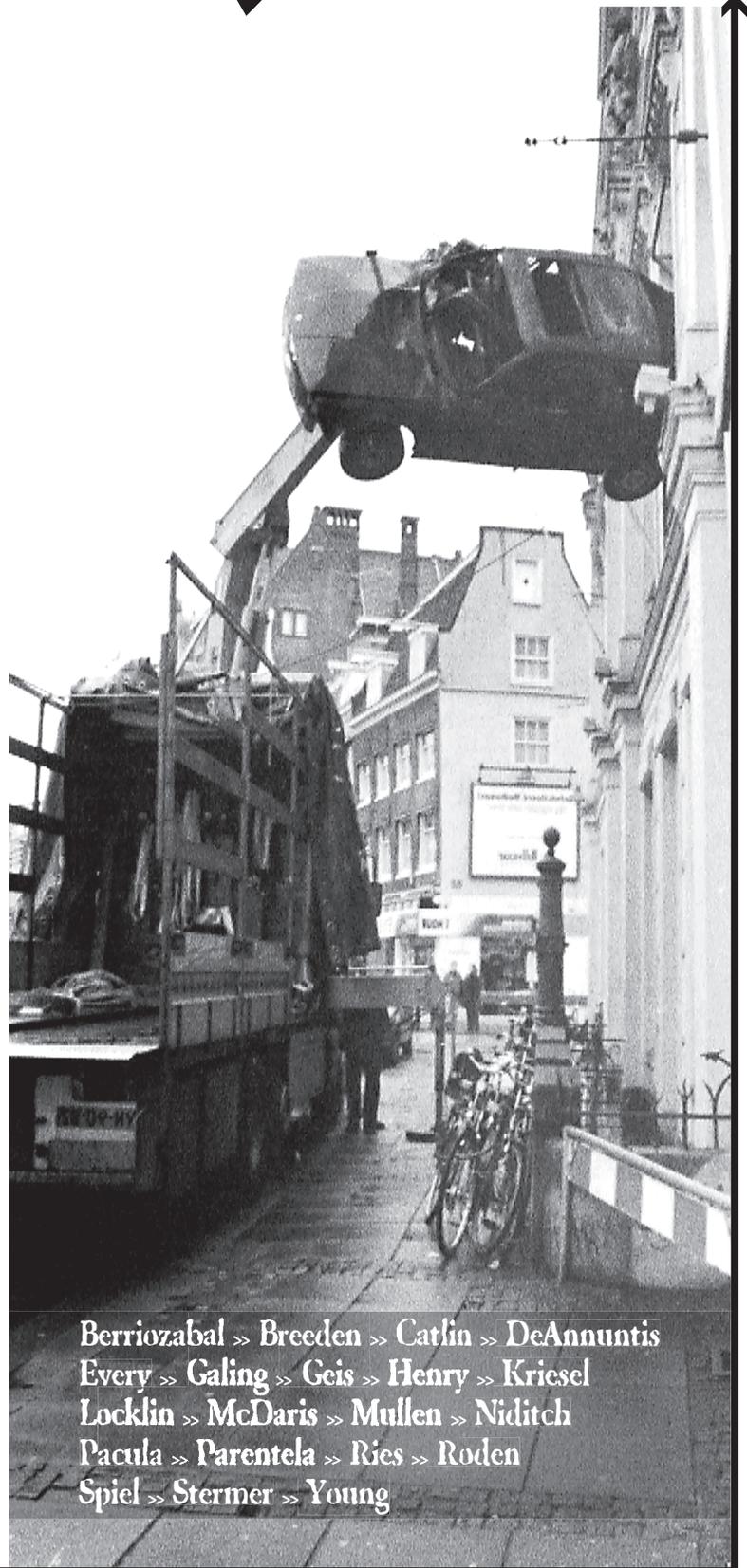


First Class

GOTTA GO WHERE THEY DON'T BELONG
THINGS SOMETIMES
20



Berriozabal » Breeden » Catlin » DeAnnuntis
Every » Galing » Geis » Henry » Kriesel
Locklin » McDaris » Mullen » Niditch
Pacula » Parentela » Ries » Roden
Spiel » Stermer » Young





ISSUE TWENTY
NOVEMBER, 2002

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First Class **contents**

- 1: **Jeffrey's Life on TV**
by A.W. DeAnnuntis
- 7: **Reflecting the Sun Back**
by Luis Cuauhtémoc Berriozábal
- 8: **Soft Tapping on Clay Pots**
by James Breeden
- 18: **The Dead Zone**
by Alan Catlin
- 24: **X:ud**
by Gary Every
- 26: **The Heyday**
by Ed Galing
- 27: **Dunk Bobo: 3 Shots for a Buck**
by Deborah Geis
- 28: **Yard Sale in Plainfield, Wisconsin**
by Michael Kriesel
- 30: **The Back Apartment**
by Nancy A. Henry
- 31: **picasso: woman with a mandolin, 1925**
by Gerald Locklin
- 32: **johann martin von rohden:
the grotto of neptune in tivoli**
by Gerald Locklin
- 33: **The Whole Enchilada**
by Catfish McDaris
- 34: **Soundproof Room That
Locks from the Inside**
by Ryan Robert Mullen
- 35: **The Orifice**
by B.Z. Niditch
- 38: **Primates of Orange County**
by Brian N. Pacula
- 47: **Plaza de Toros**
by Charles P. Ries
- 48: **Touch of Life**
by Paul A. Stermer
- 53: **Lesson Plans**
by Hester Young

Drawings by Claudio Parentela: pp.25 & 29

Drawing by Spiel: p.30

Photograph by Robert Roden: p.52

Cover Art by Christopher M

First Class #20 is a milestone issue that represents nearly 7 years of publishing independently, metamorphosing style and maintaining the highest level of substance (so much more important than style...). First Class relies on the high quality of the cream of the submissions that flow through my pobox to provide such an enjoyable collection of stories and poetics.

First Class is for readers first. It's distributed internationally through Tower Records and Magazines, by subscription, the Internet and single-copy orders.

First Class is here to stay. Four-Sep Publication chapbooks will continue to flow as thought-provoking manuscripts develop. Lockout Press, a thriving chap-for-hire service, will publish ever more chapbooks for those self-publishers out there looking for killer production and an appropriate level of presentation for your words (at a heck of a good price).

What does the future hold? First off, a move to southeastern Indiana in the spring of 2003. The pobox will migrate to a little town named Friendship. We've decided that life is best in places where air and soil are abundant (with a big city nearby, of course!) and stoplights are nearly nonexistent. Besides, I plant too many tomatoes for the tiny plot we're on now. Full information will saturate mailing lists, e-mail addresses, and other independent mags. After the move, I will begin gathering the very best words that have appeared in First Class for an anthology called "First Class First Class" which will more than likely appear in 2004. Some of you reading this will be contacted regarding the use of your stories and poetics. I'm not looking forward to distilling 20+ issues of what I consider to be solid and exemplary writing into a 250 page collection. But, if true to the function of distillation, it should be one hell of a volume packing a wallop and punch.

First Class #20 is another killer collection of the very best words that flow into my pobox. So, enjoy the read. I'm pleased that your eyes are on these pages.

- Christopher M.

Jeffrey's Life on TV

A.W. DeAnnuntis

Jeffrey watched two amber-red cockroaches walk in opposite directions across the laundromat floor. The cracked black & white linoleum was thinly covered with a haze of lint and small pale bits of paper. His cracked yellow plastic chair gave him a perfect view of his laundry spinning lazily in the dryer. And then the man walked in. Jeffrey was alone in the laundromat and the man walked directly to him.

"Give you two tokens for a dollar," the man said.

The tokens ran the washers and dryers and they cost twenty-five cents from the vending machine ten feet from where Jeffrey sat. The man looked crazy enough and Jeffrey did not want to argue, so he handed the man a dollar bill and told him to keep the tokens.

"I don't take no goddamn charity," the man yelled. He threw the tokens at Jeffrey and left. One struck him just above the eye.

Eventually Jeffrey's clothes got dry.

When he climbed the stairs to his apartment he found his front door wide open. Jeffrey lived alone, and he distinctly remembered locking the door before he left. Still carrying the laundered clothes in the sack slung over his shoulder, Jeffrey walked directly into his living room. To his astonishment, he discovered a new, larger television sitting in the place of his old one. Nothing else in the apartment seemed disturbed, nothing appeared missing. And there was this new TV. He did not call the police.

He went to his bedroom, emptied the sack of clothes still hot from the dryer onto his bed, returned to the living room and turned on the television. The television worked perfectly, the image and the color and sound were all crystal sharp. But it took a moment to realize he did not recognize the program he was watching. Jeffrey flipped from channel to channel without seeing a program, a face, a commercial product or even a corporate logo that he recognized. He stood and looked behind the television.

The only wire attached to the back of the TV ended plugged into the wall-outlet. There was no visible antenna, no satellite dish or cable line. He returned to the couch and flipped back through the channels. Now he saw even more programs, and there were faces he did not remember having seen the first time through the channels.

And there were the sports. Games he did not recognize were being played by rules he could not decipher on fields of bizarre proportion. And he saw game shows in which contestants did things for indeterminable reasons to the inexplicable guffaws and cheers of invisible studio audiences. Even the

news broadcasts were about countries he had never heard of. He stood again and looked over the back of the television more carefully.

This time he noticed a small white sticker advising him to call a certain phone number if he had any problem with the device. He called.

“Jeffrey!” The pleasant male voice addressed him with shrill pleasure, as if he had been waiting for Jeffrey to call. “How do you like your new television?”

“I don’t,” Jeffrey said.

“You don’t what?” The voice was thick with startled disappointment.

“There’s something wrong with it. I can’t figure out where these programs come from. I can’t understand anything that’s going on.”

“But our programs are all in English. That’s your language of preference, right? So how can this be?”

“I don’t have a problem with the language. But I don’t understand anything else. I’ve never seen any of this before.”

“But we thought that was what you wanted. You said you were fed-up, bored. So we gave you what you said you wanted, something new. An infinitely-various television. Because we thought this would please you.”

When Jeffrey said nothing, the voice continued.

“This is what we technically refer to as a scramble television. It takes all the incoming signals from all the incoming television shows and it mixes them together like scrambled eggs. Plot-points from one show are blended with characters from another show and the dialogue from still another show and a setting for even another show. This wonderful device even rearranges the eyes of one actor with the lips of another actor, the body of still another actor, the voice of another, and the hair and clothes of still another.”

“Well, I can see where this might improve things,” Jeffrey said with more sarcasm than conviction.

“That’s precisely our intention: improvement. This is breakthrough technology. This is the leading edge of the next generation. We’ve been watching you, Jeffrey, and from the very beginning we recognized you as a perceptive viewer capable of appreciating the implications of our revolution.

How many times have you grumbled that you hate watching the same boring-old-thing-television?”

“Well, if you’re so good at this, how about doing something about my sex-life?”

“Too easy. Besides, this new video technology might even help you there, too”

“That seems unlikely.”

“Jeffrey, I’m going to be honest with you. This TV is so revolutionary even we, its creators, don’t know exactly how it’s going to affect people, or in what ways it will change peoples lives, or even how they perceive themselves. Because no two TV’s are alike, we have no idea what anyone is seeing. Turn two of them to the same channel at the same time and you will see two entirely different TV shows.”

“And how is that an improvement? How will anybody know what program is coming on next, or after dinner, or after the evening news?”

“Isn’t that precisely the point? The problem with

boring television is that it is programed. And it’s programed to receive programs. Everything is programed. Everything is a program. In fact, if it isn’t a program, it isn’t. It is precisely this predictability that has become its flaw. So we have perfected the unprogrammable television. You will never know whether you are watching a cop show or home shopping. You’ll never know any difference because there will never be any difference. Every show will have some blood, a few boobs and a little bit of shopping. And if the show you’re watching gets dull you can always change the channel until the show gets better. If you don’t like the way a character looks just wait a little while, the character will look different on another channel.”

After a pause, Jeffrey said, “Can I call you back?”

“Of course,” the voice said, “any time. Meanwhile, let me give you a hint. Turn to channel eighteen. Maybe we can kill two birds with one TV show.” The voice gurgled a particularly vulgar laugh. The sound washed over his ear, Jeffrey endured a wave of nausea as he hung up the phone. But he did as he was told and tuned the television to channel eighteen.

Suddenly on the screen appeared a character looking exactly as Jeffrey would like himself to look. He is sitting under bright sunshine in the shade of a tree. The leaves of the tree and the grass around him are remarkably green. The small stream flowing beside him glitters. He can see perfectly two small amber-red fish swimming lazily near the shore. Jeffrey’s character looks up, the camera follows his eyes, to see a perfectly even and unbearably bright blue sky, a blue Jeffrey has only seen on boxes of

EVERYTHING IS A PROGRAM.

IN FACT, IF IT ISN’T A PROGRAM, IT ISN’T. IT IS PRECISELY THIS PREDICTABILITY THAT HAS BECOME ITS FLAW.

laundry detergent and coloring certain brands of mouth wash. Jeffrey wonders what he is doing here, as Jeffrey sits in his living room wondering what he is doing there. Jeffrey grits his teeth as he sits in his chair, resisting the anticipation that something is about to happen. It occurs to him that the man on the phone might know more than he's admitting. And it also occurs to him that this TV might not be so unpredictable. But if that was the case, why did he give Jeffrey that story about the television? On the screen he sees a movement in the trees, the camera pans in close. Jeffrey on his couch sits forward, as Jeffrey on the screen turns toward the sound.

Two thick branches heavy with fat, iridescent green leaves part, a woman appears. Tall and elegant with abundant dark hair, she wears a pale blue high-collared dress that reaches down to her feet. Its narrow waist enhances her ample proportions. She seems to move just above the grass. Her posture is reserved yet her smile is as sweet as cheap breakfast cereal. Jeffrey believes he recognizes her, and then wonders at the nature of resemblance, and the resemblances of nature.

She sits down beside him. Propped on one arm she leans toward him. Her dark green eyes do not leave his, her smile does not fade. "It is so wonderful to finally be with you."

"Yes it is," Jeffrey says a little dazed. Jeffrey on the couch is amazed at the TV Jeffrey's ineptitude.

"We're all alone now," she says staring deeply into his eyes. "My father will never find us here."

Jeffrey on the TV nods and smiles. Jeffrey on the couch leans forward reaching for the channel selector.

The woman looks up to the sky as she reaches to her throat and unbuttons the first four buttons. "It is so warm," she says sighing, "I could just lay here and doze all day." Jeffrey stares into cleavage deep and abundant.

"Me too," Jeffrey says. He smiles and looks away, as Jeffrey on the couch squirms.

"All of that laundry," she says, her voice heavy with astonished gratitude, "I never thought I would ever see anyone do so much laundry. Why, since I was born the dirty laundry has just piled up. Whole wings of our castle have been dedicated to the storage of stained and soiled laundry. Grass stains, tea and coffee, chocolate ice cream that refused to wash out. Rust, grease and tomato sauce. And worst of all, ring around the collar. We were lost, our kingdom prostrate with despair. But you arrived on your white horse. As if with a mere snap of your fingers we were saved. Now our kingdom has clothes that are bright and clean, and smell so fresh. Even Dad is astonished." Breathing heavily, bosom heaving she adds, "No man could ever do so much for me."

“Oh really,” Jeffrey says grinning with embarrassment, “it was nothing. Honest. I trusted my laundry detergent. Powerful yet gentle, and with the fresh smell of Spring. I’m just glad I could help.”

The woman leans closer, her free hand caresses his cheek, she stares deeply into his eyes. An emotion passes through her, Jeffrey on the couch watches it cloud her face. “Would you make love to me?”

Jeffrey on the screen smiles brightly. “I’ll do better than that. I will marry you.”

As the Jeffreys watch, the woman’s expression darkens. Suddenly a sparkling silver knife appears in her hand. “I don’t need your goddamn charity,” she says evenly and stabs him through the heart.

Jeffrey on the couch watched the knife rise and fall several times. He watched crimson blood arc and splatter from his wounded chest for a long while before he finally grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. Then he called the telephone number. It rang several times before the line opened, and Jeffrey heard heavy breathing but no greeting.

“Hey,” Jeffrey said, “anybody there?”

“Of course,” an impatient voice responded, “what do you want?” This voice was thicker and darker than the previous, and Jeffrey’s curiosity was aroused.

“What happened to that other guy?”

“What other guy?”

“The other guy I was talking to.”

“That would be me.”

“Sorry, but you sound different.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have a head cold.”

“But you didn’t have a head cold a minute ago.”

“It comes and goes. You know how it is. But enough of the chitchat. You like the machine or what?”

“Well,” Jeffrey said, “I have issues.”

“Yeah?” the voice said, “Well, I have hemorrhoids. So get to the part where I care. I got to go to the head.”

“I was just thinking maybe there was a way so I could get the channel where only the good stuff happens.”

“You mean, sort of like the Good-Stuff-Happens channel?” The voice was sarcastically earnest.

“Well, I mean, yeah. I mean, what could it hurt for me to like win sometimes.”

“Yeah,” the voice said, its pause was pseudo-thoughtful. “I can see your point. Kind of like the Jeffrey-Wins channel.”

“I mean I could just leave it on all the time. You

know, kind of like getting to see myself win.”

“Doing what?”

“Just what we were talking about.”

“You mean winning? You?” The laughter leaking from Jeffrey’s telephone was acid poured into his ear. So he replaced the receiver and returned to his bedroom.

But as he stood over the jumbled pile of warm, clean laundry, he could feel the TV tugging at him. After all, he had looked good on the TV. His weak chin had been replaced with something firm and cleft. His cheeks were slimmer, not gaunt but determined, even hungry. As he folded his jeans he recognized something jaunty, almost swaggering, about his TV self. And that woman. Well, she kind of looked like his old girlfriend, except better. There has to be a version of the TV show where I don’t always get stabbed. On some channel at some time, the TV Jeffrey will get the girl but without the knife. Maybe that version will play later tonight; maybe it’s playing right now.

When Jeffrey finished folding all of his laundry he turned toward the living room, but at the doorway he stopped.

The absent TV left a palpable void. Jeffrey focused his eyes hard on the space where it had been, he studied the air that had once surrounded it. The TV-gone was even larger than the TV-present. Then he looked toward his front door. It took a moment to realize the door was slightly open. As if whoever had passed through it had not wanted the closing door to make a sound. Jeffrey went to the door and opened it wide, looked along the empty corridor in both directions almost relieved to see it empty. When he closed it firmly and locked it, he returned to studying the empty TV space. As if a hole had been cut into the room, a single tooth missing from a grinning mouth. And they hadn’t even returned his old one. He went to the couch and sat down.

His gaze returned to the space where the TV had been. Jeffrey stared at that space, scrutinized it, until a fascinated glaze fell over his eyes. Arms folded and feet on the low table before him, Jeffrey watched the blank space of the TV and wondered what he was doing now.

Reflecting the Sun Back

Luis Cuauhtémoc Berriozábal

Ants burn on
The sidewalk
Under the
Boy's microscope

A future
Soldier
Versed in ways
Of torture

One hundred
Ants design
The smallest
Microscope in

History
Reflecting
The sun back
Into his eye

A future
Soldier
With an eye patch
Mean, angry

Looking and
Full of spite
For those who
Dare to fight back

Soft Tapping on Clay Pots

James Breeden

New Orleans, 1979

DeRidder couldn't get comfortable. He thought the air must have been set at 65. The furniture in the clinic was modern with a lot of chrome, the carpet gray and worn. The frosty air put a cold distance between everything in the room.

Cheerful prints were like huge greeting cards framed on the walls. He sat across from an O'Keeffe that was either a flower opening out, or something Linda called "personal and private." He rubbed his legs and got up to look out the window.

He stuck his fingers between the mini-blinds and peered out. The white afternoon blared into his eyes. The other side of Canal Street fronted a dry cleaners, a shoe repair, a furniture rental, and a used car lot. The businesses appeared like they had been there since the Fifties with little change.

A young woman across the street had locked her keys inside her car. DeRidder watched as she tried the door handle several times before stopping to brush back the curls on her forehead. Then she tried the door again. She tapped on the window on the driver's side, lightly, as if trying to get the attention of the keys, maybe they'd snap to and unlock the door. She straightened up and looked around.

An elderly man stepped from the shade of a storefront awning. He said something to her, bringing forth a knowing nod and a smile before he made off for the dry cleaners a few doors down. A few moments later he emerged, stroking the white strands under his Yankees cap and carrying a wire clothes hanger.

The old man bent the hanger in two angles and finagled it around in the door, trying to catch the lock. He bent over, ramming it between the rubber and the glass of the window, then pulling it out and sticking it between the metal of the door and the foam rubber lining, up and down, back and forth, searching for the angle that would hook the lock. He removed the coat hanger and bent it again, then inserted it.

He coaxed it gently, come-on, come-on...then thrust it suddenly hard as if to surprise the lock, demanding the hanger catch it...then gently again, come-on! Please, come-on! The man's right arm moved at different angles as the young woman stood by his elbow offering encouragement.

"Steve," Linda said softly and he turned around. A nurse stood to her left, holding her elbow.

"Are you okay?" he asked, as he made his way around a love seat. Her face appeared guilty, but he realized he might be seeing what he felt.

“Anything interesting out there?” she said. He shook his head and she leaned on him as he touched her hand. The nurse opened the door for them.

“It’s a different sort of rape,” Linda said.

The humidity was more oppressive after the frigid temperature inside. Her eyes narrowed from the afternoon sun as they walked to the pick-up. She hesitated a step to pull her sunglasses out from her handbag.

“I’m going to sleep,” she said.

He unlocked the passenger door and opened it for her. She moaned as she got in.

As he walked around to the driver’s side he noticed the young woman and her car were gone.

He got in and put the keys into the ignition and saw a pigeon alight on a block of masonry that had *New Orleans Women’s Clinic* etched into it. The pigeon twitched and flew off.

“You can’t park here. You hafta move.”

Startled, DeRidder turned to find a large black woman in a blue uniform walking from behind the truck.

“We’re leaving.”

“It don’t matter,” she replied, a car drifting slowly past behind her. “You gotta move.” DeRidder shook his head and started the truck. As he pulled out into traffic he caught the old man with the Yankees cap in the rearview mirror, standing still on the sidewalk, staring after them.

Linda lay on the bed, her hands rubbing her face. The drapes were pulled and the room held the glow of the late afternoon sun. He noticed the pink shell-shaped container she used for her diaphragm by the clock radio. It looked like a woman’s compact. There was a soft whoosh as each minute flipped on the clock radio.

“Steve, unplug the phone, okay?”

“Sure.”

“It’s too bright in here.”

“Lie on the couch.”

“This is okay.” She pulled up the comforter even though it was warm, and under it she seemed smaller, like a child. “Sometimes I wonder when my life is gonna start. When I was in high school I didn’t think it would be like this. But this is it, isn’t it?”

“Every minute.” Outside, a bus roared by on Nashville Avenue. “Can I get you anything?”

“Sleep. I want a long deep sleep.”

He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

“Close the door on your way out, okay?” She drew herself into the fetal position and shut her eyes. “Dr.

Jackson wears a ring with the Playboy logo on it. I could see the rabbit through those surgical gloves. There I am, on my back with my feet in the stirrups and I see the Playboy logo. Why should that make me feel shitty?”

Her eyes were closed. He looked at her a moment longer and then turned and left the room.

The morning newspaper, the rubber band still around it, was propped against a cushion at the end of the couch. He sat at the other end. His legs felt heavy. The cold sweat was like insects crawling down his chest and belly.

“I DON’T CARE WHO YOU ARE,” HE CONTINUED, “SOMETIME OR OTHER YOU GONNA GET CAUGHT.” THE VETERAN BOBBED HIS HEAD A FEW TIMES IN AGREEMENT WITH HIMSELF.

There was nothing to drink in the refrigerator. He would have to leave. He got up and started for the bedroom, then decided against telling her he was leaving. He didn’t know where he was going and didn’t want to talk about it.

Outside the sun was low and shadows stretched from the houses and trees. He walked around the side yard where he had parked the pickup under the crepe myrtle. The Greek that worked on cars in the back waved to him. He got in and backed up and drove out on Nashville Avenue. At the light he decided to grab a beer for the drive to the Quarter.

Franky and Johnny’s was on the next block, parallel to his apartment. It was a bar restaurant, a revered New Orleans establishment that had assorted characters plus okay food. It’s convenience to his apartment was what DeRidder liked best of all.

A group of men at a back table were laughing as he entered. It was dark in the bar after being in the sunshine. The bartender came over to him and he ordered a couple cans of beer and a go-cup. When he stepped back outside into the humid air, he sneezed and shook his head as if to clear it.

As he went around to his pickup, a man, dirty and limping, approached him. “How you doin,” he said. “You look a right good man.”

The man was in his fifties with gray hard features. He coughed into his hand a couple times and put down the plastic gym bag he carried. “Now I ain’t no bum or tramp. No. I don’t beg or panhandle or what-

ever you wanna call beggin. No sir. I just got caught.” The man began to chuckle between “just” and “got” and it spread just enough to emphasize “caught.”

“Plain old rotten luck. See, I’m a survivor of Pearl Harbor. I was on the *Arizona*. Got the life knocked outta my knee – don’t know if you noticed my limp. And I was lucky compared to most. Damn lucky. But I’m in a fix. I came to town to go to the V.A. hospital and the guy I was with got picked up. He was gonna cover me ‘til my 97 dollar government check came in. But the cops picked him up. And here I am.” The veteran shook his head, smiling at the very fact. “I don’t care who you are,” he continued, “sometime or other you gonna get caught.” The veteran bobbed his head a few times in agreement with himself.

The man’s teeth were tobacco stained and DeRidder could smell the liquor on his breath. He wanted to ask about Pearl Harbor, but couldn’t think of any questions. He wondered if the man had actually been there.

“I got 22 cents, ain’t even enough for the bus downtown. If I could get down there I’d be all right. They take care of me. I can walk into the Hummingbird and get a room and meals on credit. They know me. I’m known there.” He paused a moment, impressed. “So, what I’m askin friend is...”

DeRidder pulled out his money and gave the veteran a couple bucks and change. “Thanks. Thank you. Maybe you know what it’s like to get caught,” he said, nodding his head. “Happens to everyone, sooner or later.”

The veteran picked up his gym bag and limped to the corner. He stood under the yellow tin arrow that marked it as a bus stop. DeRidder got into his truck and drove off the opposite way on Arabello. At the corner of Laurel he looked up in his rearview and saw the old timer heading toward Franky and Johnny’s. He pulled away from the stop sign watching the man. He was no longer limping.

DeRidder sat on a wooden bench on the levee when the freighter came from down river. He had watched the tankers and barges but the freighter was the first big ship to come along. Huge ships appeared too tall to go under the bridge. But it was all perspective. The bridge was hundreds of feet above the water.

“It looks like it’s heralding something,” he heard a woman say as an elderly couple strolled in front of him. The sky in the west was deep blue and shot with crimson streaks. Overhead, the light blue sky was darkening.

“It’s reflecting on the mighty Mississipp, too,” the man said.

On the river, a tug pushed two barges down river. The back of his shirt, which had been damp, felt like ice. He sat with his arms folded and tried to con-

centrate on the barges going down river. He felt his hands would shake if he uncrossed his arms.

He had always felt that the Mississippi didn't smell like other rivers. It had more of a lake smell. This smell carried on the slight breeze in the thick air. He watched the barges disappear around the bend, and then got up and walked across the railroad tracks and up the concrete steps to Decatur Street. He walked down past the fountain and the outdoor cafe and crossed to the other side. The duck lady darted in between the pedestrians on her roller skates. Tourists turned and watched her skate along the sidewalk. Others, who had seen her before, paid little attention to her.

At the corner of St. Philip he had to walk around three men with their shirts off and their arms interlocked. The three had short, military-style haircuts. The man in the middle was kissed by the other two, one of them also licking his ear. The object of affection winked as DeRidder passed.

Molly's at the Market had two sets of double doors that were left open to the street. He frequented the bar before he and Linda started living together. It was a pleasant place to sit and watch people.

As DeRidder took a stool at the bar a man he recognized from around the Quarter said to the bartender, "There's some people you can surprise and others that just look at you funny." The man waved at the bartender and staggered out.

"A fucking asylum," the bartender said, wiping the bar top in front of DeRidder. "Where y'at?"

"Hey." He didn't feel like small talk, and ordered a shot of tequila and a beer. It was one of these nights when he could drink and not get drunk, no matter how much he drank or what he drank. He didn't want to get drunk. He felt both tired and restless.

An Edith Piaf record began playing on the jukebox. He didn't know French or what she was singing about, but felt it had to do with love and probably heartache. It was a song he'd often play when he was there. Her plaintive voice seemed to fill him, and he sipped the beer and turned the shot glass in half circles on the bar with his fingertips.

"Hey dude."

"Rodney!"

"What're you doin? Let me buy you one." His friend leaned over and nodded his head. "What's that - tequila?"

At this, they both laughed. They had worked together on several construction sites and had become work friends before becoming close friends. Rodney Simmons had bought a house on the other side of the Mississippi - the West Bank, and now they seldom saw each other.

“How’s it with Boudreau?”

“I’m one important man,” Simmons replied. “Run two crews now.”

“Big time.”

“Yeah, when you gonna come work for me?”

“I’m happy where I’m at. Ain’t ambitious like you.”

“How’s Linda?” Simmons removed a cigarette from behind his ear and lit it. He drew on it and rubbed his eye. “It’s been months, Steve.”

“Yeah. New Year’s. How’d we miss Mardi Gras? Jazz Fest? It has been a while.” He drank from the beer and noticed the gray hairs protruding from his friend’s beard. Simmons had gained weight and his hairline was backing up.

“Bad plannin’, lack of plannin’, women. Maybe we’re gettin old. I dunno.”

“How’s Alex?”

“A wild Indian. You know he’ll be in the fourth grade come August?”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“No shit. Soon he’ll be wantin a motorcycle.” Simmons tapped an ash off onto the floor. “I just dropped him at Leslie’s. He had dinner with me tonight.”

“How’s that going?”

“Bout as well as expected, I guess. Better than the old days. Definitely better. Leslie and I get along okay. I guess it’s old hat now. I see Alex pretty much whenever I want and he gets to come over, too. She doesn’t like to drive it, so that’s usually me.”

Steve motioned the bartender for two more beers. “He still got his rabbits?”

“We got one left. Archie. A fat lazy goof of a rabbit. Alex has moved on – he’s got two gerbils, an aquarium, a parakeet, and a cat. That’s just at my house. We released a water snake out in the bayou Sunday.”

“That’s cool. Still crazy about animals.”

“You know most kids have sport stars on their bedroom walls. He’s got wild animals on his– elephants, snakes, dolphins.” The bartender placed the beers in front of them and Simmons guzzled the one in his hand. “He watches all those PBS things – *Wild Kingdom*, *World of Survival*, *National Geographic*, all that shit. In fact, we’re over at my sisters tonight, and he turns on this show that was really cool. Some PBS thing. Got me hooked. About this tribe in Africa called the Dinkas. They live in Sudan or somewhere – a lot of droughts, right? Not much food. But there are lakes that have lung fish.”

“Lung fish? Is this a joke?”

“Listen – the lakes dry up because of the drought. But that doesn’t affect the lung fish. The lung fish burrow into the ground. They can live without water for months. They burrow into the lake bed and when it dries up, they’re still alive underground. And they can live like that for months, maybe years!”

“I’ve never heard of any lung fish.”

“It’s true. I saw it tonight on Channel 12. And here’s the best part – say the Dinkas need food. The drought, right? So the Dinka women take sticks and their clay pots and walk on the dry lake bed tapping the sticks against the pots. Underground the lung fish think it’s raindrops and they climb out of their holes and the Dinka women grab them.”

“You’re so full of shit my feet are getting wet. What, these lung fish are like gophers or something?”

“No shit. Try to picture native women tapping clay pots and fish coming out of the ground. They can stay down there for a long time – and the Dinkas fool them into thinking it’s raining. They come up, and they’re caught.”

The word “caught” brought to mind the Pearl Harbor veteran, and DeRidder could see the gray-whiskered, hard face with the stained teeth. *We all get caught, some time or other.* He downed the shot.

Simmons smiled and dropped the cigarette butt on the floor and stepped on it. “The Dinkas fish on land! No water needed!”

“We need some of those over here. Sure would make fishing a lot easier.”

“Well, here’s the thing. You know those fishing tournaments they’re always having? Bass fishing, trout fishing rodeos or tournaments, whatever? Have a lung fishing tournament. Stock a bunch in a lake and then drain the damn lake. It’d make millions! No fuss! Catch fish with your bare hands!”

“You ought to get some land out in the parish and do it.”

“The parish, hell. There’s so much water in the ground out there the lung fish would never come up for the raindrops. They’d have all the water they wanted right in the ground. Hell, probably be able to swim underground out there.” He leaned on the bar and took a swallow from his beer. “Yeah, old Alex. I actually learn things from my own kid.”

The jukebox had stopped and both men turned their heads to watch a tall woman with pigtails stroll to the jukebox and drop some quarters in. A scratchy version of *Mack the Knife* came on and they turned to their beers.

“Shit, and to think we actually considered abortion back then. Damn.” Simmons removed a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and slid a cigarette behind his ear and put another on his lips. “Now it

seems like Alex has always been there. Can't imagine him not being. You know what I mean?" He struck a match to light his cigarette. "We were stupid-ass kids too young for marriage, let alone all the fucking we were doin. But it's turned out all right. We're divorced." He waved the match and dropped it by his foot. "After a hell of a lotta bullshit."

The smoke from the cigarette seemed to hang over DeRidder's glass. There were layers and patterns in the smoke. Moisture from the cold beer ran down the side of the glass. He rubbed his thumb along it, then raised the glass and finished it off.

"I've gotta get going, buddy. Let's get together some time."

"Whatya gotta go for? What kinda hours ya'all workin'?"

"Ten hour shifts."

"Still on the Causeway job?"

DeRidder nodded. "I gotta go. Linda's not feeling well."

"What's wrong?"

"Female trouble." Across the room the woman with pigtails laughed and then smiled at him. She was at a table with another woman and a guy.

"I'm well-acquainted with that," Simmons said, taking a drag on his cigarette. "Need a lift?"

"Thanks, but it's just down the street."

"Call me."

The woman with pigtails said hi when he walked by her table. He nodded to her and went out the door.

A slight breeze blew from across the river. He could smell the water, and wondered what a lung fish looked like. Underground fish, probably tasted like carp.

He was a block from his pickup when a guy stepped out from a darkened doorway and asked, "Hey man, spare some change?"

"No man," he replied, "I don't have any change."

The guy pointed a knife at him. "Give me your money."

The thief was DeRidder's height but thinner. DeRidder's left hand went to his left front pocket and the thief's eyes followed the movement. DeRidder hit him with the other hand. He flicked the knife up but DeRidder knocked it away and hit the guy in the face again and again and he dropped. DeRidder kicked him in the side and put a knee on his chest and hit him and hit him. The thief shut his eyes and groaned, turning his head from side to side as if trying to inch away.

He was breathing hard when he stopped hitting him.

He picked up the knife and tossed it over a roof. A glint of light reflected off the blade as it peaked, then disappeared. He heard it land, a faint tinny sound. The thief curled up, smearing blood on the sidewalk near his face. DeRidder realized it was just a kid, fourteen, maybe fifteen years old. There was movement underneath a parked car and he turned to see a black cat crouched and watching. It stared at him with green eyes before running off into the darkness.

He started to leave but stopped and looked at the boy. He was shaking. DeRidder had the urge to give him some money, but turned instead and walked away. He felt all jumpy. When he pulled the keys out to unlock the door of the truck, he realized he had a gash across his wrist.

A Tupperware container stood like an offering outside the door of their apartment. A large cockroach scurried across the floor as he approached. He picked up the container and lifted the lid.

He unlocked the door and found Linda on the couch. The radio played jazz and silent images flickered on the TV. He held up the container. "French onion soup. Maggie must have been by."

She noticed his wrist right away. "Are you all right?" she asked, swinging her legs off the side of the couch. "It's not deep."

She held his hand and looked at the gash. The blood had smeared and dried on his hand. He knew it was sticky from when he held the steering wheel and gearshift on his way home from the Quarter. He felt sort of light-headed.

"A would-be mugger. I beat the shit outta him. A teenybopper."

"You're carrying money?"

"Not much."

"You fool." She led him into the bathroom and began to clean the wound. "I think you need stitches."

"I kept hitting him. Some lousy kid." He looked down at the blood in the sink. It didn't look like blood. It mixed with water and swirled around the drain.

"I don't feel good about it."

"You definitely need stitches." She bent over to get a closer look at the cut, and held his arm to the light.

"Where've you been?"

"Molly's. Ran into Simmons. What Maggie say?"

"She wanted to know how I was feeling."

"And how are you feeling?"

"I never wanted to deal with it, you know?" She held his wrist wrapped in a washcloth.

That was how he felt about it too, but he didn't say anything. The pill was so much more effective. She

refused to take it on political and health reasons that he didn't understand. "We were careless," he said, looking at her hands on his wrist, "with the diaphragm."

"We're careless with a lot of things." She wrapped white tape around the washcloth that covered his wrist. "Maggie got kind of weird on the phone."

"I thought she came by."

"She did, but I didn't answer the door. I didn't feel like talking. I plugged the phone back in thinking you might call. You want to go get stitches?"

"Not tonight."

"She told me about an abortion I didn't know she had. She was at the flea market Sunday and saw Jeremy, this guy she used to live with. About six years ago. And it occurred to her that she had an abortion just before they split up. She was there – at the flea market – waiting for some people who didn't show up, and she thought of that, seeing Jeremy."

She looked at him. He looked down at the bandage. Delicate blue veins broke in jagged patterns on the backs of her hands.

"I must be drunk. I don't understand what you're saying."

"I'll go with you," she said, "to one of those emergency clinics."

"No. The bleeding stopped." He could hear faintly the sound of a saxophone from the radio in the other room. She turned his wrist over, inspecting the bandage.

"Have you ever heard of lung fish?" he asked.

The Dead Zone

Alan Catlin

Sammy's idea of
a down home get
together at the bar
surprised everyone –
Not that a guy
who did twelve
different kinds
of pills – from
laughers – to downers –
to in betweeners –
with his beers
and red wine
wasn't known for
spectacular surprises –
First he placed
the box on the bar
ordered a pint
for himself and
a half pint for Mom –
Mother was never
much of a drinker
even when she was
with us – “Right Mom” –
he said solicitously
to the box – Everyone
just kind of sat there
waiting for what
would happen next –
in fact it was so un-
commonly quiet in
that bar you could
almost hear the head
bubbles evaporating
on her beer

The sign out front indicates TAVERN in
bold neon lettering

Signifying a kind of promised land where
elixirs are sold

Manna falls from heaven and becomes something
more modern more recognizable as food and drink
especially during the Hours of Happiness where the
Buffalo style chicken wings are heavily discounted
and the beer is a loss leader for bigger and better
things Like Long Island Iced Teas, Kamikaze shots,
B-52s, Car Bombs, **Belfast Bombers:**

1 part Jameson's Irish to 1¼ part Irish Creme
Looking into his dark
half moon shaded eyes
you can tell he was
hearing a windswept
Irish sea crashing
against the receding
shoreline of his dreams.
There didn't seem to be
enough Stout in pint

draughts to silence
the insistent funereal
sounds of pipes that
came every morning
with the wake.

Those who enter here don't check above
the door to see if it reads All Ye Who Enter
Here Give Up All Hope

The translations vary but the sentiment is always
the same – we're all in a circle of Dante's Divina
Comedia – we just don't know which one yet
but we sure as hell are going to find out:

Kamikaze

*2 parts Vodka to 1 part Triple Sec
splash of Roses Lime Juice – serve chilled*

They must have
started out somewhere
in another country
and hit every bar
between wherever there
was and here.

They ended up against
the bar around midnight
looking for kamikaze
shots. "Give me
one good reason
to serve you guys," I sd.
"We want to fly out
of the sun into
the blind spots of life."

I made them shots.

It's like working a Dead Zone only you are aware of
another

parallel existence

plane of being

than where the others are sipping cocktails and
plotting the next phase of their descent

or else they are aware and you are isolated in some
kind of fifth dimension of existence working your
way through the moving spheres of the universe

the unperceivable

the unknowable

and the unexplained your milieu.

Hand holders

spirit helpers guiding your way into the dark

a dark that is inescapable

The Big Chill

Kahlua, green Creme de Menthe – blend fifty fifty

He claimed the doctors at
the VA let him out summer
afternoons for a last fling
or two before the Big Sleep.
Always sat at the corner

stools resting his bum leg
on the neighboring seat,
firing down shots of whiskey
with long neck Buds for
chasers. Answers to the name
of Grandpa, telling all who
will listen that his game leg
is the proverbial wooden one,
the one he keeps moldering
in the grave while he moves on.
What he had was incurable,
I thought, and that there were
a lot worse ways to go than
with a heavy load on.

Maybe they should call that last row of seats in the
short L of the bar: The Official Designated Dead
Zone Area – smoking of all kinds permitted, boiler-
makers, shooters, pounders, name your poisons in
whatever size, shape and form it may come in

Everything is permitted zone

The names and faces may change over the years that
seem to last centuries in bar time

but it all amounts to the same thing in the end:

They Who Sat Here Drinking Their Lives Away

Die

screaming or whimpering

what the hell is the difference?

Brave Buffalo

*whatever is left over on the drink making mat
after the end of a long night shift – a shooter*

He was lying
on the barroom floor
checking out a
tequila sunrise
with his cold,
dead eyes.
He looked vaguely
familiar, sort of
like a blast from
the past boss person
I knew years ago
who was heavily into
refighting Vietnam
wars in his mind
shooting scotches down
like he was still
the point man on a
jungle patrol no one
ever came back from.

Life seems condensed when the shooters
are hitting hard

and even though the bar clock is ten minutes fast
time seems to have a stop

a slow motioning forward movement that makes

being here a kind of purgatorial thing
a sensation completely unlike any other
except maybe a play by Sartre called No Exit

Between the Sheets

*Rum, Brandy w/Roses Lime Juice in equal parts
serve up or on the rocks – your call*

There was nothing subtle
about her technique, get
them off balance with a
sweet smile, tender lips,
bedroom eyes promising
unspeakable pleasures
between the sheets.

That she could out drink
a whole division of Marines
didn't hurt her mission
to conquer, subdue and
pillage the dim, unsuspecting
men who thought with the
organ below their waists
instead of the one supposedly
running the show – the one on their
shoulders. Lighting her
cigarette, I make sure sulfur
fumes are directly in her face.

We both smile at that move.

I might represent a challenge.

A challenge or a conquest

the hard way

As a confidence woman

a lamia

she had faith in her innate powers to get her way

failing never enters her mind

but the booze does

and like all chemicals mixtures

how the reaction happens when they get
together in the brain

depends upon the chemist making the mixture

Screaming Banshee

*2oz of light rum, 1oz of Brandy, 2oz of OJ, 1/2oz of
lime juice, 1/2oz of Almond flavored brandy, blend,
aka The Scorpion*

He comes in from
a deep freeze like
some kind of male
Nanook of the North
snow and ice embedded
in his beard, small, pin
needle icicles hanging
from his moustache,
and a mutilated body
suit soiled with grease
and oil smelling like

raging forest fires
and death. The whites
of his eyes burn holes
through the dark lenses
of his goggles like twin
lasers on a heat seeking
mission. Outside his
team of huskies howl an
order at the moon for him
as a substitute for human
speech.

So much depends upon the chemist

All those defining moments in the long
continuum of Time

he is monkeying around with

mucking up the works

as much a part of the problem

as part of any solution

all the black hole dead zone creations of his mind

Home Brew

He was one of those
guys who spent most
of his waking life in
bars that served Old
Milwaukee out of Bud
taps and no one knew
the difference.

Listening to his dark
opinions on the hidden
nature of man and beasts
being nothing more than
empty thought shells some
sick creature put on earth
to piss on whenever the mood
was upon him, made me
think his idea of an Imported
beer was probably Schlitz.

“It’s imported all right.

It’s from Milwaukee.”

Somehow it wasn’t
difficult to imagine
his wife draining three
quarters of his Coors Light
bottles and burying them
neck up in the garden
for the slugs to refill
and in good time replacing
the caps to mix them in
at random with the ones
already chilling in
the fridge.

One minute it seems as if you are in a
guided tour of the Underworld

serving drinks to the cremains of someone’s mother
and the next the dark has become light in the gaping

tunnels of Time – that’s how screwed up the Space
Time Continuum thing gets after while

Before long the Dead Zone stools will be filled
with a crowd of the no longer with us Irregulars
requesting their Usuals from their spots along
the short L of the bar

By then the shadows will have lengthened
inside and out

enveloping

engulfing

enshrouding

everything that seems to be moving

and much that is not

There may seem to be an end to this shifting
unbalance of being but this too is an illusion

The punch clock may give you a printed out reading
of Ins and Outs but it is just writing on paper

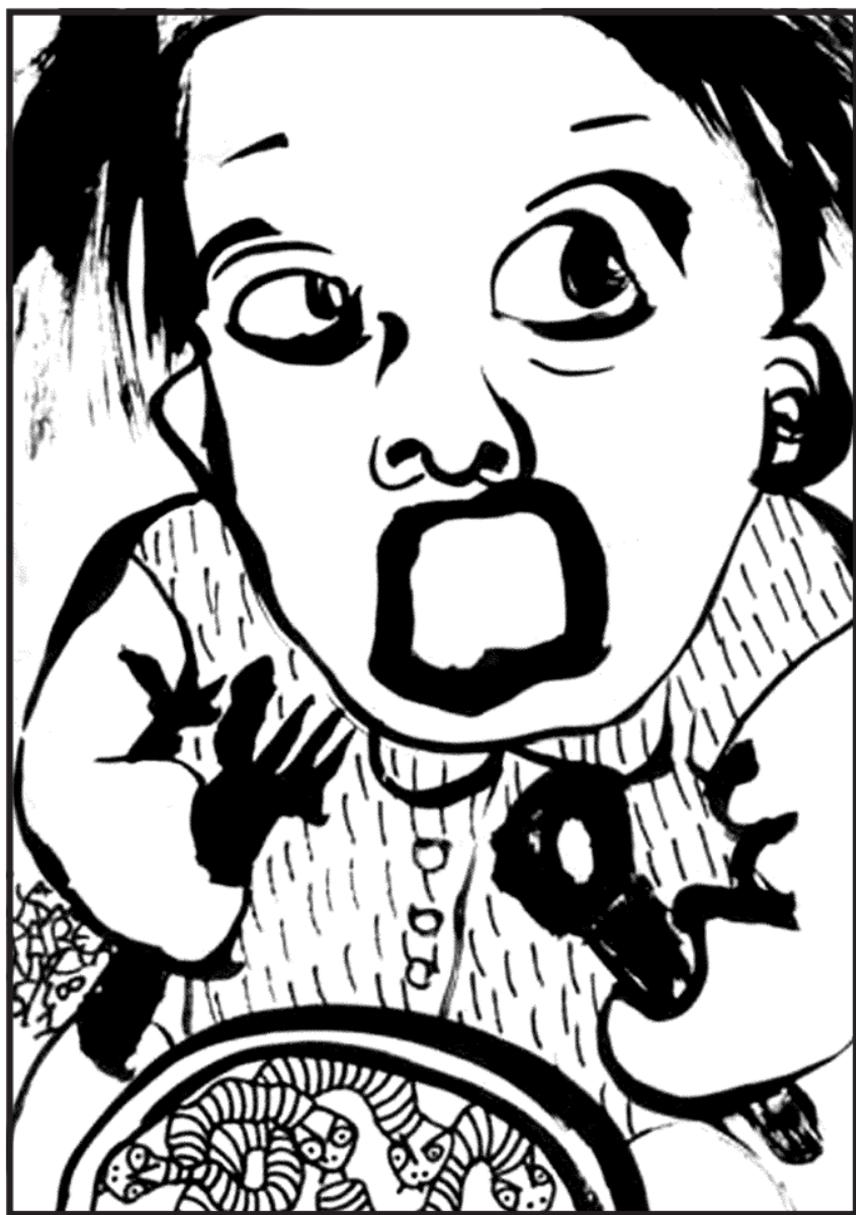
The Dead Zone is everywhere

The rain falls into puddles
 with drops as big as buttons,
 splatter bombing the shallow pools;
 creating concentric ripples
 with nowhere to expand.
 With the first summer rain
 the spadefoot toads end
 eleven months of hibernation.
 The toads emerge
 from deep inside the earth,
 immersing themselves in tiny ponds,
 submerged in miniature desert oceans,
 slurping the monsoon's slobbery kiss;
 passion tasting of spit, slime, sperm and song.
 The frogs sing loudly,
 engaged in a frenzied amphibious orgy,
 eager to make eggs
 while there are still puddles
 to rear the tadpoles.

In the early hours of the day,
 Antonio leans forward
 to sip from his coffee mug,
 where it sits on the table;
 too full to move without spilling.
 Antonio leans forward,
 his lips eager to taste
 the black warm liquid
 while his wife prepares breakfast.
 Antonio likes a traditional O'odham breakfast;
 coffee, beans and fry bread.
 Juanita is tall but not slender.
 There is the voluptuous swell of the hips
 and the two round full breasts
 which sway beneath her nightshirt,
 like puppies wrestling beneath a blanket
 Juanita is X:ud;
 an O'odham word meaning
 "full to the brim."
 A word which can be used to describe
 a rain puddle, a coffee cup,
 or a voluptuous woman.

Antonio kisses Juanita on the cheek
 as he leaves for work,
 the colors of the sunrise streaking the sky.
 The first rays of morning sunshine
 causes the frogs to hide from the light,
 amphibians submerged in the water
 up to their eyeballs.
 A soft rain continues to fall,
 more water than the puddles
 can possibly hold.
 Antonio drives towards work,
 already anticipating his return home

and the sanctuary of Juanita's warm embrace.
The spadefoot toads burrow
back into the earth,
their hungers satiated.
Sleepy from the exertions of their amphibious orgy
the toads hibernate and dream;
dreaming through eleven more months of slum-
ber,
the better to whet the appetite
until
next summer's first monsoon rain
when the spadefoots emerge once again
in sonorous croaking chorus,
a time when the Sonoran desert



claudio parentela

burlesque was bound
to die

when the store down
the street

showed x-rated films
for a quarter

there for a few
brief seconds

you could see
the whole thing

burlesque was bound
to die

when down the street
there was this place

where you walked up
to the second floor

and found yourself
in a room where you

could talk dirty to
the woman on the other
side of the booth
for a price

or when the turntable
went round and round
with naked women
reclining in all kinds
of positions

burlesque died a
gasping death

when the floodgates
opened

and civil liberty
took a different turn.

Dunk Bobo: 3 Shots For a Buck

Deborah Geis

Tennessee Valley Fair, Summer '94

There they are, lining up to be insulted –
and the crowd gathers, leaving an empty space
between themselves and his cage; when you're
around Bobo,
believe me, you don't wanna get in his sight range.
He's puffing on a cigarette – trying to make
his break last a little longer,
and for an instant, before he snaps back,
the boredom and self-hatred flicker on his face.
Then it's back to work: a crewcut boy
of ten or so has handed over money, prepares
to take his shot. "Hey, shorty!" Bobo yells,
"You little wimp!" and the boy misses every time.
Next up comes a woman; he taunts her, "Hey,
blondie! Hey airhead!" The crowd laughs and
whispers as she uses up her last few bucks.
Next comes a frat boy with a Vols cap. Bobo
throws him a few lines 'bout how them Gaters gonna
pound Tennessee; he misses and misses and finally
stalks away, muttering to his friends. Then a guy with
a cut-off t-shirt and lots of tattoos steps up
to take his turn. Bobo wastes no time: "Hey,
you big dumb redneck!" The crowd roars,
the guy aims the ball straight at the target, and
with a little click, Bobo's cage cracks open.
He thunks into the water; we all applaud, joining
for the moment in the joy of retribution, privately
remembering third grade schoolyard tauntings, dates
who stood us up or turned us down, last week's
silent treatment from the loved one, the boss's
snide remarks about our work. But in an instant,
Bobo climbs back up, wet cigarette dangling
from the corner of his mouth
and as he yells, "Hey, fatso!" at the next guy up,
everyone laughs again,
secretly tucking in stomachs
smoothing hair over bald spots
moving back just a little
but always making sure
they're still close enough to hear
what Bobo will say
to the next sucker who pays
to take a shot.

I never thought to ask
her what she ate
or if she ever thought
about what she escaped
I was too busy watching
the gray wafers of confession
falling from her tongue
wondering how many years
they'd rained
& still she wasn't done

I paid too much
for that damn book
& left

& too much
left with me



claudio parentela

The Back Apartment

Nancy A. Henry

Every thrift store candle cup lined up on the mantel. There must be seventy, we like things that twinkle even if we're shabby. Those clay whiskey jugs whisper in their original dust. We know better than disturbing them. The wiser part of gentle living is noninterference. The spiders scatter their babies like wild pinwheels, the little sacs all bursting in one night. The children find them, weeping at how easily they crush.



spiel

BELLY PLACE by spiel

30 « First Class

picasso: woman with a mandolin,

Gerald Locklin

the wooden guitar,
white shawl,
red skirt,
blue chair,
brown/beige wall,
russet hair –
all have a common raison d'être:

to frame and highlight,
defamiliarize, and sensitize

the pale, bare chest,
the small, firm breasts.
the pert and eager nipples
offering themselves to us
like kittens wanting to be played with.

and i think they will be.

johann martin von rohden:

Gerald Locklin

outside the obloid portal
in the rock, a fall of froth
slashed by an oblique
sword of sunlight.

inside, a shallow pool
of aquamarine stillness.

the god deserved his sauna,
spa, and swimming pool,
smooth-stone hot tub for
his mermaid frolicings.

the ancient gods were more
like us: they pointed fingers
as to who might be responsible
for the disastrous engineering
of their lower backs.

they couldn't hold down day jobs,
not in the absence of a barber-
god (the surgeon didn't count –
in fact he couldn't count), and
no evidence of suit or tie or,
for that matter, clothes.

and a good grotto was a bitch
(their term was hera) to find.

no, you didn't get much grotto
for your sand-dollars, not with
the constantly proliferating
deities and demi-gods of multi-
theism. and family planning an
alien concept to these unruly
tenants. you might as well have
called some of them ids instead
of gods. it would take moes to
invent a mono-theo who'd command
a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T. and from
allah on you can be sure the brokers
gave good grotto, not to mention
mosques, cathedrals, temples, and
the whitest little meeting rooms.
also, whatever you would call those
things that gaudi built (other than,
well, gaudy)

but neptune's digs were good enough,
i guess, for the ruler of liquidity,
precursor of the money-market account,
an immortal on the verge of obsolescence,
water on the brain and oil spills just a
couple of millennia down the soon-to-be-
conceived historical thoroughfare:
hail, cronus; hail time; hail,
the impersonal, inexorable destroyer.

The Whole Enchilada

Catfish McDaris

Benito sat in the kitchen
reading his taco splattered
copy of Bukowski, he was
pissed off because his
sister, Pilar, was running
with some low riders

Getting up, he washed
the dishes, went in
the bathroom and checked
out his tattoo of Medusa
in the mirror

Pilar's bra hung from
the shower rod, he tried
it on and smiled, she
had big tits

Benito had been in jail
for six years for car
theft, he took the bra
and threw it out
the window

The phone rang, but he
didn't answer, figuring
it was probably for Pilar

The door bell rang, he
ignored that too, laying
down on the couch, he
studied the ceiling

Where Pilar had painted
a mural of Jose Clemente
Orozco's *Cristo destruye
su cruz*, she had talent,
looks, and intelligence

But he doubted if she'd
ever get out of the barrio
Benito heard gunshots
outside in the street
going over to the window
to investigate, he saw

Two soul brothers lying on
the sidewalk bleeding

Fuck it, he thought
closing the curtains
he listened to the sirens
and went to sleep dreaming
of his third grade teacher.

Soundproof Room That Locks From the

Ryan Robert Mullen

Like any original thought, he had to turn it around a few times before it even made any sense. Finally he just said it, "I'm turning my basement into a soundproof room that locks from the inside." Until he said it he'd forgotten what his voice sounded like, that was Danny's problem. Danny's problem was that he was seventy-eight and still didn't feel like an actual human-being, it didn't go away at thirty like he thought it would. Now, with his wife gone, it was just one less thing to say, "Danny Brown is a real man." He lost substance in his sleep, every morning he woke with less and less. When he said the words out loud, "I'm turning my basement into a soundproof room that locks from the inside," Danny remembered being a small boy playing with Lincoln Logs. That was why he was going to build it – the guy was seventy-eight and all he'd got from life were lots of unfinished ideas that seemed like someone else's. This would be different. All Danny wanted to do was talk to himself – what better way to know himself? Of course, it'd be too embarrassing and too difficult to explain if anyone caught him, that's why he needed a soundproof room that locks from the inside.

While he installed the viscoelastic polymer and sheets of steel Danny felt it working already, "Why didn't I think of this before?" he thought. "Why didn't I think of this before?" Danny said and grinned with his big yellow teeth. In two days he had the whole thing set-up, which was damn good for a guy who's seventy-eight, and all that was left was for Danny to test it. Placing a battery-operated radio in the center of the small room, he tuned in some classic guitar-soloey rock, turned the volume louder than he was capable of speaking, ran out, and shut the door behind him. Not a peep. He opened and closed the cool thick door real quick a few times like how he'd mess with the television volume when he was a kid: volume up, volume off, volume up, volume off – the people would sound funny. Danny laughed.

While Danny laughed, he figured, "Oh hell, why not just step in this thing right now," and that's precisely what he did, stepped in and locked the door behind him. Being in the room itself was kind of creepy, sure it had a light – a bare sixty-watt in the middle of the ceiling. But it was still creepy. The room itself was three feet by three feet and six feet tall, a closet really, with a stool in it. Danny slid his body up on the stool like a new spine and felt the warmth of the light bulb on his forehead and nose. Looking at the shining steel walls which surrounded him with warped reflections Danny realized heat ventilation could become a problem – the box was already getting warm. Dipping his verbal toes into the silence, "I fucked up," said the old man, then recognized his soundproof room as what it was. It was a personal confession booth.

Dempster Dumpster of Hiawatha, Maine was born with two extra orifices on his body. It made all his functions have to do twice the work with its own pleasure and pains. Repeatedly, Mrs. Dumpster, a former Hollywood starlet, took Demp to the greatest specialists down in Boston, but the doctors felt helpless, and Demp would just stare at them, seeing double.

His only friend was Sumatra Waters who lived down the street in a former fallout shelter. Her father, Barney, repeatedly tried to kidnap Dempster and take him to the Austrian circus. But Sumatra always got wind of the plot and saved Demp from deportation.

Dempster had to quit school because of terrible teasing from other students intent on tormenting him. Not only was he a boy with some extra things, but at eleven he stopped growing and developed a stubbed toe. The only people who treated him worse were the teachers, who ignored him, and the clergy who said to his mother they would pray for his death.

One day Sumatra caught her father taking photographs of Dempster, and she destroyed the camera when her father beat her up and forbade her ever to visit Demp.

Sumatra called up her friend. "Dear Demp, Dad won't let me come over."

And Demp said, "But we were going to play Twister! Now no one will talk to me. Mother said you will marry me some day. Will you, Sum?"

"I can't say, Demp. I'm only a teenager myself."

"Perhaps we could elope."

"You'll be easy to spot, especially around here with these press maniacs always going around the street. They tried to catch me nude in the bath. I caught one from *The Boston Post* snooping around and interviewing my father, who probably called him up here. He's obsessed to make money off you. The nerve of him!"

"Can't you get rid of him?"

"Perhaps he feels responsible. Don't say anything. But rumor is that he's really your father too."

"Then we are brother and sister and can't get married!"

"But I don't believe Barney could be your father. I think he wants to get custody of you so he can sell you to that circus."

"Mother would protect me, wouldn't she?"

"But remember the time your mother made you take those pills to make you normal and you almost died? And the time that she left you for a month with that crazy baby-sitter who only fed you Fruit Loops?"

“I like the Fruit Loops.”

Dempster took off his Red Sox cap and gold-rimmed spectacles and pictured himself dancing in a bowl of cereal with strawberries.

“Dempster, what I’m saying is, we need to take care of ourselves from now on. No one is going to do it for us. We need to get away from my father, and that means we have to leave Hiawatha.”

“Mother told me she wants to introduce me to Mr. Mark Mogul, a Hollywood producer. I think Mark was once mother’s boyfriend, but now she is too bulky for love. He wants to bring my life story to the big screen.”

“Who’s going to play you?”

“They’re talking Johnny Depp as the Demp.”

“Wow. He’s cute. Maybe we should wait for Mogul and see what develops. Maybe he’ll bring us both out to Hollywood. I’m as photogenic as the next girl.”

“You’re even sexier than Glenn Close when she was in *Fatal Attraction*.”

“Maybe I could play myself in your life drama, Demp. I always wanted to leave Hiawatha for Hollywood, and I’ve got to do whatever it takes.”

“Mr. Mogul is going to stay over here tomorrow night. That means I have to sleep in the shed.”

“Poor Demp. But soon you’ll be living it up in Culver City. I just wish I could get out of the fallout shelter. There are too many water rats.”

“Including, I’m afraid, your father.”

“He once tried to sell me into white slavery. But I got around my father.”

Sumatra took off her rhinestone-encrusted wiglet and started combing it out.

“Well, I have to go do my math homework now. Make sure to put me in Mark’s little black book on Saturday.”

“I’ll try, but don’t get any funny ideas. You and I are going steady.”

Mark Mogul, in dark sunglasses, came out of his red Maserati with a vodka in his hand. His chauffeur, Baboo, a pale Swede with black pomade on his stringy hair, held Mark up with his one gloved hand and carried the Louis Vuitton suitcase in the other.

Mrs. Mary Louella Dumpster emerged from her front door, wearing baby blue pearls over a white body-suit, doing the sabre dance in Mark’s honor. Once Mary Louella was a legend among the starlet community. Sometimes, truth be told, she starred in stag films for newlyweds in L.A. and Vegas during the 60’s.

Mark interviewed Dempster and Sumatra after a few pick-me-ups and hors d’oeuvres. Baboo, who is also

Mark's valet, is into Chinese cuisine, strictly kosher miniature hot dogs and herbal laxative drinks, and shared them with the group.

Sumatra was thrilled with the ambience and spent some quiet time with Baboo getting her wiglet restyled.

Mr. Mogul asked Dempster if he wouldn't mind, man to man, showing him his attributes. Dempster complied, knowing this is his only chance for success. Mr. Mogul almost passed out but kept his composure and complemented the boy.

"Do you think, Mr. Mogul —" "Call me Mark."

"Do you think I'm a freak?" "Of course not."

"What am I?"

"Beats me. We'd like you to be in the film. Could you be up early tomorrow for a screen test? You will make cameo appearances at the beginning and end of the film, but we are interviewing others for the leading role."

"Aw, shucks."

That night in Hiawatha there was a revival tent meeting, and a neighbor, Mrs. Totem, one of the oldest residents in the community, invited Dempster. Baboo went along as their escort. Mrs. Totem had a chicken neck and wore a dog collar that she had fashioned for a 6-hour protest she led against *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Pastor Poltergeist, wearing a sun bonnet and a white Nehru jacket, had just returned from his mission in Bali full of enthusiasm. He stopped his sermon and said directly to Dempster, who was sitting in the back row sipping on an O'Doul's, "This is the night for you to become a new man." He placed his hand on his head. Suddenly Dempster could feel his rogue orifices closing up. He doubled over in pain for just a moment, and there was a hush in the tent; lifting up his head, he looked like any other guy. Mrs. Totem and others from the town are amazed, and Baboo fell in love.

But it was the end of Dempster's movie career, although the film was made. But *The Orifice* could not live up to its publicity and was pulled from release. It has become a cult favorite for those who are in love with Dempster's story.

Sumatra, on the other hand, was lauded as the star of her one-woman show on Mother Theresa at the Hollywood Bowl.

Dempster was able to attend Maine State College, and after a brief baseball career in Japan became the Junior Senator.

Primates of Orange County

Brian N. Pacula

Dennis Brakely was employed at United Parcel Delivery. His functional purpose in life was to drive a truck around certain areas of Irvine, California, and dispatch packages to homes and businesses. Most people were glad to see Dennis, in an abstract, impersonal sort of way.

Something Dennis didn't know was that his name was the anglicized version of the name "Dionysus," the name of the Greek god of wine. When Dennis was twelve years old, his oldest brother Rod encouraged him to drink so much red wine that he threw up all over his mother's valuable Persian carpet, leaving an ugly, asymmetrical purple stain that could never be washed out. Because of this traumatic incident, Dennis would hate wine for the rest of his life.

Dennis's father had bought the carpet as a gift for his wife. In fact, it was neither valuable nor Persian, but an overpriced, high-quality fake. Dennis's father didn't know this, and neither did his mother, so it didn't matter. In their world, it would always be a priceless heirloom that Dennis thoughtlessly destroyed.

Most of the packages Dennis delivered were the result of mercantile transactions carried out over the Internet. The Internet is one of the many beneficial gifts that mankind has given to itself over the years, just like viticulture and carpet-weaving.

The package Dennis was presently carrying up a driveway was purchased over the Internet. It was a box full of books, and the woman who purchased them could have easily driven to a bookstore three miles away from her home and bought them all there. Instead, she ordered them over the Internet and waited two to three days for United Parcel Delivery to bring them to her door. The reason she liked to buy books over the Internet instead of at a bookstore was because she was shy. Not so shy that she couldn't function properly in the outside world when necessary – she just liked to stay at home and mind her own business as much as possible.

Dennis rang the woman's doorbell. After a moment, he heard agitated footsteps from inside. A muffled voice came from within: "Hold on, I'll be right there!" A minute later, he heard the sound of a latch turning, and the door started to open. The woman's hair was wet, it looked as if she had just been in the shower. As the door swung in, the handle caught the side of the bathrobe she was wearing and tugged it open. She wasn't wearing anything underneath. Very quickly, she pulled it closed again and folded her arms very tightly in front of her chest.

"Oh my God," she said. "I'm so embarrassed."

"I didn't see a thing," Dennis said. This was a

bald-faced lie. He had looked away, but by the time he thought to do so, she had already fixed her bathrobe, so in fact he had seen everything. She still looked mortified, so he said, "Don't even worry about it. Believe it or not, that happens all the time. All of us drivers are used to it," which was another lie. This was the very first time Dennis had ever seen such a thing happen, although he'd heard of a fair number of similar occurrences from other delivery drivers. He had always hoped that he, too, would someday witness such a spectacle, and now that he had, he hoped it would happen again in the near future.

The woman's hand was shaking a little bit as she signed for the package. Her first name was Miriam; she didn't sign a last name. She took the box, thanked Dennis, and slammed her door shut, all without making any eye contact. Dennis walked back to his truck, feeling a little heady and strange. He was embarrassed for the woman, Miriam, and he felt a little guilty, too, even though he hadn't really done anything wrong. On the other hand, this was far and away the most interesting and remarkable thing that had ever happened to him during a work shift. She looked to have been about thirty-five, ten years older than Dennis, but definitely attractive in a Mrs. Robinson sort of way. As he got in the truck, he tried to picture poor Miriam again, with her bathrobe falling open, which kicked up more turbid clouds of excitement and shame in his head.

Don't feel weird, Dennis thought to himself. You're just an intelligent, social, tool-using primate; and intelligent, social, tool-using primates like to look at the secondary sexual characteristics of other intelligent, social, tool-using primates. That's all that's going on here. Now chill out.

This kind of nonsense was going through Dennis's head all the time. He knew that when all is said and done, the destiny of the human race is ruled by chemicals and hormones that want nothing else in life but to maximize the reproductive success of the intelligent, social, tool-using primates whose bloodstreams they inhabit. Nothing wrong with that. Dennis had a good layman's understanding of the natural sciences. The problem was that Dennis thought that just keeping this perspective in mind at all times somehow made him rational and wise.

Nobody knew about Dennis's private little philosophy of life, so nobody could tell him that going around thinking about everything in terms of biological determinism was kind of a creepy and pointless way to conduct his day-to-day affairs.

Creepy and pointless: two adjectives that describe Dennis Brakely.

Dennis had a moderately creepy tattoo on his left arm. He got it when he was nineteen years old and wanted the most cryptic and ineffable symbol he

could possibly find permanently inked into his arm. What he finally decided on was the bizarre pyramid with the floating eye that's printed on the back of the one-dollar bill. It was pointless: Dennis didn't know what the symbol meant or why it was printed on currency.

After delivering books to the shy woman who accidentally flashed him, Dennis made another stop just a couple blocks away and delivered a package to a forty year old venture capitalist with prematurely gray hair. Dennis had made deliveries to this particular address many times before, so he and the guy who lived there were more or less casual acquaintances, which didn't mean a whole hell of a lot to either of them. But when Dennis rang the doorbell that morning, the guy answered the door wearing an old white undershirt. This would have been pretty inconsequential if not for the fact that Dennis could now see that this man had a tattoo on his arm nearly identical to his own. Without a word, Dennis set the man's package on the ground and rolled up his shirt-sleeve, leaning forward to show the man his own pyramid tattoo.

The venture capitalist raised one eyebrow and smiled patiently, realizing that he was now obligated to marvel at the coincidence and make polite small talk about body art with his delivery guy.

As it turned out, the venture capitalist had the one-eyed pyramid tattooed on his arm because the symbol meant something to him: it meant "money." But he knew what it meant to the people who had placed it on the back of the one dollar bill, too. The floating eye was the Eye of Providence that watches over everybody, and the pyramid represented the perpetually unfinished work involved in building up a nation. The venture capitalist explained all this to Dennis, who hadn't ever known what the eye and the pyramid symbolized.

Now Dennis knew what his creepy tattoo actually meant: hard work and providence.

Locked in her bedroom, shy Miriam who bought books over the Internet cried and cried because Dennis Brakely, an intelligent, social, tool-using primate, had seen her secondary sexual characteristics. From that day forward, she would always request that Federal Express deliver her packages, even though it would cost more money, in order to ensure that she would never, ever have to see Dennis Brakely again, ever.

Meanwhile, on Dennis Brakely's left arm, the Eye of Providence stared into the fabric of his shirtsleeve. Even when covered up, the Eye of Providence sees all and knows all. If the Eye had a mouth to speak with, it might have told Dennis that he was going to die in just a few paragraphs. An intelligent, social, tool-using primate was going to kill him in a fit of misdirected anger, but no tools would be involved:

the other primate, much larger than Dennis, would do it with his bare hands.

A few words about the killer ape Dennis is fated to meet: his name is Gil Templeman, and his favorite song when he was younger was “Bad, Bad Leroy Brown,” because he could readily identify with the character of Leroy Brown. Gil was badder than old King Kong and meaner than a junkyard dog, just like Leroy. The only part of the song that Gil didn’t care for was the ending, where Leroy gets his ass kicked by some lady’s jealous husband. Gil was big and tough enough to hurt just about anybody he wanted to, so he couldn’t relate to that.

Meanwhile, inside his house, the venture capitalist with prematurely gray hair opened the package that Dennis had brought to him. The package contained several pornographic videotapes. Dennis, always blissfully ignorant of the exact contents of his deliveries, brought these videotapes, often up to three or four per order, to the venture capitalist’s house every four to six weeks. The venture capitalist’s name was Steve, he liked pornography, and he felt perfectly fine about that and didn’t need to justify it to anyone.

Steve had the Eye of Providence tattooed on his right arm. The Eye looked into Steve’s auspicious future. It saw that Steve would meet a beautiful, intelligent, exciting woman who hates tattoos and pornography. The Eye saw Steve using the Internet to help him sell his videotape collection to other pornography enthusiasts.

Then the Eye saw its own destruction as Steve underwent laser tattoo-removal surgery: and the Eye was sure afraid.

Gil Templeman, the big ox of a man who was just like Bad, Bad Leroy Brown, had a friend who was practically his twin. Eddie Pitcher was also a big, hulking, socially maladjusted behemoth, but there were also a few differences. Eddie had a much more impressive criminal record, most of it having to do with drug possession, although there were the two arrests for attempting to solicit sex from an undercover vice cop. He eventually matured somewhat and started drinking legal, socially acceptable alcohol instead of using harder drugs, mostly because of Gil’s influence. Eddie also had a gland problem that slowly atrophied the part of his brain that made him feel concern for the well-being of others.

This is how Gil and Eddie became friends: one afternoon in 1984, they accidentally jostled each other at a seedy bar in Anaheim, and got into a fistfight. Eddie was real coked up at the time and he broke Gil’s nose. Afterward, they had a few Coronas together and formed a lasting bond of friendship.

Gil and Eddie lived in a poor neighborhood of Orange county and more or less ran the place like feudal barons, enjoying life as best as they could

and asserting their authority however possible: they would organize rowdy block parties, beat up drug dealers, have sex with other mens' wives, stuff like that.

Gil was the leader. He kept Eddie stabilized and steered him away from serious trouble. Sometimes people that Eddie messed with would threaten him with a lawsuit, the police, small claims court, or whatever. Gil would usually go and talk to these folks, using both calm, reasonable words and the subtle, veiled threat of physical violence to dissuade them from pursuing legal action against his friend Eddie.

(It's funny how easy it is to get what you want from people when you make use of reasonable words combined with the veiled threat of physical violence.)

Unfortunately, Gil wasn't always available to look out for Eddie's best interests. One night, Eddie pestered and harassed an unfamiliar woman so relentlessly that she got to the point where she started to seriously worry that he was going to try to rape her, and so, fearing his great size, she took a small pearl-handled revolver out of her handbag and shot him full of bullets until he died. He actually wasn't going to rape her, but how was she supposed to know that? He was huge, inebriated, and terrifying. A court of law reassured her that she had acted in self-defense.

So that's how Gil Templeman's best and only friend died. That's why he was in such a staggeringly foul mood even before Dennis Brakely broadsided his pickup truck.

Incidentally, the woman who shot Eddie Pitcher had nightmares about having killed a man for the rest of her life, even when she was a very, very old.

This is why Dennis Brakely broadsided Gil Templeman's pickup truck: he was too preoccupied and distracted to drive safely. He was thinking about the breasts he had seen that belonged to Miriam, the shy woman who bought books over the Internet.

After he coasted past a stop sign and plowed into Gil's pickup, he was mostly worried about having damaged his delivery truck, because he didn't want to lose his job. All things considered, he should have worried instead about the newly friendless raging bull of a man climbing out of his banged-up pickup truck with a murderous glare in his salty eyes.

Dennis exited his vehicle, too. His legs felt rubbery. "Shit," he said. "I'm sorry, man." These are very common things for an intelligent, social, tool-using primate to say when he has just caused a horrifically stupid accident.

As the unpleasant reality of the situation began to sink in, Dennis noticed that the man who had been driving the pickup truck looked extremely pissed.

The delivery truck was more or less okay, but the other guy's vehicle had been struck in the engine and it looked awful. Twisted machinery bulged from the hood, engine fluids bled freely onto the road, and a pillar of smoke and steam was drifting skyward. Dennis uttered a profanity again, in order to better convey the depths of his sorrow and remorse to the other driver. Because he was shaken and alarmed, what he specifically blurted out, without thinking, was this: "Jesus Fuck."

"Jesus" was the name of an intelligent, social, tool-using primate who, according to certain other intelligent primates, might be the son of the creature whose eye is floating above the pyramid printed on

the back of the one-dollar bill. "Fuck" is an impolite synonym for sexual intercourse. The words don't really mean anything or make much sense when put together, but for Dennis, somehow, it seemed fitting and appropriate to verbally juxtapose the sacred and the profane in such a way at that particular moment.

"Jesus" and "Fuck" would be the last two words ever spoken by Dennis Brakely, for immediately afterward Gil began to pummel him without mercy against the side of his own delivery truck, and would not stop until well after the point of his death.

Two days later, Miriam would pay Federal Express seven dollars to ship a package that would cost only four dollars to ship with United Parcel Delivery. If only she knew that she had indirectly caused the death of the very delivery person she was paying good money to avoid! All she did was catch her terrycloth bathrobe on a moving door handle, but if Dennis hadn't been so preoccupied by thinking about her accidental exposure, he never would have missed the stop sign and rammed into Gil's pickup.

She almost found out. Her local television news ran a story about the shocking midday assault that claimed Dennis' life. But she didn't like to watch violent, tragic stories on the news, so she changed the channel before the TV station could show her a still picture of Dennis in his United Parcel Delivery truck driver's uniform. She did see the scary-looking photo of Gil Templeman they showed, however, and heard the anchorperson describe the attack as

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having been caused by “road rage.”

Gil didn't suffer from “road rage.” It was just plain old-fashioned garden-variety rage that churned up the bile in his stomach, the kind of rage that comes from tragedy and helplessness and existential horror, not tailgaters or red-light runners or people who don't use their turn signals.

Gil didn't know how to process this kind of rage into something harmless and socially acceptable, like a bad poem or a week-long crying jag or something like that, so he had punched Dennis Brakely over and over again until the poor kid's head was too messed up to deliver blood to his brain properly, and he died. So Gil was going to spend the next twenty-five years or so in prison.

Gil Templeman would have found Dennis Brakely's mental constructs of primates and biological determinism to be meaningless, puerile bullshit. In a word, pointless.

Why was Gil Templeman so aggressive and powerful that he beat poor Dennis Brakely to death? Chemicals and hormones.

Remember Steve the venture capitalist and the mysterious woman who would cause him to change his tattooed, porn-loving ways? As it turned out, that woman happened to be the driver who took over Dennis Brakely's delivery route after he died. Steve hadn't heard about what happened to Dennis, either. He never had time to watch the local news, he was always too busy reading financial papers, buying and selling stocks, making important phone calls, meeting with entrepreneurs, and of course, watching pornography.

That's why Steve was surprised and a little nervous when a beautiful, intelligent, exciting woman showed up on his doorstep to deliver his most recent selection of pornographic videotapes. When he took her pen to sign for the package, he tried to touch her hand.

Steve kept the porn coming so he could see her again. One day, they got to talking, and she told him about how she'd gotten assigned to his route because the previous driver, who Steve sort of halfway remembered, died a tragic, lamentable death in a savage beating over a car accident.

Steve didn't have time to feel sorry for Dennis Brakely's tragic, lamentable death. Steve was in love!

On a Saturday afternoon later that year, at the very same moment that Steve the venture capitalist formalized an agreement to sell a lonely man in Minneapolis two hundred and fifty-two pornographic videotapes for only one thousand dollars, the shy woman whose breasts had inadvertently lead to the death of Dennis Brakely bought some compact discs at an actual brick-and-mortar record store because

she was sick of paying so much money in shipping charges to Federal Express.

Miriam was shy, but she was very smart and well-educated. She could have told Dennis Brakely's parents that their expensive Persian carpet was a fake. She knew a thing or two about Persian carpets. She also would have known how to remove the stubborn purple wine-vomit stain.

Fat lot of good all that does for Dennis, now.

Miriam was named after a character in the Bible. Dennis Brakely never read the Bible. Gil Templeman would, ten years into his prison sentence, for lack of anything better to do. Miriam read the whole thing when she was only thirteen years old. And Steve, the venture capitalist? He's read the Bible, the Book of Mormon, L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and about half of the Koran.

What is Steve's learned verdict? "They're all a crock," he says, to anyone who asks. "All of them. They're all nothing but a bunch of made-up fairy tales and superstitions."

What Steve means, of course, is that he recognizes the fundamental truths present in every type of faith.

Miriam didn't spend much of her adult time thinking about religion. After all, she read the entire Bible, both testaments, when she was only thirteen. That ought to be enough.

Zap! That's the sound of the tattoo ink in Steve's right arm being disintegrated by lasers. Zap!

The Eye of Providence on Steve's arm is dying. It takes one final glimpse into the future and sees the inevitable dissolution of Steve's new relationship. It'll go down like this: Steve will start to resent having sacrificed his porn and his tattoo for a person who he doesn't perceive as having made any real changes or accommodations to her own life-style for his sake. He'll deal with this by acting like a passive-aggressive jerk instead of talking about what's bothering him. Dramatic arguments and tearful reconciliations will follow. Eventually the couple will realize they are too incompatible to form a healthy, sustainable union, and Steve and the beautiful, intelligent, exciting United Parcel Delivery employee will agree to part company.

Zap! The laser surgery is very expensive.

Zap! The Eye of Providence on Steve's arm is now blind, but it laughs at him. It laughs and laughs.

This is the epilogue: Miriam is shy, but she has a few friends. One of them is named Carol Franklin, and guess what? She's the lady that shot and killed Eddie Pitcher. Strange coincidence! They have coffee and cheesecake together at Miriam's house every once in a while. In a roundabout, blameless sort of way,

they're both responsible for the chain of events that killed Dennis Brakely, but neither of them are the least bit aware of that fact.

Miriam knows that Carol once shot a man in self-defense. Carol knows that Miriam accidentally flashed her delivery guy one time. It's months later, now, and they talk about other things. Right now, Miriam is telling Carol about her agoraphobia in anecdotal, easily relatable terms.

"I hate those club cards they make you use at the supermarket, now," is one of the things Miriam says. "And how they read your name out loud off the receipt. It drives me nuts."

"Oh, me too," says Carol. Carol has been quiet and a little distant ever since the day she shot and killed Eddie Pitcher. Miriam can't tell if Carol really agrees with her, or if she's just trying to be polite.

"Honestly, I would just go to Von's, but they're so far out of the way," Miriam continues. "I get the strangest looks from the employees, there, too, you know."

Carol nods her head.

"I mean, it's not the end of the world," says Miriam. "It just bugs me."

"Miriam, I'm surprised you don't buy your groceries on the Internet by now," says Carol. It's the longest sentence she's said to Miriam all afternoon.

Miriam has no idea whether or not Carol is being facetious.

Millions of miles away, Carol just sips her coffee. And so on, etcetera.

Plaza de Toros

Charles P. Ries

The Matador handed me the bull's severed ear,
a trophy of his victory and the bull's predictable defeat.
They called him *El Tiempo Grande*.
They save the biggest bull for last.

His ear filled my hand.
I raised it to the sky and to the crowd
saluting El Toro's strength, and rage, and defeat
at the hands of Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza.

Pressing the bull's ear to my own, I heard:
the morning of his birth
the pastures of Southern Mexico
the blood as it seeped into the ground
the last glimpse of the sun
the tears as they cut his throat

As they dragged his carcass out of Plaza de Toros,
I saluted and cheered him again,
he who symbolized the burden of rage
and the insanity of being born male.

April 17 - Big news! I think I have killed Great-Uncle Benjamin. More tomorrow.

April 18 - Mama says it was a heart attack which took Great-Uncle Benjamin from us. Is that so? I think to myself. Only God knows when our time will come, she says. But isn't that the very same thing she said about Great-Aunt Edna?

I had been visiting both of these people just before they died. So I wonder – as anyone would – if I have the touch of death. If I find that is so, I must remember to be careful, and try not to spend any time with the elderly or the sickly.

April 26 - Auntie Iris (who is not really an aunt at all, but the nice, nice woman who owns the bakery shop) has great, clacking jaws that come at you like a steam shovel. When I was young, this terrified me. She would draw near me for a kiss, and all I could see was that enormous head, all I could hear was the frightful sound of those great jawbones trembling.

Even so, her cakes and pies were known all over town.

And now Mama tells me that Aunt Iris has fallen ill. Of course she has! Why, didn't I just visit her last week to pick up strawberry tarts for Janka's birthday party? I am murdering all the old people and don't know how to stop myself!

May 2 - I am resigned to my fate. Perhaps I am the angel of death.

Papa reads the newspaper and knows everyone in the village, so each day I ask him who has died or who is ill. I think he is beginning to be suspicious.

May 5 - School is not always interesting to me. I will confess that I might daydream from time to time. But today, in Religious History studies, a wonderful discovery: Just as I had turned the page to learn about the fierce battles fought by King David, I saw that my book had been coated with blood! Was it a sign from God? Was it a cruel prank played on poor schoolchildren?

Upon closer inspection, it seems that the blood was from a plump mosquito which must have been smashed in the book, leaving the blood of some unknown person on its pages.

May 14 - Mama says it is important to remember our "folklore." This morning she told Janka and myself an old story of how people in the village would gather on a certain night, in a certain place, where they would be visited by the spirits of those who would die in the coming year. If you saw a shadow of yourself, you were doomed. Even more fascinating, the spirits would appear in the way that the people had

died – such as from a traffic accident or a war injury or a drowning or some awful disease.

“Is it true?” asked innocent little Janka. Mama laughed and said that people will believe whatever they choose to. Well, it is real enough for me. More nightmares tonight!

May 19 - The Catholic Church in the village has burned down. They do seem to use an awful lot of candles. Nobody was there at the time, and I am glad for that, of course. Still, I wish to visit just to be sure there are no charred bodies that the fire team may have missed.

May 24 - Heard a beautiful story in history class today! Someone (Who? A field general? A doctor?) captured the final breath of the great emperor Napoleon. It is in a small jar in a museum in America.

Note: Ask Dr. Kaplan if he has saved any dying breaths from those who have died under his care.

May 28 - When the Great Rains came to western Europe in the last century, some villages had their burial grounds destroyed by the rising rivers. This is what Mr. Levek told us at school.

Now, what do you suppose this would be like? You tuck yourself into bed at night, then the coffins secretly rise up during the night in the raging waters, and when you awake in the morning, you find that they have come to your door to visit!

I shudder at this!

June 1 - Papa tells me that I must stop visiting the graveyard and spend more time on my school-work. I plead for him to reconsider. These visits can teach me about art and nature and history and even arithmetic, I tell him. My pleas do not soften his heart.

Note: Graveyard visits must take place after school. This way there is less suspicion.

June 10 - The coroner in town is called Mr. Wojtus. His name is listed in the village telephone directory. Perhaps one day I will call him for a visit. Oh, I have so many questions!

June 14 - A walk through the Deep Woods which lie between our village and the next can be a thrilling adventure. Late yesterday afternoon, I walked alone through the giant trees and came upon an old stone house. Certainly, no human being had lived there for many years. Yet all around were little signs of life. A rusty tiller for a forgotten garden, a carefully made wooden chair, a tiny bicycle, and some wildflowers which I picked for Mama.

I was very late to come home for dinner. But the punishment I received (an early bedtime) was well worth this amazing journey.

June 20 - The cinema in our town is a cheery place, good for neighbors to visit and children to play. It does not offer us the equipment to watch sound movies, so all we see are silly silent movies from America, from Europe and from Russia. This is good fun for everybody.

June 25 - Mother and I went to the butcher's shop today, and Mr. Motycka the Butcher told me a horrible, wonderful story. When chickens and turkeys are slaughtered, he said, it is not unusual for their heads to live on long after they have been violently separated from their twitching bodies.

Once, this very man killed a rooster whose body then lived on for hours – and then days – and then months! This poor, headless chicken saved himself from the soup pot by living for more than one full year with no head! Oh, what a fabulous tale.

July 4 - Mama and Janka and I went into town today to buy meat and milk and bread and root vegetables for soup and storage and maybe even some delicious fruit.

This town has the stench of death, I know it does. But Mama tells me it's just the fishmongers.

July 11 - How to Poison Your Sister, Chapter One: Mama cleaned the kitchen today, and I helped her. What she did not know was that I saved some of the old spoiled food that was to be thrown away, beat it soft with a hammer and fed it to Janka as my Great Magical Goop. Sadly, my sister did not fall for the trick.

Then, somehow, the cat got into the goop and threw it up all over the parlor floor.

This did not work out the way I had hoped.

July 15 - A new fascination: The wrecking ball! Some of the old buildings in town are coming down, and the men use a giant steel ball that swoops in and turns brick and stone and wood into little smoking heaps. It's a fantastic sight!

I watch these things whenever I have the chance.

It warms my heart to see such destruction. I suppose I should say that it is also nice to see a new building come up to replace the old one.

July 22 - Mama says I must brush my teeth every morning. This, I believe, can help if a person is burned or mangled beyond recognition, because then only a dentist can identify these poor bodies.

July 23 - It is a beautiful day and I should play outside. This is what Mama says. So I take Janka to the graveyard and we spend the day making rubbings of headstones. People certainly died young in the old days, didn't they?

July 27 - Papa works every day and has little time for fun. But he has announced that he will go sailing

tomorrow with some of his mates on one of the large lakes just outside the village. He asks if I would like to come along. I am terrified of water, but fascinated by the possibility of drowning. What a glorious, horrible way to leave the mortal world! I think of all the sailors who have lost their lives in history's great shipwrecks. I wonder how they spent their final moments. Did they say a prayer as their lungs filled with the cold, black water?

I tell Papa I would prefer to stay home. He tells me the other men are bringing their sons and that I have no choice.

Oh, dear. Is this to be my final entry?

July 28 - Well, friends, I have survived! Sailing was most pleasant. Papa says I acted like a real man after I stopped crying.

August 1 - Read a book today about science. The Nobel Prize is named for Alfred Nobel, the same man who invented dynamite. So I wonder: If we took all the people who have been killed by dynamite and put them in a room with the people whose lives have been saved by the Nobel scientists – which group would be larger?

Now I know that I would like to win one of these Nobel Prizes for myself. Perhaps for science, or for writing, or maybe just for good behavior. No matter. And when I also win my Olympic Gold Medal for sprinting, I will be the first man alive to win both awards!

August 6 - It was 40 years ago, near the turn of the century, that a local child went missing. His parents were anguished, and it is a terrible story. The little boy's body was never found. The grown-ups in our village don't speak of it, but all of us children know just the same. Ever since, boys and girls have searched everywhere, in our play areas, behind the shops, even in the farmers' fields and barns to find Peter. Poor, dear Peter. It is a tragic mystery.

August 11 - In a normal day, I probably do not think too much about salted herring. But once again, Mr. Motycka the Butcher has given me a story that's filled my head with wonder and joy. Several years ago, it seems, the lakes and streams in our little town were not giving us any fish. This led Mr. Motycka to purchase many barrels full of herring fermented with salt for the villagers to buy. But the barrels had not been sealed properly, and as our dear Butcher opened them, the smell was so bad that birds dropped dead out of the sky! Oh, dear! This is a funny picture for my mind to see!

August 13 - Now I am having dreams about Lada, my dear four-legged friend who we lost in a traffic accident in the winter. Last week as I slept, and again last night, Lada was with me just like before. We played "fetch" and wrestled and splashed in the river together.

She was the best dog a boy might have. And now I believe I love her all the more, since she has broken through the wall that separates the living from the dead to visit me in dreams.

Oh, Lada!

August 15 - Read a story today about an ancient king who turned his subjects into furniture! Can you imagine? What is it like to light a lamp made from a skull, to turn a knob made from a bone, to wear a coat of human hair? It's a horrible idea. How can people treat one another this way? Yet I find this sort of thing interesting and fascinating. Hurrah!

August 31 - Papa told the family today that we will be moving soon. He was mad and trembling and Mama was crying. What is to become of us and our friends and our little village? I am sad and a little afraid and poor Janka is just in pieces over this.

Why does that horrible Mr. Hitler hate the Jews and what does he want with Poland anyway?

More tomorrow.



STOP by robert roden

1. The Schoolhouse

They build the schoolhouse on the land where Tita Zarzuela's house burned down. Tita was in the house when it burnt down, so she isn't around now to argue when a bunch of *americanos* come poking around.

They arrive in a bus, a big blue one, but there are trucks, too, filled with fresh lumber. It is the dry season, before the roads get washed out, and the dust rises in great clouds when the bus stops to let them off. Out they come, like a stream of ants. They all have matching yellow t-shirts that say *Jesus Saves!* in big letters. All that yellow hurts my eyes.

The first night, the *americanos* pitch tents and start campfires and sit around singing songs until late. There are men and women and even a few kids. My little brother, Carlito, goes over to investigate, then reports back to us. So many people! You'd think it was a party, he says, except there is no cashew wine and the music isn't very good. Later that night, I hear for myself, and he's right. Those poor *americanos* sing so high and thin, it's like my little brothers when they're whining for sweets.

The next morning the *americanos* are up bright and early, hammering. We don't help them, we just stand around and watch. At first, we can't figure out what they are doing, and then, when they say they're building us a schoolhouse, we can't figure out why they are doing it. We already have a schoolhouse. Mama Sofia runs it out of the community center. My *abuelo* hears about the schoolhouse and says, it must be an election year. People from the capitol always come and do things for you right before they need your vote. One year, we got a basketball net. Another time it was free bottles of Coca Cola. My *tío* doesn't think any political party would send a bunch of *gringos* to make nice, though, so the reasons for our schoolhouse remain a mystery.

Once, when he is feeling brave, Carlito asks the *americanos* why they're making us the school. They go off in their broken Spanish about *Díos, el Gran Creador y su hijo, Jesus*. Carlito just nods and smiles like he understands. We know all about God and Jesus, but we can't see what *El Gran Creador* has to do with our schoolhouse. According to Carlito, these *americanos* aren't even Catholic.

After a few weeks, the schoolhouse is done, and the *americanos* leave. As soon as they are gone, the whole village runs to get a look at what they've made. Some people laugh. Others scratch their heads, wondering how the United States has become so powerful when they make houses like this. It's a funny-looking building, short and squat, with no stilts to

protect it from the rainy season. We aren't sure what to do with it. We can't have school there, because it will be flooded up with mud half the year. Anyway, it's too far away, five kilometers from the center of the village where most people live. Except for the nights when sweethearts sneak in for a bit of fun, the schoolhouse stays empty.

2. The Teachers

The teacher girls come at the start of the wet season. Right away they want to know, where is the new schoolhouse? Everyone coughs and shrugs and pretends not to understand their Spanish. Eventually someone takes them over to Tita Zarzuela's land, so they can see for themselves how the mud has poured in and covered the schoolhouse floor. They see how the mosquitoes have been breeding, so as you come near, you get bitten up all over your face and arms. Inside the house, they see little plants springing up from the floors.

We use the community center for our school, Mama Sofía tells the teacher girls, and they don't argue. Okay, they say with big fake smiles, *está bien!* Works for us! They have come to teach us English.

They are both *gringas*, and we can never keep them straight. One has an easy name, Ann, and one has a hard name, Bethany, with a *th* sound that trips our tongues. No one can tell which teacher is which, because they both have yellow hair and blue eyes and skin pale as the moon. We don't want to hurt their feelings by mixing up their names, so we just call them both Miss Teacher. Miss Teacher, I need to use the bathroom. Miss Teacher, he's bothering me.

The teacher girls never walk to school because Ancho drives them. He is the richest man in the whole village. My mother tells me, marry one of Ancho's sons, then you'll always have plenty. Ancho is proud to drive the teachers around in his truck. He says you can tell the quality of a woman by her teeth, just like you can in animals, and those teacher girls have the finest teeth he's ever seen. Every day the teachers sit in the back of his truck and go bump bump bump down the road. We see them as we walk to school sometimes, and we wave, we yell *Hola!* When the road is flooded, Ancho drives slow through the puddles and all the boys race him. The truck spatters their shirts orange with mud, but nobody minds except the mothers when they have to do the washing.

Before long, one of the teacher girls gets very sick. She has a fever, and everything she eats comes right back out. This happens a lot with *gringos*, my mother says. The sick teacher spends a lot of time in the outhouse and she never comes to school. For weeks we are left with just one Miss Teacher, but we never ask which one it is, Ann or the girl with a name too hard to say.

3. The Students

The worst student is Luis. We all know he is the worst, and Miss Teacher knows, too. When we study with Mama Sofía, he asks so many questions she has to hit him with her pointer stick. With Miss Teacher, he just fools around. A lot of kids do, even the good ones, because Miss Teacher never hits you when you're bad. She just looks at you with a sad face and says in Spanish, I am very disappointed.

I'm one of the good students, because I pretend to listen *always*. I raise my hand and sometimes I say the right answer, even though a lot of the time I don't really know what she's talking about. If I say the wrong answer, Miss Teacher says, good effort. Some of the kids hate English, but I think it's okay. It's better than math. Mostly Miss Teacher shows us pictures and asks *¿Qué es?* And we have to say the English word. Or she'll ask, *¿cuántos son?* and you have to say the right number. My *abuelo* says it's important to know English because maybe you could go to the United States and get a job and make a lot of money. Anita DeSanto's brother lives there and he has a television.

Miss Teacher has a stack of papers that she stares at while she teaches. Right in the middle of our lesson, she'll stop what she is saying so she can check her papers. Then she remembers what to say, and goes on talking. Sometimes we wonder if she isn't very smart, because Mama Sofía never teaches us from papers. She knows everything in her head.

One day when her back is turned, Luis steals the whole stack. He shoves the papers up his shirt and crosses his arms so you can't see them. Before she can notice what he's done, he excuses himself to go to the bathroom. We all begin to giggle.

What's so funny? Miss Teacher asks, smiling as if we might include her in the joke.

Nothing, we say.

She shakes her head, still smiling, and continues talking. She is talking about verbs. No one in the room knows what a verb is, but when she asks, *¿me entiendes?* we all nod enthusiastically. Oh yes, we say, verbs! like we can't get enough of them. That's the only way to make her talk about something else.

Great, Miss Teacher says, and goes to look at her stack of papers. When she sees that it is gone, her mouth falls open. Then she catches herself. All right, she says, in Spanish so there will be no misunderstanding, *¿quien los tiene?* Who's got them? No one says a word, but Luis comes strolling in at exactly that moment, and we don't have to.

Luis, she asks, *¿donde están mis papeles?*

I don't know, he says with a big grin. Mama Sofía would've whipped him right there, but that *gringa*

teacher won't lay a hand on him and he knows it.

Did you hide them? she asks, did you hide them when you went to the bathroom? He doesn't say anything, just keeps on smiling, and she says, *por favor, Luis, es muy importante.*

Okay, Miss Teacher, Luis says, don't flip your lid. He is so cocky and she is so upset that it's not funny anymore. I'll tell you what I did with your papers, he says. He gestures obscenely like he's wiping his backside, then laughs in her horrified face before skipping out the door. I'm not coming back, you know, he calls over his shoulder. Who cares about English?

We all try to comfort her, even the boys, but Miss Teacher cries anyway. That embarrasses us. Quiet down, Miss Teacher, we say, it'll be okay. *Siempre habrá una mañana.* Tomorrow always comes. Nothing we say makes it better, though.

My lesson plans, she weeps. He threw away all my lesson plans! What will I teach you now? Unsure of what she was teaching us before, we have no real answer. It is Carlito, my clever little brother, who finally knows what to say.

Verbs, Miss Teacher, he tells her solemnly, you'll teach us verbs.

Yes, yes, we agree in eager chorus, verbs! We pat her hand and try to look like the most interested pupils she's ever seen. Maybe she's not a very good teacher, but we don't want her to feel bad. Besides, she looks so young when she cries. Pretty almost, if you overlook her funny eyes.

wordmakers

Luis Cuauhtémoc Berriozábal » Lives in West Covina, California and works in the mental health field.

James Breeden » Published in a dozen or so magazines including 'Arts Line' and 'Pig Iron,' he lives and writes in Durham, North Carolina.

Alan Catlin » Barmaster in Schenectady, New York. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. 'Killer Cocktails' is available from Four-Sep, as well as its fine successors 'Hair of the Dog That Bit Me' and 'The Leper's Kiss.'

A.W. DeAnnuntis » Long-time resident of Philadelphia, also appearing in 'The Iconoclast' among others.

Gary Every » Has graced these pages numerous times. His exceptional 'Cat Canyon Secrets,' 46pp of especially descriptive and fantastic stories from the southwest, is available for \$6 from the author at: pobox 5419, Oracle, Arizona 85623.

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

Debby Geis » A former member of the Knoxville, Tennessee national poetry slam team, this Ohioan has performed everywhere from a laundromat to a converted opera house.

Nancy Henry » Pushcart Prize nominee in 2001, she's the associate editor of the 'Cafe Review' and her recent chap 'Anything Can Happen' from MuscleHead Press is out now.

Michael Kriesel » Lives in the Wisconsin countryside pairing poetics with selling firewood to tourists. A few chaps out including 'Heart's Run' from Green Bean Press.

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

Catfish McDaris » Influenced by Hendrix, van Gogh and Jose Cuervo. This Milwaukee-based postal poet has numerous chaps and can be found in the pages of 'Prying' from Four-Sep Publications.

Ryan Robert Mullen » Writes in Madison, Wisconsin hoping that one day he can back up the truck and dump 500,000 hardcovers on everybody who has ever said, 'a writer?' and given him that look.

B.Z. Niditch » The artistic director of 'The Original Theatre' in Brookline, Massachusetts, with international publishing credits. Several of his plays and prose have appeared in First Class. Three of his many books are available from Four-Sep Publications.

Brian N. Pacula » Lives in Cotati, California with short fiction in 'Elements Magazine' and 'The Copperfield Review.'

Claudio Parentela » Italian illustrator, mail artist, cartoonist, very active in the international underground scene. Type his name into any search engine to find many of his stark images online.

Charles P. Ries » Milwaukee's 'Bad Monk' is currently working on a biographical memoir titled 'Riesville' about surviving Catholicism while being brought up on a mink farm. His chap 'Bad Monk: Neither Here Nor There' is available from Four-Sep Publications.

Robert Roden » Hard-typin' poet out of Roseville, California, seen in many independent press mags. This is his first photo in First Class. His chap 'The Scopophilic' is available from Four-Sep.

Spiel » A self-described 'reclusive duck' calling Pueblo West, Colorado home. A writer and illustrator with appearances in the best mags of the independent press.

Paul A. Stermer » Lives in St. Joseph, Michigan, working as a freelance journalist for three daily metropolitan newspapers. He's currently working on a series of children's books, a book of essays and several teleplays.

Hester Young » Lives in Tucson, Arizona where she works at a bilingual elementary school.

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 submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— Christopher M.

killer reads

Four-Sep Publications Chapbooks

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

John Bennett

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

Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin - NEW!

THE LEPER'S KISS - the fourth installment in the Killer Cocktails chapbook series of poetics inspired by the river of patrons on the public side of the bar and invented imbibables, fresh from the mind of Alan Catlin, Schenectady, NY's very best bartender poet. *Craft cover/linen paper/32pp - \$6ppd*

Stepan Chapman

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*

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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*

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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*

B.Z. Niditch

MASKS AND BEARDS - loaded with a continuous flow of killer short pieces describing absurd characters and their even more absurd actions ala the great

Russian master of the absurd – Daniil Kharms. Modern and Post- meet on these pages. *Gloss cover/24# paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

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Robert Roden

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

Wade Vonasek

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

Wade Vonasek

CLAY MOLDED INSANE - revolted by the social morass of the 21st century landscape, fantastic and creative words leap from poetics rife with mood and cutting splendor. Featuring artwork by Dee Rimbaud, Michael Labash, and Stepan Chapman. *2-color offset cover/linen paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

A.D. Winans

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

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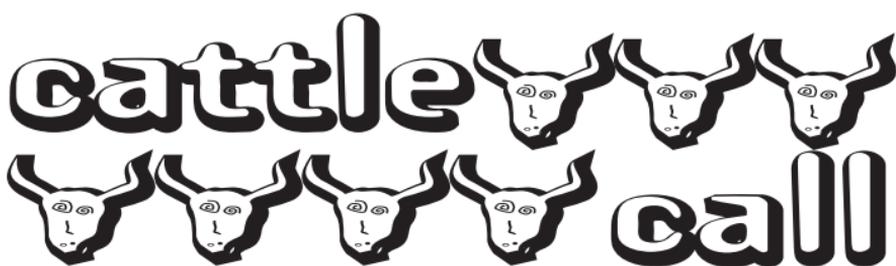
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cattle call



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.

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A PUNK IN GALLOWS AMERICA by P.W. Fox: Frustration and loss spur Chicago white-bread Eddie toward attempted self-destruction and eventual near-redemption in this story that reels through dank bars and dens of prostitution while tiptoe-ing through the gutters. Eddie doesn't understand love, despair, real fear, or true desperation, but gets a crash course as he (in his mind, at least) befriends the people whom his class normally looks right through and wishes out of existence. Thick with detail and well-honed dialogue, this dense novel is loaded with characters that are at once cryptic and as real as the person sitting right next to you. Expensive at 24 bucks, but Fox gives a voice to the destitute clawing their way through this jagged world and if the shit that gushes from the latest best-sellers can get it, so can Fox (or the publishers of this finely produced 240pp book). *Birch Brook Press, pobox 81, Delhi, NY 13753*, www.birchbrookpress.com.

DEATH IS MY SHEPHERD by David Castleman: At times brilliant, yet with tiny fragments of pretension, Castleman's book follows financially beleaguered quasi-intellectual/existentialist Grit's relationship to the young narrator whom he liberates (with 100 silver dollars) from a life of beer-running for his bartender father and prostitute mother. If one is to believe that a near-child protege can speak with the utter intellectual fluidity exhibited by this Working Boy, then one is in for a story and exuberant prose that will stretch the mind as the pair verbally duel throughout the course of their adventures which take them from a loft above an avant-movie theater to a small-town house that becomes home to frightened neighborhood pets during a nasty storm. Descriptive narrative and metaphor abound, take this: "Shaking hands with him was like being grabbed by a gigantic marshmallow that had been soaking in the cold acidic soup of an out-house toilet all during a long dark winter's night." Besides a few errors that one more editing bout would surely have uncovered, this is a solid piece of fiction and philosophy. Contact: *ArtWord, 5273 Portland Avenue, White Bear Lake, MN 55110*.

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