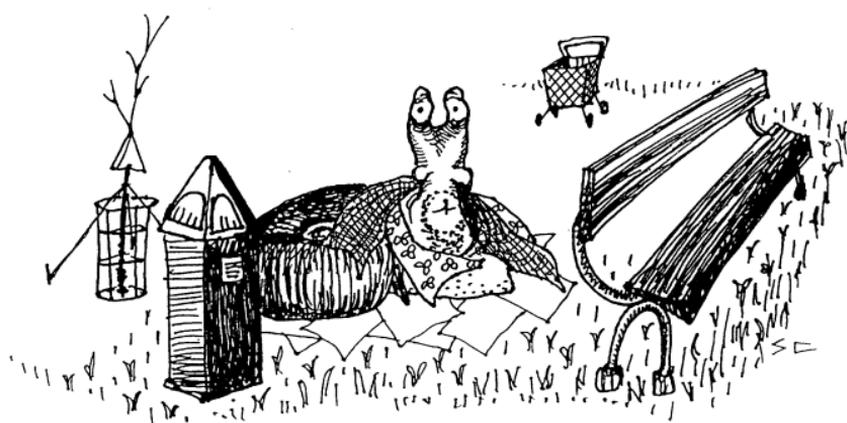
That and my hatred for the Russians was totally justifiable.

John Hurt was another matter altogether.

We'd both been through a whole hell of a lot of life and death on Long Island and neither of us had emerged the better man for it.

That was a sordid tale best worked out in the privacy of one's journal, with a bottle of unblended Scotch and some excellent weed than in something, like a short story that might actually get read.

You never know who might get the wrong idea about what I have to say.



SNAIL by *stepan chapman*

Problems

Christopher Cunningham

the real
problem in
this country
isn't one
of
race

but of

class.

I work
with all
races
in a
hot
fucking
kitchen
six nights a
week.

that sweat
rolling down
all of our
faces
is
clear
and drips into
the puddles of
grease at our feet.

we all slip in it
sometimes,

us
working
class
folk.

we need to see that
the real color
of
racism
is
green

or whatever color
the absence of
green
leaves behind.

The Data Beggar

Michael Fowler

“Excuse me, sir,” I’m on a street corner downtown, accosting a man attired for business as he hurries along at noontime. “Do you know the French expression for ‘undercooked sole’?”

It isn’t a lot to ask, I figure, even of a harried attorney or accountant, and I have high hopes of a response, even a wrong one. “Sorry” is the brush-off I get, almost as if I don’t exist. There’s a way of saying no to a beggar that doesn’t demean or show anger. This guy doesn’t know it or doesn’t care. One of thousands like that, I might add.

Perhaps no one will answer that one today. Two ladies are coming by now, still licking the grease from lunch off their lips. I mosey up to them in my least alarming way. “Pardon, ma’ams, I haven’t had any fresh information all day, and I’m about ready to fall on my face. Would you know of what material the Mayans composed their bricks?”

“No I don’t,” one of them shoots back, real snotty. They disappear around the corner, lost in talk, not giving me a second look. I don’t go fathoms deep into myself looking to explain my rejection rate. It is high. I’m not dressed poorly or nattily either, but as a sort of everyman with inexpensive comfy shoes, unpressed cords, a well-worn shirt with no serious holes. I shower, my beard isn’t more than a day or two’s growth, what’s left of my hair stands up kind of funny but doesn’t smack of mental illness or mites unless other clues are added. I’m polite in my requests. So I don’t know why people shrink from me and don’t answer. I think it’s just that most don’t have time to bother with strangers. Or they think what I’m really after is their money.

On the contrary, it’s their minds I value.

“Say, brother, would you happen to know the number of volumes in the Religion and Philosophy section at the public library? I could really use an answer.” This to a student-type shuffling along reading a newspaper with a book satchel slung over his shoulder. He just shakes his head and keeps on reading, keeps on walking.

“But, brother man, no one else will even spare me an estimate.” Nothing doing, and I have to be careful not to cross over to harassment. They can arrest me for that, and have. It’s a disgrace, the draconian laws in this democracy.

Still it’s hard to leave off. It gripes me too when I know a stranger knows something but won’t tell it. Like this student. He’s headed right for the library, I’ve seen him in there numerous times. It’s my favorite downtown spot, and I recognize a lot of regulars. He surely has some idea of the number of volumes in the Philosophy

and Religion section, and it would be useful to compare it to the number I have. But for a guy to have that knowledge and not share it, well it's to be expected but my god. What we need on this planet is more information sharing. And it's just piddling stuff I'm asking too, the number of books. It isn't as if I'm demanding to know the key to the universe. I would never ask anybody that question, it would be presumptuous and rude.

"I'm sorry, but do you have any idea what I can substitute for rum in mixing a zombie?" Now I address a man who's unloading a truck of bread and buns right by the corner I've adopted for the day. I watched him back his truck into a spot on the street with the warning beeper blasting, stared at him as he jumped out and flung open the panels, and now I'm breathing down his neck as he gets ready to move his wares into Carol's restaurant right beside us. He shakes his head, not listening to me and probably assuming that I'm trying to get "change" out of him or a handout of loaves to sell on the street.

"I work too, you know," I say to encourage him, but it's nothing doing. I do work, when I have too. I have a love-hate relationship with employment. I love it when I don't have it, hate it when I do. My problem on any job is that the information comes to me too fast. Show me a computer key to hit, and I like to mull it over, see how it fits into my world. I hate to just dive into whole systems and subsystems where I soon flounder and get lost. I need time, time the boss doesn't have time to give me. So I work usually at temp jobs, Joe's Quick Job, Moe's Temp Service, Mike's Split Second Helpers, Tony's Flash Employment, Nancy's Jiffy Careers. I do a day or two, very poor performance, then I'm out, with low pay. But enough for my pup tent-sized apartment, utilities included.

"How 'bout this?" I'm back in my bread-man's face again. Sometimes persistence pays off, if you're careful. "If you're befuddled by the possible ingredients of a zombie, and you're by no means alone there, then maybe you can tell me something else. Is ice always 32 degrees, or can it be colder?"

He looks at me. "32 degrees," he says. Then he piles plastic trays of bread on a dolly for transport to Carol's.

He's helped. He may not know it, but he's helped.

"Hey thanks," I tell him. "I really appreciate it. But can't you do better? Can't you also tell me how many children the composer Wagner was stepfather to? If I find that out, maybe I can get some rest." He ignores me, doesn't even ask why I want to know any of this. Most don't. He pulls the fully loaded dolly down an alley beside Carol's to the delivery door. But he's looking back at me to see if I'm going to make a move on his bread, so I wave to him and back off. We lose sight of each other, at least I lose sight of him, but I don't doubt he's still got the truck in view. I rest against the façade of the establishment next to Carol's, a Hustler store that doesn't do much trade, and think.

His input is useful to me, even if his understanding of ice is wrong, as I suspect it is. I come now to the grand scheme behind my begging. You see I'm building a web of knowledge for myself, a foundation for my life. Everyone does that, to a greater or lesser extent, but I'm an independent minded cuss who wants a web tailored just for me. If some of the threads in my web aren't the same as those in yours, I don't mind. I've done some serious weaving, or perhaps I should say casting, for some years now, in a variety of fields. My

web is tight here, loose there. And of course it has holes. It is the very nature of a web to have holes, so mine doesn't snare every tidbit of truth any better than another's. Certain facts, unimportant or even inimical to my web, will slip through it even where it is most secure. Still the web does its job.

“MA’AM, CAN A CROW
COUNT?” THE LADY,
SHORT, ROUND, AND
IN THE UNIFORM OF A
FAST-FOOD PLACE,
ACTUALLY STOPS TO
CONSIDER.

It holds the big fish.

I should say that, when speaking of my web, I use such words as tight and loose, and speak of threads and holes, and employ other expressions as well. But I don't know if these are the right expressions. I don't even know if “web” is right. It turns out I know very little about it.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” I say to a mid-aged bag lady well known to me. She appears to be of native Indian descent, very lean with long gray braids and brown skin, and bright blue eyes. I see her downtown all the time, usually in the dark of early morning. To myself I call her American Woman, because for some reason whenever I see her, including the very first time, that pop song plays in my brain. I have a lot of data from her already, much of it invaluable. She's fishing through a trashcan as if curious about its contents. “Do you have any idea if living near a radio transmitter will affect my health?”

“No, no,” she says, and skitters off. Ambiguity I love. A lot of her answers are that way. Once I asked her, “What's your favorite season?” She replied, “I fall a lot.” I thought about that a long time.

American Woman may have more knowledge than I, and consequently a more elaborate and extensive web. So far so good. I wouldn't be surprised, since she's always out there hustling for information and maybe asks a lot of tough questions. I'm sure they're better questions than mine, anyway, since I never know if I'm

asking the right ones. They're OK, I guess, but hers may prompt much more interesting responses, spin filaments for a web of much finer and stronger mesh than mine. Getting carried away now. Unlike me, she doesn't use the library, which I find isn't enough. She may be illiterate, certain signs make me think so, but she uses that to her advantage.

The plain fact is that, although my web is quite broad and fairly secure by now, it's still nothing that anyone else would covet, and certainly not American Woman, who's been playing this game better and probably also longer than I have. No one envies me my great fund of wisdom or folklore or prophecies. Certainly no government agent is going to show up on my doorstep to inquire about my secret research for which there may be a military or political application. Simple observation of others has taught me that my web is one of the flimsiest going, and that compared to others I'm playing a laggard's game of catch-up. I think I always will be.

"If you'll excuse me, sir, but is a pink shirt ever worn with charcoal slacks?" This I fire at a male jogger in running outfit as he goes by.

"You bet," he shoots over his shoulder, trotting off.

"Wonderful," I say. When I get a direct response like that, so generous and so selfless, I hold it to my heart. I feel its correctness burn into me as if someone told me the sun rose and set, or that the ground won't recede when I walk on it. It finds its place in the web at once, and I feel a bit more secure.

"Ma'am, can a crow count?" The lady, short, round, and in the uniform of a fast-food place, actually stops to consider. She fans her face with a five-spot, and is clearly running on her break into the drugstore down from Carol's, probably for cigarettes. She hasn't much time to get back to the counter, and I'm eating into it.

She says something, I don't know what, and vanishes.

"Thanks..."

The web grows day by day.

First of the Month

Jeffrey F. Grice

rent man's paid
lights back on
insurance man is gone
refrigerator's full
no more hungry mouths
to feed

and auntie mable
is over wit' a fifth
of orange jubilee

lil' bra' got air nike's on
sista welfare clean, hair
freshly weaved
and mamma's boogie-woogie
twistin' her hips

daddy played his number
93-6

first of the month

neighbor burglariz'd
post-man found shot
3 masked hoodlums
livin' on
d' wild

2 got caught
everybody whispering
1 lying dead
nobody listening

first of the month
like we give a damn.

Just Anotha' Stain

Jeffrey F. Grice

today
b' fo' my eyes
in the neighbor-

hood playground
a gun went off
strikin' anotha'
mother's child

knockin 'em
backwards by
surprise...

he collapsed
blood
stainin' the asphalt
his eyes
lolling upward
toward pensive clouds

dere were also other homeboys
hanging 'bout the neighbor-

hood playground
they hawk drugz mostly

they left then
and they weren't at the playground
the next day
or the next
either

nobody was...

Season's Greetings

Blaine Hammond

So you were standing on the sidewalk
outside of Macy's with your
hand out, it was December and for
California pretty cold. And the
hardest thing to do, you found
out long ago, is to catch
their eyes, their eyes
are like rabbits, as they come
out of the store carrying
their Christmases. Their eyes
know where you are
and they run from you. But their voices
think you're not there at all,
don't they? You heard that last
woman say she couldn't believe
she got out of there
for less than a thousand dollars,
and you stuck your hand out further
but her eyes were running
and you are no longer able
to be a hound.



GATORADE GUARDIAN by *christopher m.*

The Good German

B.Z. Niditch

PLACE: New York, latter half of the 20th century, in a sidewalk cafe that the characters frequent.

CHARACTERS: **Lubich**, a Jewish Socialist who emigrated from Weimar in the late 30's; **Helmut**, a German playwright who also emigrated in the late 30's; and **Anna**, Helmut's wife, a German Jew who emigrated with her husband.

LUBICH: We've been coming here for years.

HELMUT: Forty years – or is it fifty?

LUBICH: A good German cafe.

HELMUT: Still you and I, Lubich, poor disillusioned Socialist.

LUBICH: Whom you supported. I've tried to be true to Marx.

HELMUT: The false messiah.

LUBICH: Germany made the marks her prophets earned.

HELMUT: Inflation made Hitler possible. Remember, the Nazis never got a majority of the popular vote.

LUBICH: Until they seized power. Remember, Helmut, that torchlight parade when Hitler rode by and we saw that old woman eating the stone where Hitler's motorcade passed by? I knew when Hitler blamed the Communists for the Reichstag fire he would be another Nero, burning Rome. Remember Weimar, the place of Goethe, where we all grew up, would become the site of Buchenwald.

HELMUT: I can't forget. I guess you and I will always be German refugees.

LUBICH: Why haven't you gone back to Germany?

HELMUT: Because it would be too painful. Weimar, even in the late 20's, with all its decadent poverty, was still a wonderfully artistic time for us. When I think of the Nazis, it's too much for me. And of course, I had just married a Jewish woman. I had no choice but to leave. My plays would have been burnt up along with my conscience, then my wife and I. When Stalin prevented the Left from fighting Hitler, I knew it was our end of Weimar. The Jews believed in democracy and fairness to the end.

LUBICH: Trotsky was a prophet, too. He predicted what would happen to us.

HELMUT: Marx, your false messiah, and Trotsky, your prophet. And what was Lenin, your God?

LUBICH: I can't deny it. I think I wanted to forget I was a Jew.

HELMUT: But history and God won't let you, Lubich.

LUBICH: As a boy I heard the Internationale when I walked with my father in Berlin, and I thought all of mankind would be one, and there could be no more wars or massacres or pogroms. But I soon saw the kind of socialism the German marks bought.

HELMUT: We never adjusted here in American; you, I, nor Anna. Yet you kept up your politics even here.

LUBICH: I paid my dues here in America with McCarthy and all. America almost came close to fascism in the thirties when the German agents put up Lindbergh for President, who together with Father Coughlin and the Ku Klux Klan types almost took over.

HELMUT: Lubich, "almost" doesn't count in politics, you know that.

LUBICH: Here is Anna. She is still beautiful.

HELMUT: And you still love her.

LUBICH: More than admire her, Helmut.

HELMUT: She has kept me sane. Anna reminds me of a true prophet in the Bible.

ANNA: Lubich, still arguing about the 1933 election? Or is it the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939?

LUBICH: The only interesting thing to me are the relations between the Germans and the Jews.

ANNA: You're a masochist.

HELMUT: I used to think the Germans were the Assyrians and the Jews were led into captivity. And, at the risk of blasphemy, I swear Lubich is a Christ figure.

LUBICH: Better than his betrayer. As a boy I was beaten up in Munich during Christmastime, and called a Christ killer. And I just went to Munich to see the lights. My father warned me, but I did not believe him. I wanted to be one of the moderns, but I took after Marx, a descendant of rabbis.

HELMUT: So you opened up the Left door.

LUBICH: Where else could I go? You weren't much different from me, in that respect.

HELMUT: How come, Lubich, you never married?

LUBICH: In front of Anna you say this? You know I was committed to my politics.

ANNA: There's more to it. But keep your sex secrets to yourself.

LUBICH: What secrets?

HELMUT: I'm not your psychiatrist.

ANNA: Leave Lubich alone.

LUBICH: That's the trouble. Everyone has left me alone.

HELMUT: You've asked me why I don't go back to Germany. How come you never went to Israel to start over?

LUBICH: In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. I recall it in Hebrew from my bar mitzvah days: "Brashit barah elohim et hashamayim v'et haoretz."

HELMUT: I really thought you'd go to Israel in the forties when you were so unhappy.

ANNA: When hasn't Lubich been unhappy?

HELMUT: Even when he had you in love with him.

ANNA: Don't be ridiculous, Helmut! I've been faithful.

HELMUT: Only God knows.

ANNA: I've been having those nightmares about my sister again.

HELMUT: Take those pills the good doctor gave us.

ANNA: We should have waited for her. Now I don't have a family. We could never have children.

HELMUT: Whose fault is that? So, my family's living, but I never want to see them again.

LUBICH: I have no one except you two who will come to my funeral. All those speeches I gave, what happened to their listeners? Helmut, you think I sold out, don't you?

HELMUT: You had to. Socialism failed, and it failed you.

ANNA: Leave Lubich be!

HELMUT: You're always implying I pick on Lubich.

ANNA: I've hurt Lubich, too.

HELMUT: How, Anna?

LUBICH: Yes, Anna, how?

ANNA: Lubich can tell us.

LUBICH: Anna has been in a depression. I don't want to hurt her anymore.

ANNA: Speak up, Lubich, I can't hear you.

LUBICH: You need to help Anna. She helps us. The trouble with me was, I was too late. That's been always my problem – in life and in love. I was caught as a tiny historical footnote.

HELMUT: You're just another human error of politics and race – that is Socialism.

LUBICH: You're always so clean and clear, like the sky today.

ANNA: I heard a different forecast.

LUBICH: I was a tiny voice. No one will hear from me. I'm dying.

HELMUT: We all are.

ANNA: We've all been dead since we left Weimar. Then we went to Vienna. And we helped bring my therapist to New York. But my own sister I left back in Germany. And I still feel suicidal.

LUBICH: I wonder what kept me from doing it – even back home, when I saw the writing on the wall.

HELMUT: Curiosity with life – your own, and your politics.

LUBICH: And cowardice.

HELMUT: You had the fear of your god.

LUBICH: Anna is right. After 1939, I knew politics was a dead issue for me.

HELMUT: So why did you become so active in the Left here in America?

LUBICH: It was like being a rabbi. What else could I do to keep me going?

HELMUT: But you believed!

LUBICH: Like you, Helmut, are a Christian.

ANNA: He is. He saved people before it was too late. He did more for people than you, Lubich, with all your speeches. Forgive me.

LUBICH: I can't forgive myself, let alone you. Yes, I have a death sentence over me. I may not live out the month.

ANNA: Shut up, Lubich!

HELMUT: Let him speak.

ANNA: I can't live without him. All right, Helmut, I admired him too, even though you were more handsome and witty. And I know he loved me too. But when he was beaten up in gymnasium class for his politics, you rescued him. Don't you see, Helmut, you're our messiah? Not that I made the wrong choice in marrying you. But I had more pity for Lubich.

HELMUT: Because he was victimized?

ANNA: Helmut, you were more of a mensch. But I admired the once revolutionary. He had ideals. But Helmut, you had humanity. And so for personal reasons I married you. It wasn't just to save my skin, Helmut.

HELMUT: I loved you, Anna, with an everlasting love – a Biblical love.

ANNA: I know. Even if i was baptized ten generations back, I could not even take communion with you. We both would have been murdered. Helmut, in a way it's sad to see you lose your faith and become cynical after we were in America.

HELMUT: America has always been a comedy act for me, after Germany in our 30's. It could never be serious here. So I became philosophical – I hope it was not cynical. It's fatal to a writer, perhaps, and to those who approved of me. That's why I had writer's block for so many years. I felt so deadly despondent, I buried my talent God gave me. And now I don't want to think. I let you two think for me. Maybe Hitlerism was only an aberration. But it has ruined me and Germany.

ANNA: Lubich, you're white!

LUBICH: I don't have much time.

ANNA: Listen, please don't die. Helmut, ask God to let Lubich live.

HELMUT: Take one of those pills, here, with water.

LUBICH: For what? What do I have to live for? Who will listen to me? I've been a loser to history. You saw the wall go up and down. And they'll find other demons in the wall.

HELMUT: The Nazis put the Jews behind a wall, and in slavery, which they called their security. We all need a wall, so we can hide our arrogance and pride, and others behind it. Until we repent, there will always be walls in Germany.

LUBICH: Always the Christian, down deep.

HELMUT: My mother was a believer. But my family eventually accepted the inevitable – Hitler. Except for my mother. She would put me on her knee as a child, and read to me from the Bible.

ANNA: You can still be a child, my Helmut. He thinks I'm someone in the people of the book.

HELMUT: Yes, when I first met you Anna, that's what I felt.

ANNA: You were never realistic, but at least you were more decent and tolerant and less bitter than Lubich at the time.

HELMUT: He had more to be bitter about. Lubich had to leave like you, and I loved you and him.

ANNA: At one time I thought you loved Lubich more.

HELMUT: Before all the world, with all his politics, craziness, and red flags, yes.

ANNA: And I couldn't get into your world.

HELMUT: You were a part of it.

ANNA: I was apart from it. But I knew there was something deep between you.

LUBICH: I loved you, Anna and Helmut.

HELMUT: I was jealous of you, Lubich, because we both wanted to sacrifice for you. You could have broken up our marriage easily.

LUBICH: I didn't want to.

HELMUT: He had both of us to love. Why should he have to? Even though we could not admit it to ourselves, that he was closer to us than a brother.

ANNA: I allowed him my person. Perhaps I wanted a baby from him.

HELMUT: How do you know it was my fault?

LUBICH: I wanted a brother. I missed my brother Walter.

HELMUT: I had a brother, too.

ANNA: Lubich can't love anyone, though he tried to be intimate, he would up hating himself, which meant to me at that time that he really loved only himself.

LUBICH: I had feelings for both of you, and when I expressed it, I worried you would tell each other about me.

HELMUT: We never spoke of it together.

LUBICH: So I gave my love to political concerns.

ANNA: Don't blame your life on your asexual politics.

HELMUT: I never betrayed you to my wife. I just betrayed my wife.

ANNA: You didn't betray your wife or country. You were the only good German I knew.

HELMUT: And what was Lubich?

ANNA: Lubich was Lubich, an unhappy man.

LUBICH: I betrayed both of you, but you never betrayed me. I wanted a family back then. I lost everything. And soon I will only be a peculiarity.

HELMUT: You're not our collective unconscious, Lubich. You're our friend.

LUBICH: I'm no friend of mankind, womankind, no kind. Maybe that why I'm being punished. Is that it, Helmut?

HELMUT: You're asking me?

ANNA: I remember that last speech you gave in the Weimar Gymnasium.

LUBICH: Where have all my speeches brought me, or gotten Germany? I am part of the wall, too.

HELMUT: Maybe we should all go to the Wailing Wall.

LUBICH: It won't help me.

HELMUT: Nothing will help you, Lubich.

ANNA: I tried to help.

LUBICH: Forget your martyrdom, both of you.

HELMUT: Maybe that's what we've all tried to be.

LUBICH: All my ideals – they have come to a bitter end, like me.

ANNA: If you die, I'll be next – I swear to you, Lubich. (She turns to Helmut.) I've been faithful.

HELMUT: No, let's be honest. None of us have been faithful to what we believed or to each other.

ANNA: You were, Helmut.

HELMUT: Was I? I ran away, when I could have stayed and fought back.

ANNA: You're a child, Helmut. You knew it was too late after 1933 for any of us. The best thing for all of us was to get out, as quickly as possible. It was they who betrayed Germany, and us, and the whole world, through the thugs they put in to rule.

HELMUT: Everything is betrayal.

ANNA: But you helped people get out. I was the one who let my sister stay. I live with it every day.

LUBICH: I survived, but did I help anyone?

HELMUT: I loved you, though to Anna I tried to be faithful.

ANNA: I didn't know you and Lubich were as close as we are.

LUBICH: I'm filled with self-hatred.

HELMUT: That's pride, Lubich. My mother told me that the nations which blessed the Jews would be blessed, and the ones that cursed the Jews would be cursed.

LUBICH: Always living in a Bible world, thinking that we had a David and Jonathan affair.

ANNA: I always felt guilty when I had sex. The doctor said I was borderline. I'm glad I never had children.

HELMUT: Anna, please forgive me.

ANNA: I wanted to be a good wife. I know you tried to help me by sending me to therapy with Reich.

HELMUT: I'm sorry if it didn't help. I guess we know which Reich survived. Lubich, wake up.

ANNA: Feel his pulse.

HELMUT: He's not moving.

ANNA: We can't bury him.

HELMUT: His kind won't rise again.

ANNA: Do you think your kind will?

Celia, the taxi cab driver has fun taking out-of-towners to the wrong destinations. She's actually a former gossip columnist and yenta who enjoys taking people for a ride. Tourists are the easiest to fool. M. from France is brought to the Haitian part of New York because he speaks French, though he wishes to go to the Metropolitan Museum. Celia has great fun making businessmen miss their business lunches, soloists miss their recitals, bringing doctors and dentists miles away from their conventions, making actors late for rehearsal. Celia goes home and writes about the confusion she has caused and after talking and feigning sympathy for her victims gets to know their story from the tabloids the next morning. One day a terrorist showed up with a suitcase and bombs and Celia, just as always, was taking him to the wrong destination. But she was intrigued with his accent and sexy confidence. She delayed the ride's end and the bomb exploded. Her story is in this morning's paper.



MOSCOW'S ANGELS '95 by *christopher m.*

Ted collected gold coins from all over the world since he was eleven. One day he lost a coin and remembered the parables of Jesus, prayed and found it. He took a bus downtown, excited to give testimony to his miracle. As he got off the bus he noticed on the side of the road a dead homeless man with one eye open. Ted knew what he had to do and put the coin on the homeless man's eye. A year later from that day at a flea market Ted saw the coin and bought it and rushed home. He called his pastor to tell him of the miracle but try as he might, he could not find it again, but praised the Lord anyway. The next morning Ted would find it lodged in his cufflink.

These and other absurd peeks at humanity can be found in B.Z. Niditch's new chapbook "Masks and Beards," recently published by Four-Sep Publications. Information in rear end of this issue or online at www.four-sep.com.

In the old days they called 'em sweatshops
Still do, I suppose:
Filthy little joints tucked away
In pockets of the city
Where
Asian immigrants slave over benches for a buck and
change
An hour

I did my share too in the old days
Janitored inner-city apartments
Swept up busted glass in the breweries
Swabbed commodes on movie sets
Packed appliances in the factories courtesy of Man-
power
Cheek by jowl with Mexicans dressed like
Gay cowpokes
Loaded trucks on vicious summer nights when the
temperature
Cracked 130 deep inside the asshole of a semi
A contraband chemical from a leaking package
Streaming in iridescent orange ribbons
Down my arms
Searing my flesh
Making me whimper with pain
Like a little girl

And all for peanuts, like a dumb elephant

Afterwards
Scurrying back to my attic
In the rooming house on Park Street
Where with only the cockroaches for company
I contemplated suicide like clockwork
Once at dawn and again at twilight

Well
The years passed
I earned myself a *de-gree*
Escaped the shit jobs
Went on to bigger and better things

Now I'm employed
As a pharmaceuticals advertisement proofreader
In a tight but clean cubicle
In a corporate park
Off a rather picturesque suburban highway
Where the laborers drive relatively nice cars
And dress in relatively nice clothes
And live in relatively nice condos

The funny thing is that
The hours are just as long
The work never stops coming
The boss is on my ass
Just like in the old days

And my back is still up against the wall
When the monthly invoices arrive.

When one of my wise-ass friends asks via e-mail:
“Hey, man – how are things on the cube farm?”

I realize that while I no longer have to soak my feet
Or fumigate myself when the whistle blows

I can hardly see straight from reading the fine print
And my back is damned near broken from
Hunching over a desk all day long
And when they say
“You’re staying until midnight”
I don’t have much choice
Especially now that I have a
Wife and kids

Come to think of it
I suppose it hasn’t changed all that much

New Scheme Announced

Jack Saunders

Slap Out, Alabama (YU) – Heightened Alert Czar Richard “Chicken” Little, no relation to mimic and impersonator Rich Little, announced today that, in an effort to prevent, or lessen Heightened Alert Fatigue Syndrome (HAFS), his office has revised the classification scheme for conditions of alert.

From lowest to highest, these are:

High High High High Alert.....Something certainly, or definitely will happen

High High High AlertSomething probably will happen

High High Alert.....Something might, or may happen

High AlertSomething could happen, although it isn't very likely

An example of the least high alert category is you could win the lottery, or publish an unsolicited manuscript.

Notice how logical, or orderly the progression is. This may be an artifact of the software on which it was prepared, which ranks things from low to high, or vice versa, but requires a weighted score to be assigned to every item relative to every other item – the so-called Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, or Existential Dread Effect, named after a remark tossed off by one of the Coen Brothers in an interview on “Behind the Scenes,” popular in-depth magazine-style television program for film buffs, or cinéastes.

The next highest category is like you might get a promotion at your work, or might survive the Old Rollback, when it comes. The Old Rollback is largely a statistical event, which falls on the just and the unjust alike, and your chances of survival are random, and not influenced by performance, the climate of opinion, sunspots, tides, meteor showers, and so forth.

Although your chances of being laid off are contingent and variable, the probability of a layoff coming is immutable, and fixed. No propitiation will forestall the Old Rollback from arriving, though you sacrifice virgins in a rain forest by a cenote, or sinkhole, with a chert knife.

Finally, you may rest assured that, when you are laid off, it will be your fault. The blame will rest on you. You were weighed in the balance and found wanting. The person who laid you off, for example, was not laid off.

This logic leads to conclusions like if she'll go with me, she must be fooling around, or I wouldn't belong to any club that will have me.

When it was pointed out to Heightened Alert Czar Little that too many alerts, or false alarm alerts, led to complacency, and the very alert fatigue he was trying to prevent, he said that eternal vigilance is the price of true alertness.

True alertness is a new term in the lexicon of discourse

with Heightened Alert Czar Little. Will someone be accused of false or counterfeit alertness? Spurious alertness? Coffee-nerve alertness?

Will there be an Alertness Police? Numerical scores assigned to taxpayers, driver's license holders, or citizens with social security numbers?

Is this the first step in ranking every citizen so the bottom quartile may be axed by the Triage Czar? No, I guess triage would be third-ile. Below the salt. Not quite up to snuff.

Beyond help. Robin Michelle Clifton once called a self-published pamphlet of Brew's "drivel beyond help."

Brew thought he was assigned the third aisle, and had a good seat.

Art "Home" Brew, Miami Bureau Chief, YU News Service, a parody news and disinformation syndicate.

Brew was just another poor boy at the party. A lamb to slaughter. His YU Press badge would not go very far, compared to television networks, national newspapers, and mass circulation magazines, commercial and noncommercial radio, supported by donations from listeners like you.

Help keep this ministry on the air, Brew pled.

Even a bad artist needs assistance.

Brew's likelihood of getting help was low low low low.

Anything you have to do, as Rahsaan Roland Kirk, blind African-American multi-instrumentalist (tenor, manzello, stritch, nose flute, scat singing, simultaneously), said, you have to go on and do yourself.

Brew had been on hiatus at *The Daily Bugle*, the principal outlet for his work.

Nobody noticed.

He was back. America needed him.

Nobody would notice.

You could take that to the bank. With a high confidence level.

High high high high.

Slap Out, Alabama (YU) – Art “Home” Brew, compare *art brut*, Miami Bureau Chief, YU News Service, a parody news and disinformation syndicate, lives in Slap Out, Alabama, in a travel trailer up on cinder blocks behind a junior store.

A junior store is a convenience store, named after the Sunshine Jr. stores “Sunshine” Lewis erected in the Dothan, Alabama - Albany, Georgia - Panama City, Florida tri-states, that Bermuda Triangle of unsolicited manuscripts where Hunter S. Thompson used to write wrestling promotion, after-duty, or on-duty, sub rosa, for the *Playground Daily News*, Fort Walton Beach’s finest, if only, newspaper.

Many newspapermen think they have a novel in them. It’s sitting in their desk drawer. Unfinished.

Brew finishes his, and sends them out, and they come back, by winged messenger. Like boomerangs, or a bad penny. Or Richard Nixon.

Is that the twisted serpent, staff of Asclepius, the healer, Brew will ask, or the Caduceus, symbol of Hermes (Mercury), god of commerce, thieves, and the medical profession?



Twisted serpent versus Caduceus is a *leitmotif* or theme, of Brew’s work. The cultural operator sets up and resolves oppositions in his life. Then writes about them, in myth.

Brew is a legend on his own time. The way the CIA uses *legend*: as a cover story, or persona.

Confusion to the enemy. Brew had several mail art names.

Blaster Al Ackerman, David Crowbar Nestle, Susan Poe, or the Rev. Suzy Crowbar.

Dread Clampett, named after the bluegrass-reggae fusion band his sons played in around Seaside, Florida.

Sometimes Clamp calls himself the Miami Bureau Chief.

Brew promises to keep transmitting over his Colt Commodore computer, his modem, and his phone line, the Good Lord willing and the creek don’t rise. Pronounced *crick*.

Modem stands for *modulator-demodulator*. In comes the good air, out goes the bad air. Up the xylem, down the phloem.

One of them cycles.

Brew writes poems, too.

Cyclist

The rent-a-beatnik business
got a little slow, then
adopt-a-hippie dried up,
but these things run in cycles,
I feel a discontent, with prosperity
for some, and what is left, the dregs
for everybody else, I sense the old
sourdough bohemian style-of-life
is fixing to make a comeback, as it does
whenever what Potter called “those
goddamned Republicans” get in.

So me and Mike walk into a sporting goods store and walk out with a canoe. I got my head buried between the gunnels at the stem. The fluorescent lights scamper from the linoleum up along the aluminum til I feel like I got my head in the air pocket of a boat that went under. So I follow Mike's sneakers, like standing on shoulders. They're stolen too. Try on a pair in a shoe store, leaving them on, leaving the old ones in the box on the shelf. They're squeaking like crazy and I'm sure we're going to get caught 'cause someone's bound to hear all that squeaking. But it's easier with my head dug into the bottom of a boat. Like if I can't see them, they can't see me. Like without my head I'm a disembodied body and nobody will notice. We walk right out through the automatic sliding doors and carry it down the highway straight into the Susquehanna River. Only we forgot to swipe paddles. We wound up in Pennsylvania. I'm sitting there on the muddy bank among the Dutch and Mike says, "Gimme an hour." He comes back in a car with a roof rack and a half-eaten bag of Doritos. I don't ask. A week goes by and Mike takes out an ad in the paper: *Brand new canoe. A steal at 150.* We sold it the same day. I had been getting rather fond of playing Huck Finn in my living room. But then the canoe's gone. And with the 150, so's Mike.

The guy at the office supply store heaves a great big sigh when I approach. "You again?" He's got this drop cloth quality about him.

"Don't mean to tear you away from *Mine Sweeper*," he turns the monitor away from me, I read his name tag, "Dick." With all the other options, Rich, Richie, Richard, Rick, Rickie, I ask you.

I already know his name though. A month ago I brought back a desk organizer at \$3.89, then a metal mesh letter holder, \$4.50, a tablet of tracing paper. So I know his name. I just like enunciating. This time I got some felt tip markers.

"Can't return those," he says, "they're open."

I look at the caps on them.

"They're O-PEN," he gets a little spit on me with the "p."

"O-PEN," he says.

O-pen, Q-pen, whatever. "They're MAR-KERS," I say, hoping this is some kind of an answer.

He pinches his hands into little beaks, "O-PEN." It's amazing how animated people can get in real life. Like those movie extras with a three second bit determined to make that moment the highlight of the film.

"I'm sorry Dick, I'm mildly retarded, could you repeat that?"

I don't think he quite caught the sarcasm.

“They’re out of the package.”

“They were never in the package. They’re sold IN-DA-VIDUALLY.” Okay, so I’ve just learned that highly polysyllabic words do not lend themselves to retard speak.

“You could have used them.”

“But I didn’t.”

“But you could have.”

Dick! He just cost me \$3.89. Now I’ve got to walk home, ‘cause you can snow just about anyone but bus drivers. So I stay at the mall and hop on line at the Old Country Buffet instead. It’s a food trough and I’m unbridled. Only everyone here is fat and scary. The turkey’s gone, so’s the chicken, and I got into a rather nasty elbow fight with an enormous woman in spandex and a fanny pack. Suffice it to say, she won. I opt for country fried steak, green beans, and scalloped potatoes. Then I head out the door. The girl at the register stops me.

“I already paid,” I say, “when I came in.”

She purses her lips. “I’ve been here the whole time.”

“I know,” I say, “you’re the one I paid.”

She looks around. “Oh.”

Once you understand that people’s self-doubt is their own worst enemy, you’re golden.

I take in a movie. These big chain places sell the tickets at the counter and tear them at the podium. It’s never the same guy. And during the day, they don’t even have a ticket tearer. You can walk right through. Trick is holding your back straight.

The movie is terrible. I mean, so bad, I’m embarrassed for it. Every scene is gleaned from some other flick, and not even their really big star can make these lines work. And the actors take themselves so seriously, and I never quite get that. I mean, they’re just actors. Even the worst script in the world was at least written by somebody. But what the hell do actors have to be pompous about? I contemplate asking for my money back, but I don’t. Mike would have. He always goes one step further than me.

I sell back all my greatest hits CDs. They made my collection look too girlie anyway. 18 bucks. I pick back the folded corners and try to press them flat. Someone wrote “Wanda is a slut” on the edge of a five and drew glasses on Lincoln. Okay. I got them all laid out. A ten, a five, and three singles. I’m looking at them when Mike shows up. He’s got some kind of honing mechanism. The bills are shoved in my pocket when I open the door. But he already knew coming up the stairs.

“Let’s grab a beer.”

Mike has a habit of wearing propellers in his eyes.

I shrug. “I’m tapped.”

“My treat,” he says. I know his treats like a chain link fence. The whole evening intricately connected, impeccably designed – a foot hold here, a gap to crawl through there, climbing, climbing, climbing... GUARD DOG!

Then I hear Beethoven’s 9th. I’m not sure what this unconscious psychological recall’s supposed to mean.

“What’s that?” Mike asks.

It never occurred to me it was real. I tug his sleeve out the door.

The park is full of people in lawn chairs with coolers, in ripples around the gazebo. The orchestra’s halfway through the first movement and the hot dog man’s selling kraut and weird cheese by the gallon. Free concert in the park. Me and Mike choose the crest of the hill between the public pool and the baseball diamond. The sky is full and blue and fast. Mike tries to say something when the second movement shrieks in tight violins then soft mallets on a kettle drum. The breeze cools my armpits, raw from the rim of a deodorant I should have tossed weeks ago. And I’m off my feet. Last week I trimmed my toenails with my teeth. I’ve got a nail clipper, but where’s the challenge in that. Apparently, it’s hard to control the depth at which you pluck a hangnail from your toe flesh using only your incisors. My eyes skip from cloud to cloud with the downbeat of each measure. And Beethoven’s reverberating through the hills reaching me in fast three’s, then a sixteenth note delay again and it’s like aural déjà vu. And I’m ready to cry because the déjà vu is mine so the piece is mine like I dreamed it, like I own it, like I’ve always known it, and the sky is so tall.

I wake up next morning and Mike’s gone and so’s my TV. It really doesn’t matter. I cancelled cable and there’s no reception and a blank TV stares at you like a glass eye. It was just nice to *have*, you know? He’ll be back. So I bide my time.

According to quantum physics the literal act of watching a pot does, by microseconds, make it boil slower. I spend the greater part of the day testing this theory. The afternoon hours fly by as I reconstruct the final battle scene from *Spartacus* using my tiled bathroom floor as cohorts. You stare at a tiled floor long enough, they do begin to move. I spend the evening at the department store downtown trying to learn Braille from the elevator and bathroom.

Next morning I have the rare privilege of experiencing how disconcerting it is to shit in the dark when they shut off my electric. The sun comes up loud and I clean my apartment with laundry detergent, shampoo, and a sock. Then I’m on the couch twisting pills of fabric from my sweater being interviewed by Larry King. “No, see, that’s a misconception, Larry. Poor people do not necessarily live in squalor. Sweeping the floor and making your bed are free, you know.” Insert the wah-wah’s from the grown-ups in *Charlie Brown*. “Okay, I

can see why you'd think that, but actually my health is much improved by being broke. Whole grains in bulk, tuna, beans, fresh vegetables — these things are cheap. It's chips and ice cream bleed you dry. And having no employment obligations is conducive to sleeping. You'd be surprised how many of our nation's ailments would cease if we just got enough sleep."

Then I take a walk.

When you first go broke it's like starting a diet. Every thing you see, you want. Like, ah man, and I could really use a karaoke machine, you know. That goes on for a while, and because you can't get anything you think everything is stupid. Why would anyone want a piece of cake, anyway. Then you justify. I don't need a car, walking in the freezing rain is refreshing. It's like the stages of grief, mourning the loss of your place, any place, in this culture. And then you're okay. Until you're not so you do something like steal a canoe, for instance.

Over the next three days I:

attempt to compose a villanelle and decide that Dylan Thomas was a one-hit wonder;

read the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles Driver's Manual from cover to cover (I'm disturbingly undisturbed that half the information came as a complete surprise to me. Probably because I sold my car eight months ago.);

find a rock by the river;

tape together empty toilet paper rolls in a convoluted tunnel and look for a marble; and

watch a centipede and realize that I really don't know anything about centipedes.

Then Mike's at the door. There are tears in his eyes and the windmill's in his throat.

"Dude, I'm so sorry," he cries, "I needed the cash. I didn't want to tell you, but I got AIDS. I needed the cash for my medication." Yeah, I know how he's got AIDS. Same as with my toaster oven it was shingles and with my typewriter it was leprosy. All I'd have to do is ask him the name of his medication and his whole fantasy would come crashing down. But I spent yesterday in the park with some kids and a broken umbrella reenacting the Zapruder film, so who am I to judge. Besides, he's having a moment and hands me twenty bucks.

So me and Mike walk into Wal-Mart and walk out with two cartloads of stuff. The fluorescent lights glint off the linoleum and bounce along the aluminum shopping carts and I feel like I'm under water again. Holding your breath is easy, the hard part is deciding when to exhale when you don't know how long you'll be down there. So I follow Mike's sneakers like air

bubbles to the surface. An old man stops us. The lake's frozen over. I can see Mike on the other side. He hands the guy some really long receipt. "Oh, okay," the guy says and we walk right through.

Mike's got a car. I don't know from where. I don't ask. At home we look at the goods. He stole stuff with high resale value — ratchet sets and handsaws, breadmaker and fancy Krups coffee machines, a stereo and VCR. Me, I stole toilet paper, a cooking pot, a dictionary, some tomato sauce.

"You've gotta think big," Mike coaches me.

But I can't. That's my problem. It's some sort of disorder that my world is so small. I look down, there's my feet. I look up, there's my eyelids.

Next morning I wake up and Mike's gone and so's my watch and so's this story. I spend the next couple of weeks trying to figure out what time it is and trying to remember how this story went. Then I find out Mike's dead. Some guy at the bus station told me. I don't believe him. For all I know Mike started the rumor himself, just so I'd end this story with him being dead. He's not particularly subtle, you know. But then I run into a mutual friend behind the old warehouse laying pennies on the train track. He's making remembrances of Mike, he says. And it gets me thinking 'cause it's not like Mike to get this consistent in a lie.

A few months go by. I still don't believe it, but I can't sleep. So I go to the park to watch the sunrise. I don't know what time it is but it's fizzy in the sky. I climb up on the jungle gym and sit on the 100% safe, rickety wooden bridge. Somewhere along the line I really miss those metal monkey bars of my youth. If you fell, you broke your arm. The peril was real. And I'm looking around at all the pretend perils of the playground. We're totally ruining our nation's children. They'll never know how to survive.

And there, leaning against the rubber seated, rubber matted, buckle yourself in safely, heaven help you you should experience one moment of fear in your life, swing sets, is a bum. Like a for-real bum. Grubby beard, layers of clothes, facing East, waiting for the sunrise.

I know there's an aesthetic philosophy in here somewhere. Or maybe a moral. All I can think about is that story I read once about Diogenes. How Diogenes gave it all up except for a loin cloth and a cup to drink from. Then one day he's down by the river and sees a boy drinking from his joined hands. Diogenes throws away his cup and declares, "I have been shamed."

And I watch the sun rise along the bum's body, over his throat and up his face, until he's covered with sun and closes his eyes.

Diogenes searched with a lantern for an honest man.

I never stole a lantern.

And I never felt like looking.

Freezing Rain

James Ladd Thomas

John Weaver stood in deathly cold water up to his waist. He was in the middle of the Alabama River, 40 miles from his parents' home in Wetumpka, Alabama, on a Saturday morning watching the first splinters of light shoot from the eastern sky. The time, he guessed, near six a.m. and he whispered to himself, "Can it get any worse?"

He had been out the night before until one a.m. with Paula Vaughan, a girl he had known less than a week. He met her Tuesday night at a party in the woods where people were dropping acid and burning furniture for a bonfire, his second night of Christmas vacation from the University of Alabama. They had gone to a movie, then over to her folks' house, down to their basement, a place that as he stood shivering in the life numbing river showed signs of holiness. He wanted to be in that basement this very moment, lying on that long black and white couch, under two quilts with the warmth of Paula Vaughan's naked body seeping into his. He wanted to be kissing Paula Vaughan's neck, her beautiful flat stomach, her breasts that, as he stood in the frigid water, were quickly becoming his reason for living. He was 21, three years into a degree in U.S. history, and five days into a resubmersion in his family's life.

He and his father had driven to the river with Donny, his sister's husband. They had unloaded the small boat from the top of his father's Bonneville, carried it to the edge of the river, not really a boat launch, just a spot that Donny had learned from one of his construction buddies, then attached the small motor, gas tank, thrown in the life vests in almost complete darkness, the only sources of light two 9-volt flashlights. All three had then put on their chest high waders, stepped into the shallows of the river with crusts of ice on the edge, then John and Donny eased into the small boat, Donny choosing to steer the small outboard motor. Before they took off for the small island located in the east side of the river, John's father handed him his shotgun and one of the flashlights.

"Now remember, when you see us heading across the river turn on the light so we can find our way to you," his father told him.

Once out in the water John's bitterness over hunting before daylight in this cold only intensified. The water was choppy, almost too choppy for the small boat to maneuver across the river, and the wind, which was blowing against them as they crossed, felt like razor blades thrown in his face. Paula Vaughan's lips flooded John's thoughts as the two men bounced and bounced towards the island. They were full lips, lips which had a purpose for more than shaping the sounds out of her mouth. Though he had his collar turned up and his head mostly down, John thought his face was close to

freezing. When he tried to move his mouth his muscles seemed to not respond.

If he had been allowed a vote, he would not be in this boat bucking through the icy water and frigid air. When his father came down the hallway and knocked on his bedroom door to awaken him at 3:30 a.m. he would have just said, "I think I'll pass today." But he didn't, because he had at the last minute canceled a fishing trip his father had planned in the fall, a Saturday trip when he had come home for a weekend visit. He had understood the depth of his father's disappointment. His father was trying to make amends since walking out on his family three years ago for another woman, actually the next-door neighbor, the

wife of his father's best friend. John's mother and older sister had walked around for weeks in a daze, but eventually they reshuffled their lives, gathered themselves. The father had returned last year, showing up one Saturday afternoon explaining his mistake and begging for for-

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giveness from John's mother. Standing in the kitchen doorway, John would never forget watching his father cry while slumping over in his chair with his head face down on the mauve and white rag place mat John's mother had made the year before.

Donny dropped him off at the island, handing him the gun and flashlight and giving him a wink. "We'll be back in a couple of days to pick you up," he said.

John laughed.

He stood in the water with his back to the wind, in the area at the southern tip of the island, where the ducks and geese would come swirling in for their landings. Though the darkness was still prevalent, the dawn had grown enough to reveal the outlines of the giant cooling towers of the nuclear power plant that was located a couple of miles downriver. He looked at the giant cones casting their outlines in the morning sky. He felt fear, danger, that somehow being this close to such a huge and powerful man-made landscape was not right, but he also felt the purity of Paula Vaughan's breasts, breasts he had been caressing and kissing only a few hours before. This combination of these polar emotions and the icy water and wind created a rather strange and ominous excitement. He thought of how such small moments were what we always remembered.

He heard the puttering of the small motor making its way to the island. He turned and saw Donny and his father were a third of the way across the river. He flipped on his flashlight, waving it as if signaling for help. His father waved their light. A few seconds more and they were close to the halfway point, but suddenly he saw his father's hunting cap blow off his head and fall into the river. Donny, seeing the cap blow off and into the water, made a sharp right turn, a turn his father had not expected. The father was quickly thrown over the side and, in what seemed like two seconds, disappeared. The father falling and sinking had panicked Donny; he jerked the handle of the motor in the opposite direction, flipping the boat up but not over. Donny toppled out, and like John's father, vanished within seconds as the waders filled with water. With the empty boat puttering down river, the frigid wind slicing through John's body, the honks of the ducks and geese dropping from the angelic blue sky, the morning sun divinely glowing off the giant cooling cones, and Paula Vaughan's breasts quickly fading from the moment, a new day dawned in John Weaver's life.



SINKING PARADISE *by christopher m.*

So this car in front of me floats to a stop, gently, like a feather slowly drifting to rest after being flung from the wing of a bird. And I jump out of my school bus and go to the window and the guy is shriveled looking, worn-out, as though from a hard life, as much as being simply wrinkled with age.

I think it's a heart attack, or a stroke, but what do I know, I just drive that bus, working my way through night classes, trying to get some kind of degree. Then a thin arm, bony as a curled branch from a tree, reaches out and grabs at my collar, pulling me down. My eyes dart up as my head jerks towards his face; I see people coming from their homes, some staring, others talking in whispers, a woman making a call with a cell phone. I hear the kids on the bus getting louder; they're fifth and sixth graders, starting to sing and holler and probably toss papers back and forth, but I'm trapped, so what can I do?

"Will you please let me talk to you?" the guy in the car asks. "It's my heart. I'm finished and I need to get this out."

He's still holding me tight as a vise grip, but it's not just that, there's urgency in his words, as if a very important statement has to be made about some past, monumental event in his life.

"Sure," I say. "But look. Can you let loose of the shirt just a bit?"

"You'll listen to me?" he rasps.

"Yeah, I'll listen! Now can you please loosen the grip?"

He lets go a little, but not enough to totally set me free, and just enough to grab back on if I try to make a run for it.

"I don't consider myself old," he says. "Youth is something that never leaves, it just retreats inside and stays hidden after a certain time." His voice is like an ancient, scratched record, or the worn out tape for a cassette.

"Time can jump," he says. "Not because of mental illness, but maybe due to the loss of love, even simple boredom. Do you know that?"

Then he starts to tell me about the times a horse came down his alley in Chicago back in 1951. At a moment like this, can you believe it; he wants to talk about a horse? But there it is, this horse pulling a cart full of cantaloupes, watermelons, onions, lettuce, cucumbers, string beans, corn, walking slowly along, and an Old Italian guy calling out, and then the women coming from inside their homes, as if summoned by the Pied Piper or Kokopelli. Knives were sharpened on a big stone wheel, he goes on; the wheel moved on a spindle pulled with a wide, flat leather strap. And the horse

always had a bag of oats over its mouth, and the eyes would stare: huge, wide marbles, following motion and sound, milky and streaked with lines of red. All of this I hear in great detail, while I patiently wait for the cops or an ambulance or the main point I know the guy must be trying to make.

Now he's breathing like a puffed up fish pulled out of water, but he still keeps wheezing it out, like a cricket chirping at the moon.

Nietzsche, he says, went insane when he saw someone beating a horse in a street and he ran out and threw his arms around the brute's neck; his great, poetic, fluid, godless stream of existence, without truth or meaning, finally coming down to one last sane act: showing mercy to a lesser being, loving a simple creature, one enslaved. Then Nietzsche was in his madness, ready to become the victim of Zarathustra's sister. He says all of this in a burst of words, his voice cracking and breaking, a little coughing thrown in, more heavy, deep breaths, while I still hear the kids on the bus getting louder and louder.

"I once took a cantaloupe off the back of the wagon and smacked it with a bat to watch it explode," he says next. "Prelude to war." He tries a laugh, fails, saliva sputters out of his mouth in small, magical-looking bubbles.

"Okay, Pops," I say, still peeking around for the cops or an ambulance.

"My mother," he says, "kept her change in a small, woolen pouch, like a medieval shopkeeper. I hated her counting pennies; I always hated to count money myself. It's vulgar. The cucumbers were phallic, and the steeples of the churches in Western Europe are, too, due to male power; the kivas of the Southwestern United States are round and vaginal because the Indians are matriarchal. Tomatoes. White onions. Green peppers. My mother bounced them in her hands like they were baseballs and the Italian guy weighed them on scales as though considering justice."

I force a glance at his car; it's a brand new Caddy, shiny black. He's wearing a suit that looks expensive. His watch appears priceless, he has on three diamond rings with clusters of stones as thick as bunches of grapes. He's obviously an educated man, more brains than three of me, but now he's suddenly going green as grass.

I try to pull away, but his grip gets tight again and I can't move. I'm worried about all those kids going crazy on the bus. They're my responsibility, after all, not some hapless soul needing a doctor on my route to school at eight a.m., apparently trying to get at the roots of some philosophical thought.

"Frank Zappa smashed fruit," the guy says now. "Apples, oranges, tangerines. Led Zeppelin. Plums, strawberries, grapes, lemons, The Rolling Stones, Ice Cube, Jennifer Lopez, blueberries. All the same.

I always hated Sinatra because at a concert in his honor he snubbed Bob Dylan, who sang a song for him. But who remembers that? What lives were changed by that little act of self-importance? Or Madonna being photographed in the nude?"

I finally pull my head free, yell at the woman with the cell phone and she answers that the cops are on the way.

"Come back!" the guy in the car says.

I motion to the kids on the bus to settle down, yell for them to shut up, but something makes me stick my head back near his mouth.

"When the horse moved on," the guy says, "pulling the wagon to the next home, the huge wooden wheels with the gigantic hubs and spokes would grind into the cement of the alley because there was a band of steel around the outer rim of the wheel. The sound was like an old muffler hanging off a car, scraping down the street. But you know, there was a trust there, with that Old Italian. I learned how to bargain and trade and be fair. I've never found that anywhere else. In all my life."

"Do you have any family?" I ask, but he ignores me.

"It wasn't the dark ages, son," he goes on, anxious to get out his words. "It was the 50's! People listened to the radio back then!"

"I listen to the radio now," I say.

"You don't get it. That was what the whole family would do at night. That was our evening. We'd listen to the radio!"

I don't answer him. I hear the wail of the police car coming in the distance, know I'm almost finished with this, ready to get those kids delivered to their school.

"Hitler and Goebbels took over Germany with radios, did you know that?"

"Now the politicians use TV's," I tell him, not really knowing what would be the right response.

"I watched the first Sputnik. We'd go into this school lot, climb up on this big slide made for the little kids and wait for it, like Halley's Comet. I was too young for Hitler, though, but I heard it was really horrible."

"Did you see the Sputnik?"

"I did. It sailed across the sky like hope and dreams and a great, wonderful promise."

"A promise of what?"

"A promise that we were getting pretty smart and we weren't going to screw up the world any more."

"Seems it didn't work."

"I always admired George Custer."

"Why?"

“It was a good try, even if he never made it across that river. He could have been president of the United States. People enjoy great killing; it moves them like the smooth flow of violins and classical piano played on the darkness of night. Do you know how many careers and empires have been built on foundations of blood?”

I don't answer.

“Well, you're standing on one now.”

I don't respond. It all sucks anyway, if that's what he's getting at, so why argue?

“I wish that wagon would come back,” he says.

“With the fruits and vegetables stacked on shelves like miniature pyramids, right in back of the houses. That Italian's call was like the call of the wild. I think he was nailing half those housewives in their basements while the horse just stood and sweated in those alleys. Maybe that horse could go across the ocean and roll those huge wheels over all the radios in Europe. Look at the horror and misery that would save. Evil eliminated. The end of cruelty. And then, when Nietzsche comes back from the dead, he'll be happy.”

The cops pull up. I wrench my head away, then look back at the guy.

“Thanks,” he says, sputtering and breathing hard.

“You made this a lot easier.”

I quickly turn towards the cops, then look back to assure the old man that help has arrived. But now his nose has popped and there's blood dripping down onto his mouth, then continuing its path to his throat and shirt. His head has fallen at a ridiculous angle, he's no longer taking deep breaths, and his face has suddenly gone from green to an unearthly white. He is, in fact, looking as bleached and dead as a snail's empty shell.

A cop steps up to the guy's car, gently pushes me aside, says thank you, tells me to just move along and have a nice day. Like I was standing there all that time, blissfully discussing affairs of the mind? Anyhow, I take a few steps back, then step to the bus, hop up and get back behind the wheel. I hear the kids again, my focus coming back, and suddenly I really enjoy the sound of their yelling and laughing and fooling around. I start up the engine and begin to resume my trip to the school, knowing we'll be a little late, but this couldn't have been avoided. Not by a man with the slightest bit of mercy in his heart. I feel like a Father Confessor, like it all somehow rubbed off on me, even though the words meant nothing to me at all. But Christ, when the wheel turns and my time has driven through the skies, what thoughts would I want to leave the world with, escaping from my lips?

We Walk the Street

Gerald Zipper

When teamster wagons clogged the downtown streets
my father the boy hoisted barrels from wagons sometimes
the bartenders slipped him pennies
passed him herring slices
horses dropped in the streets their hearts stripped bare
people died at home bewildered stifled in pain
under quilts stained with blood and phlegm
the world played different tunes on varied streets
I was a boy hauling sugar sacks and chemical barrels
my heart beating machine gun bursts
face scored by chemical splashes
my father the man polished rings and clips for rich folks
breathing the fatal dust of dim lofts
weekends we gallivanted on subways
rattling to Coney Island and salt water thrills
jostling thousands swarming to the gritty surf
cramming hot dogs and foamy root beers
strivers working up and down the booming street wor-
shipping at the temple of the shining future
cutting a path for newer strivers
forever casting a sharp eye at the curb.

Numbers

Gerald Zipper

A man obsessed by the infinity of numbers
eating sleeping dreaming numerals
calculating and computing
the world marveled at the Master of the Workout
flamboyant Manipulator of Integers
Keeper of the Universal Balance Sheet
Lord of the Indispensable
they spent evenings sporting with rollicking symbols
sultry nights making exponential love
copulating to the sensual rhythm of numbers
entertaining with playful quarter points
convulsed over the rollicking decimals
one day the calculator seized
challenging several dubious numerals
they quarreled over the suspect calculations
raged over the furtive transactions
he shot her with a thirty-eight
his sentence set at twenty-five to life.

wordmakers

David Apostolico » Author of the all-dialogue novella 'Fried Calamari' and his short stories have appeared in 'Pindeldyboz' and 'Shadow Voices.' Lives in suburban Philadelphia with his beautiful wife and wonderful son.

Robyn Art » Brooklynite published in numerous journals, also a finalist in the 2001 'Indiana Review' poetry contest, and a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Ronald Baatz » Lives in Mt. Tremper, New York, recently seen in 'Chiron Review' and has just released a new chapbook of haiku 'At Herring Cove' through Lockout Press.

Jon Boilard » San Francisco is home and he recently won first place in the 'Berkeley Fiction Review's' sudden fiction contest among other publications.

Christine Brandel » Writer and photographer living in north-west Ohio. She has appeared in the 'Iconoclast' among others and is soon moving abroad to start over.

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.'

Christopher Cunningham » Poet out of College Park, Georgia. Check out his new chap 'screaming in some beauty' from Lockout Press. E-mail him for info at thelastpoet@hotmail.com.

Michael Fowler » Michael Fowler readies himself for the task of writing by jabbing himself in the jaw like a fighter about to enter the ring. Mike lives in Cincinnati and makes a living as a freelance sycophant. Known to his friends as Old Fart, he has a daughter and one wife.

Jeffrey F. Grice » Capturing a crisp view of the African-American perspective from Lovelock, Nevada, he has been published in 'Blue Collar Review' among others.

Blaine Hammond » Internationally published poet residing in Ocean Park, Washington.

B.Z. Niditch » The artistic director of 'The Original Theatre' with international publishing credits. Several of his plays and prose have appeared in First Class.

Mark SaFranko » Living in Montclair, New Jersey, a widely published and produced playwright with a forthcoming novel from Wreckingball Press

Jack Saunders » By far, one of the most prolific writers this side of the Arctic Circle, with a depth of intelligence and worldly knowledge worthy of striving toward.

Kaa Terebessy » Lives in Binghamton, New York.

James Ladd Thomas » Prize-winning writer with credits in 'Short Stories Bimonthly' and 'RE:AL,' this Pushcart Prize nominee lives in Sanford, Florida.

Paul D. Wolf » Numerous publishing credits with his first novel 'A Punk in Gallows America,' written as P.W. Fox, nominated for a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award.

Gerald Zipper » Widely published poet, playwright and producer living in Manhattan.

A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries its 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 imbibles. *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*

B.Z. Niditch - NEW!

DICTIONARY OF THE 21st CENTURY - features the wordplay and wit of Niditch in a format conducive to his quick, quirky jabs and observations. *Gloss cover/24# paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

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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'.

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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

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A.D. Winans

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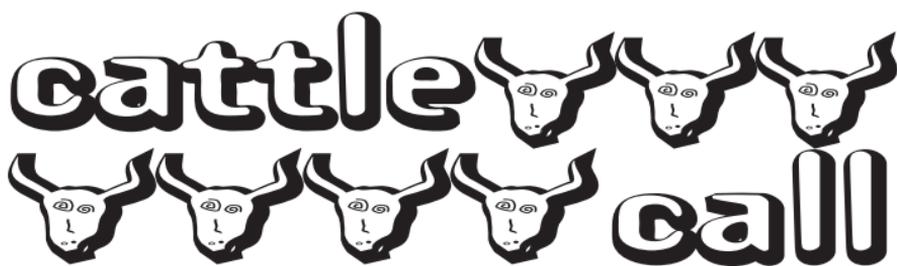
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cattle call



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.

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-Christopher M.

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LIT-MAGS

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CHAPS AND BOOKS

JOURNEYMAN'S DUES by William Hart: Blue collar word-punches as only a gifted English doctorate who has also worked in the trenches at a variety of hard labor jobs can pen. "The welder sees / through glass darkly / a small demon bead / of raw energy / turning steel to tears / and laying scars / that hold the guts / inside a building." Punch in for a shift with this eloquent 20-page chap by sending \$3 to: Bone World Pub., 3700 Cty. Rte. 24, Russell, New York 13684.

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