

*...for a killer mix of short fiction
and poetics – compiled with finely
honed editorial acumen – it's hard
to find a better mag to wedge in
your back pocket...*



**First
Class**

AS COLD AND CLAMMY AS A FLYING FROG FLUNG IN APRIL
21

Bain
Catlin
Chapman
Every
Frazier
Galing
Hamel
Niditch
Roden
Simpson
Spiel
Zanelli





ISSUE TWENTY-ONE
MAY, 2003

NOTICE!

DUE TO TYPEFACES EVOLVING, THIS DIGITAL VERSIONS OF FIRST CLASS HAS A DIFFERENT APPEARANCE THAN THE ORIGINAL LAYOUT AND DESIGN, AS TYPEFACES HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH SOMEWHAT SIMILAR FONTS. SO, IF YOU WANT AN AUTHENTIC ORIGINAL, CONTACT ME AT christopherm@four-sep.com. ALSO NOTE THAT THE BELOW ADDRESS NO LONGER EXISTS.

WEBSITE : www.four-sep.com

CONTACT : christopherm@four-sep.com



**ALL CONTENTS ©2003
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS**

FIRST CLASS IS PUBLISHED IN MAY AND NOVEMBER EACH YEAR BY FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS. FOR INFORMATION REGARDING SUBMISSIONS SEE "CATTLE CALL" NEAR THE REAR END OF THIS ISSUE. PLEASE ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE, QUERIES, CASH, AND SUBMISSIONS, INCLUDING A SASE WHEN APPROPRIATE TO:

First Class » Four-Sep Publications

POBOX 86 » FRIENDSHIP, INDIANA 47021

christopherm@four-sep.com

[www.four-sep.com]

ALL RIGHTS REVERT BACK TO AUTHORS

SUBSCRIPTION INFO:

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

POSTAGE IS INCLUDED.

CASH OR CHECKS PAYABLE TO : CHRISTOPHER M.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.

First Class **contents**

- 1: **Sweating with the Oldies**
by M.L. Bain
- 2: **Areas of Heavy Traffic**
by M.L. Bain
- 3: **Death Angels**
by Alan Catlin
- 7: **Canadian Coins**
by Gary Every
- 18: **The Haunted City**
by Kevin Frazier
- 20: **Bella**
by Ed Galing
- 21: **Window Breaker**
by Matthew Hamel
- 24: **Joanne**
by B.Z. Niditch
- 24: **The Carpenter**
by B.Z. Niditch
- 25: **Near the Bottom**
by Robert Roden
- 26: **Mother's Mother Died Today,
Or Maybe Yesterday...**
by Robert Roden
- 28: **Resignation**
by Robert Roden
- 29: **Never Ask Directions From
One Who's Lost**
by Kenneth Simpson
- 35: **Goodwill Among Men**
by Spiel
- 43: **Negation**
by Alessio Zanelli
- 44: **The Other Side**
by Alessio Zanelli

Illustrations by Stepan Chapman: pp.17 & 43

Photographs by Christopher M.: p.6, 27 & 34

Cover Art by Christopher M

First Class #21 is the first issue to be published in the new home of Four-Sep Publications – Friendship, Indiana.

Suffice it to say, the pobox is disgorging a multitude of envelopes bearing the yellow-striped-scars of their shuffle to southeastern Indiana following a brief visit to Milwaukee where they were summarily branded as outsiders, left behind by the intended recipients, doomed to an interstate game of catch-up...

Speaking of catching up, this issue made it out on time after the expected delays. Thanks for your patience as the notification letters were behind by a couple of weeks.

First Class #21 is another killer collection of the very best words that flow into my pobox. No need to blather on – enjoy the read. I'm pleased that your eyes are on these pages.

- Christopher M.

Sweating With the Oldies

M.L. Bain

White-hot enough for ya!

Yes, I think the lenses of my eyes just
melted away...

Yup! There they go, sliding down my chest like
bullet-sized tears.

You can lose about forty pounds in a steam room—

You just have to wait for your flesh to slide off.

Chlorinated enough for ya!

Yes. My pubic hair just turned the color
of an ermine,

And I'm only in my thirties.

The whirlpool is a giant bowl of soup,

And the *soup de jour* is boiled spots of liver with
broth of oldman breast.

Areas of Heavy Traffic

M.L. Bain

I can only beat my head against the
steering wheel so many times!

My list of people-to-call
is exhaustive
and exhausted.

I'm starving...

My TV needs me, and

I'm starting to feel symptoms of internet
withdrawal:

Ennui, angst, dejection, exclusion, etc.

Why isn't there a computer
in my SUV?

When will my SUV have the capability of flight?

Gridlock is too veritable:

a horrid apotheosis of reality,
a showcase of greed and frustration,
and proof positive of egoism.

I can see miles of unyielding steel and glass.

I can hear the din of conglomerate horns
coupled with expletives.

I can feel my blood pressure peaking
and the constriction of movement.

I can taste the aggression and misanthropy.

And, even though I'm embosomed within the
protective womb of my SUV
(with air conditioning),

I can smell exhaust, combustion, pheromones,
and a hint of pessimistic resignation.

Death Angels

Alan Catlin

They came from the blind side of life and it was obvious they'd been hit more than a few times where it counted

Hit hard

The marks weren't obvious yet but in a few years, when they started to get on the wrong side of thirty, after one too many all night binges, sex orgies and lines of blow, they would see something in the mirror that was bad

Crazy bad

And it would be a death mask made out of what remained of their living flesh but twisted out of shape in so many unbelievable ways, what they saw would be almost unrecognizable almost as if they had been sleeping in an alleyway with handmaidens for the angel of death

No, impossible, they would say

We haven't slept in like days

Weeks

We can't sleep

But somewhere in the back of their brains, medicated to the max, as always, there would be this little self-preservation mechanism whispering quietly to all the overwrought, out of control brain cells, "Sleep, sleep"

And they do

But it's more like a coma

All the images rushing inside of their everyday halycon existence, a virtual Hieronymus Bosch Garden of Earthly Delights three dimensional movie, I-Maxed inside for their own personal viewing pleasure once the surface tension of their deep sleeping is under control and unless they have an IV drip of muscle

relaxers, heavy tranquilizers and/or morphine to maintain the level of substratospheric sleeping, they were in for a treat of a lifetime, a Walpurgisnacht video of their own little personal hells they'd been cultivating ever since they had turned a semi-legal age or got enough phony identification to go with the incredible bodies they had to offer so that no one would look all that close at the papers they were presenting as legal proof so that they could star in home video's featuring guys with names like Long Black John, Midnight Mauler, Big Bopper or even, Gregor Samsa, a little literary joke with a Latinate flavoring, no one would get but perverse comp lit majors at a Triple X-rated feature film festival, wasted out of his mind or they would go on stage in between blow breaks in the Ladies from which they

would emerge with a strange glow, wide eyes and more enthusiasm than anyone would be expected to have for a fourth set at three a.m. on a Thursday Amateur Stripper Night in some podunk town hundreds of miles from the Big City they wanted to crash in the worst way

And crash they would but that would be years after the initial hits, cheap thrills in motels with heart shaped tubs and mirrors on the ceiling they could admire themselves in, if they could see that far, though in the dream they were entering what they would be seeing would be an endless procession of tortured souls, half human, half beast staggering down a burning dirt path, leaving the town of their birth razed to the ground and everything they owned or ever dreamed of owning, reduced to a king sized raging fire for a three headed beast escaped from the sulphur pit near town to warm itself with, stuffing the slower human beasts into all three of its mouths with the eight arms it used for capturing anything within its reach, pausing only to gulp vats of home-made wine, beer, anything potable – its innumerable eyes rolling about in the loose, runny sockets, smoke emitting from any one of several

unseen ears recessed about the enormous head, all so vivid and so real, they could smell the sewage, the deathrot, the fire escaping from the lungs of the beast and just when the scene seemed almost unbearable a second scene from the triptych would appear, a more unfamiliar one underground where the three headed monster's mate presided, almost identical in shape and appetite but slightly smaller in girth, tormenting the naked human beasts exiled from above by letting them think they had escaped from the clutches of her arms only to be swept up at the last possible moment and consigned to her bottomless mouthpit along with all the others that had preceded them, the shebeast spinning, as she ate, almost invisible to the near humans, webs, flimsy if perceived but intractable, solid as steel fibers, containing the tensile strength of a hundred real men and coated with an adhering sticky substance no man could escape from, the scene so terrible screaming seems the natural reaction but then the page turns yet again to the third and last scene, one so murky, so ominously quiet, like that moment in a zillion monster movies, that silent time when the killing thing, the unimaginable, is lurking nearby, leaving imprints in the dust, or grass or making creaking stairs resound, resonant with terror, redolent with a lurking, unmistakable hidden fear so primal even screaming is unthinkable, impossible as the lungs are deprived the vital air for breathing, for forming sounds, the atmosphere is so dense, so filled with toxic clouds, chemical wastes, just imagining this place is poison to the dreamer over the edge now in the deepest pit, the subconscious cellar beneath hell where only the worst of life's offender's are kept, coming down from a chemical dependent high, total

withdrawal, heart stopping, only the galvanized muscles still working by rote, by leftover internal electricity, energies, everything twitching at once, a long stark parade of every dread image becoming clear in the clinging, wasting haze and then this panel is darkened fading to black to nothing

but that is
years in the
future

Now

Right now
at this very
moment
they are the
leftover party-
girls from
some dread
experiment in
alcohol, sleep
deprivation,
drug abuse
and loud music

EVERYTHING TWITCHING
AT ONCE, A LONG STARK
PARADE OF EVERY DREAD
IMAGE BECOMING CLEAR
IN THE CLINGING,
WASTING HAZE

wandering about the streets of Albany dressed as Satan in Satin and Satan's Slut barely enough clothes on their body to escape arrest even in the wake of the All Hallow's Eve just completed, their faces ringed with a new kind of black circling not makeup, their eyes glassine surfaces skimmed by natural

color with the unnatural added for an unintended gruesome effect, trying to order way hot joe with a sweetener added to really open those tired eyes and don't forget some palatable grub to compensate for not having taken part in the breakfast club repast/ buffet offered along with the never doing until dawn, open bar they bellied up to with a vengeance, draining all they could hold in a semi-orderly, semi-professional way of ones experienced in the ways of alcohol and the lingering after effects of performance enhancing drugs that someone spoke of slyly as capacity enhancing drugs, an activity it might take days or a lifetime to recover from though the only thing certain as they mugged for spontaneous pictures to the early lunch bar crowd, wavering on their four inch spike heels, was that they wouldn't make it for the opening bell of their five o'clock shifts at De Carlo's, that the phone would be an unsolvable mystery machine, if they could remember where they had left it or what the annoying sound emanating through the layers of their latest toxic effect actually was, days later maybe many days later in an emergency room somewhere after the stomach pumping and all the good things that come with it

In the eternal Now, none of the downside is apparent and even if it were, it was too late to turn back

from the burning trails they were leaving behind
them wherever they went

They had their see-through panties with vital areas
almost covered, their push 'em up bodices – costume
attire they didn't have to buy for dressing up, but just
reach into the closet for their own personal Victo-
ria's Secret and go to town, flick the jacket, flick the
sweater, the wrap, all that shit that gets in the way of
handmaidens to the angel of death wings, semi-de-
tached tails, we're not spending any time Outside
anyway are we?

Are we?

Actually they would be getting to and from where
ever they left off and to the tavern and back again

Ask them how they got here

Go ahead

They won't remember that was like ages ago

In another lifetime

And in a way they wouldn't be exaggerating

It was another lifetime

And so is this one

One so fraught with unexpected, unknowable terrors
not even the jaws of life would be able to get them
out



THE LAST by *christopher m.*

The table resembled a medieval torture device. It was known as a four point restraining table and it came in handy in a hospital emergency room. In time, I would become used to such devices but this story took place while I was still doing my residency, when I was new to the crazy chaos of the emergency room. It came as quite a shock when I saw my first human being restrained to the table. There were fixed points for securing every arm and leg to the table in a spread eagle pose. There were waist straps for cinching down the torso and bands to further lash the limbs tight. Worst of all, was the head clamp, a padded metal band which could be tightened until the unfortunate person's skull was trapped against the table without even being able to turn from side to side. The first person I ever saw imprisoned on the four point restraining table was Herman.

Herman was a tiny, tiny human being; old and toothless. He could have been no more than five foot four inches tall and a hundred ten pounds. His black skin sagged. Herman's face was sunken in and all his teeth were missing from years of smoking crack. Surviving as a homeless man in the ghettos of Detroit must have been more of a horror than I can possibly imagine. Herman had made an occupation of being beaten, raped, robbed, and victimized. Being strapped tightly to a table was just another example of that victimization. Still, when I saw Herman for the first time – he was smiling that big toothless smile from ear to ear – strapped down flat on his back, secure and motionless.

Herman was so small that every single strap had to be stretched as tight as it would cinch in order to pin his skinny torso to the table. His meatless arms needed to be stretched as far as he could reach in order to be secured to the posts; straps locking his wrists tight. His feet and ankles were wrapped and doubled wrapped just in case he wanted to kick someone with those toothpicks he called legs. And of course the tiny tiny man had an itty bitty skull and that meant the head clamp was tightened to the fullest of its capacity. As I walked into the ER for my third day of residency there was tiny little Herman pinned down on the four point restraining table and the orderly was tightening the head clamp. It looked like they were turning screws into his brain.

The whole scene was so horrific that I could not help but look – the way you feel compelled to stare at a traffic accident. Without meaning to, I made eye contact. That was when I looked into Herman's big beautiful eyes. Herman stared back and we locked gazes for a moment, sizing each other up. Then I remembered the horror of the restraining table and I tried to walk away...

...But it was too late.

“Hey Doc!” Herman cried out in a squeaky voice that fit his tiny body. “You gotta help me.”

There were three large orderlies beside the four point restraining table. Each of them looked large enough to handle tiny little Herman without breaking a sweat. The table hardly seemed necessary.

“You gotta help me,” he pleaded.

He was right. I did have to help him. I had taken an oath. One of the orderlies tried to warn me.

“Careful Doc,” the orderly growled. “This guy could flip out at any moment.”

“Its true,” Herman agreed. I am sure he would have shrugged but the restraining table held him too tightly.

“Well then, how can I help you?” I asked

“My nose itches,” Herman complained.

I reached out with a finger nail and softly scratched his nose. It felt like something you would do for a puppy – scratch him on the tip of the nose. That was exactly what it felt like; scratching the nose of a puppy. As soon as I finished, Herman’s perpetual smile stretched far wider than I would have thought humanly possible. I would learn that being toothless only made Herman’s smile more flexible. The way Herman looked at me reminded me of that bumper sticker “Lord, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am.” I wanted to be the type of doctor I saw reflected in Herman’s big beautiful eyes filled to the brim with loving kindness, and generosity.

“Better?” I asked.

“Thanks Doc,” Herman said.

I turned to walk away, my third day as a resident, more determined than ever to become all the healer I could be.

Nights in the emergency room were always draining. Sick babies, the mentally ill, and people too clumsy to be working in restaurants filled the lobby. There were others who sat there and waited; people who were bleeding, people who had worked themselves up into being scared over nothing, and couples who should have never been together. After putting seventeen stitches into the arms of a little boy, I strolled through the lobby to get a candy bar from the vending machine. Herman was still being held on the restraining table.

I was stunned. It had been nearly twelve hours. Herman looked pretty relaxed. I walked over to make small talk.

“How you doing?”

“Beautiful day,” Herman replied.

Those words seemed out of place coming from the

mouth of a tiny little man strapped to a giant table so tightly that he couldn't even wiggle.

"Look, I'm new around here," I offered. "I could use a few friends."

Herman broke out that great big ear to ear grin. "I'll be your friend."

"Is there anything that I can get you buddy. A bite of my candy bar? Another scratch on the nose?"

"It sure would be nice to be able to scratch my own nose." Herman replied.

"I'm not sure if I can let you do that," I returned.

"Sure you can," Herman said. "You're my friend."

Then he looked at me with those great big eyes and I wanted desperately to be the doctor that I saw reflected there.

I started to undo one of the arm straps.

One of the orderlies flew across the room.

"I wouldn't do that," the orderly said in a gruff voice.

I looked at Herman to tell him no, and all I could see were those big puppy dog eyes.

"Please," he pleaded.

I took another look at Herman and that tiny, emaciated, toothless frame and reckoned what kind of danger could he really pose.

"I'm the doctor," I pulled rank. The orderly stormed off in a huff. I undid one arm strap and the accompanying arm bands.

Herman scratched his nose. He scratched and scratched, a little too fervently for my tastes. I grabbed his wrist and moved it gently aside before he began to bleed.

"Thanks Doc. That was starting to hurt."

"No problem buddy."

"How come a rich white doctor like you is so nice to a poor black man like me.

"Because we're friends."

Herman smiled.

"Do you think Doc? That you could loosen this head thing so I could look around. When I'm here," Herman said, "I look to look around and watch television. I hardly ever get to watch television. I also like to people watch. You can learn a lot by people watching."

It seemed like little enough to ask. What damage could it really cause. It seemed like the only human thing for a healer to do. I left one arm free and unstrapped his head so that Herman could do some people watching. I was the one who learned the lesson.

A gunshot wound was rolled into the ER and things were being busily prepped for surgery. The usual emergency room chaos erupted in full conflagration. I flew into action, trying to stay calm, assess the situation accurately, and take a series of steps in an attempt to improve the situation. I fought down the panic. I fought down the adrenaline. I assisted in the surgery and two and a half hours later I emerged, exhausted, fatigued, bewildered and splattered with blood. I also had the urge for another candy bar.

As I strolled towards the vending machines in the lobby there was a tremendous commotion. Suddenly, I remembered Herman and I burst through the doors into the lobby.

There on the restraining table there were Herman's clothes but no Herman. Herman was certainly still in the house. He was the small skinny naked black man being chased by the orderlies. Herman was much faster than he looked. He leapt over chairs and scrambled down the aisles with fancy footwork that would have made "Crazy Legs" Hirsch envious. The orderlies pursued with fervent energy but Herman was too fast and nimble for them. A spin, a dodge, a leap, a duck, and once again Herman narrowly avoided capture. The orderlies began to grunt and curse as Herman just barely eluded their grasp again and again. Herman leapt over the rows of seats as his tiny black penis flapped in the breeze.

The frightened patients and family waiting in the lobby flattened themselves against the wall, desperately trying to avoid eye contact with the psychotic runaway. The orderlies were tiring, gasping for breath. Herman's eyes grew wider and wider. The orderlies began to argue amongst themselves as Herman eluded this trap and that. The naked black man leapt over some chairs and spun away just as the cops arrived with whistles shrieking.

That was when one of the orderlies pointed a finger directly at me, "It was his idea to unstrap the patient!"

I can't even begin to describe what an awkward uncomfortable moment it was when every eye in the emergency room lobby turned to look at me. The frightened people plastered up against the wall looked at me in dumbfounded amazement. The cops stared at me like I was stupid and the orderlies just glared. Only Herman was looking at me with a smile on his face. Everything paused for just an instant while everybody stared at me. I didn't know what to say or do.

Herman was the first to react.

He turned and ran, moving his little naked behind as fast as he could towards the exit. No one responded quickly enough to slow Herman down. Herman cut left to avoid an old woman in a wheelchair and then sprinted down field. Myself, the orderlies, and the

police all followed. As soon as he burst past the double glass doors, stepping outside into open sunlight, Herman raised his hands above his head like a touchdown signal and he broke into a slow home run trot. All traffic stopped to stare at the celebrating naked black man.

Myself, the orderlies, and the cops all followed in hot pursuit. As soon as we exited the double glass doors, Herman took off like he was an Olympic track star.

As soon as his feet left the pavement of hospital sidewalk, the orderlies stopped chasing him their responsibilities ended right there. The cops continued in hot pursuit. Feeling guilty, I kept running. Herman kept running too, waving his arms wildly above his head and covering ground quickly. The cops were losing ground. Out of breath, I was falling behind the cops. The scene was alive with screaming sirens as more squad cars could be heard approaching. Herman would have surely escaped if it had not been for what happened next.

Herman sprinted across an intersection as cars swerved and brakes squealed. He narrowly escaped death and reached a street corner where a bank was located. Herman ran up to a long line of cars waiting for the drive up ATM. He opened the door of the last car and hopped inside.

All things considered, the suburban soccer mom inside the last car handled events quite well. It is not every day that a toothless, naked black man suddenly hops inside your car while you are waiting for the bank machine. The cops said the two of them were just talking pleasantly when they arrived. The police pulled Herman from the car and subdue him, sprawling him face down on the sidewalk. There is no real need to frisk a naked man. Herman never struggled. He never stopped smiling either.

By the time I arrived, breathless and late, the lady in the car was already on the cell phone telling friends and family about her adventure. The cops were raising Herman to his feet and had wrapped him in a blanket for the sake of public decency.

“Are you taking him straight to jail?” I asked a police officer.

“Actually, we will take him back to the hospital,” the policeman replied. “They have a four point restraining table they can put him inside. I wonder why he wasn’t already in one.”

“Beats me,” I lied.

As the cops marched Herman away, he turned and made eye contact with me. “Hey Doc,” Herman shouted, “I need your help.”

I hesitated, considering the problems helping Herman had already caused. “For a buddy?” he asked.

“Of course,” I never did learn how to say no to Herman’s beautiful eyes. “Here hold this,” Herman said. “I ain’t got no pockets.”

Naked people usually don’t have pockets. Herman handed me 37 cents. “Where did you get this?”

“The nice lady gave me money for a cup of coffee,” Herman explained. “I think she likes me.”

This particular hospital is famous for psychos and prisoners. Turned out Herman was both. It all came out during the hospital interview. As part of my punishment for setting Herman free, I was forced to write the hospital incident report. Besides everybody else on staff had already interviewed Herman.

There was a standard incident interview form with a list of suggested questions.

“Do you hear voices?” I asked.

“Sure all the time,” Herman replied. “Especially when I watch television. Sometimes I hear so many voices when I watch television that it is hard to follow the program. Then it gets scary and I have to turn away.”

I took notes furiously.

“How come a rich white doctor like you is so nice to a poor black man like me?”

“I’m not rich Herman and I’m just learning to be a doctor.”

“Sure are nice though.”

“I think,” I said. “That I am supposed to ask the questions here.”

Herman looked at me with those big beautiful eyes, waiting for the next question. I looked at the list.

“Can you read minds?”

“Sure, I can read minds.”

I asked a question which departed from the list. “Can you read my mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“You’re God.”

The orderly approached me with a wicked smile on his face. I knew I was in trouble.

“It’s about Herman,” the orderly said.

Ever since the incident where I had unwittingly aided Herman’s escape, every time a problem came up with Herman it became my problem. I was a Herman specialist. I did not mind, as the months had passed this small homeless man turned out to be the sweetest, gentlest human beings I had ever met. Except he really wasn’t homeless anymore. Herman’s

schizophrenia was so acute that we could not release him. Herman was right; I had to try and help him.

“What is the problem?” I asked.

“Herman is putting something up his butt.” The orderly explained. “We think its money.

“Money won’t hurt him,” I replied.

“We need to do a rectal examination and make sure he is not putting something up his butt that will injure.” The orderly handed me a box of rubber gloves. “You’re the doctor.”

It was true that I did not want Herman to injure himself. It was also true that as a medical technician I was supposed to treat body functions as just a natural part of biological mechanics. All that aside, sticking your hand up somebody’s ass is a dirty smelly job. Even with a rubber glove. Even with a box of rubber gloves.

Smell the glove. No, I am serious, because there is no way I can describe with mere words the awful stench that my examination of Herman’s rectum released. It was as if Herman’s asshole was a portal to an alternate universe filled with nothing but stink spirits and me and my rubber glove had unwittingly opened a door to this other dimension. Even after all these years, those smells sometimes still haunt my nightmares. My latex enclosed fingers searched all over the inside of Herman’s body but we found nothing. It did not help my demeanor any that all through the examination, Herman wore a great big smile. I declared the examination finished and threw my rubber gloves in the incinerator trash.

“Herman,” I said. “The orderlies think you are stuffing something up your butt.”

“Yes sir, I am.” Herman declared proudly.

“The orderlies think it is money.”

“That’s right, Doc.” Herman replied. “I hide the money where no one can find it no matter how many times they rob me.”

“Herman...” I pondered my next statement, “Think of poor George Washington, the first president of the United States, just sitting there on the surface of a quarter and suddenly he finds himself stuffed up where the sun don’t shine.”

“You know Doc,” Herman explained. “I am not surprised that it is a kind man like yourself who brought up the very same question that I have been pondering for quite some time. Cause you see, on that quarter Mr. Washington has a nose, and I have always wondered if he can smell it when I fart.”

“Trust me Herman, he can smell it.” I was speaking from personal experience.

“In that case,” Herman said. “I feel awful bad, not

just for Mr. Washington but for Thomas Jefferson too. Not so much for that little tiny dude with the glasses. He looks like a weasel.”

“Herman, no one is going to rob you in the hospital,” I explained.

“I know Doc. You wouldn’t let them but what happens if I want to buy a cup of coffee?”

“Herman, in the hospital you can drink all the coffee you want for free.”

“That’s awful nice of you Doc.”

“Don’t you think that putting money up your butt is an awful thing to do to George Washington?”

Herman shrugged. “I have tried putting Canadian coins up there but they always keep falling right back out.”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. The things they never teach you in medical school. Apparently, just like vending machines, some human beings don’t accept Canadian coins.

As the months passed and my residency was nearing its end, Herman began to make remarkable improvements. A lot of the cure was due to finding the right combination of medicines to battle his schizophrenia. A lot of it just seemed to be Herman’s unwavering belief that life was going to get better.

He had told me horror stories of his life on the streets of Detroit. I had never gone to bed hungry, wondering where I would find food the next day but Herman had. He had been forced to sleep outdoors during Michigan blizzards. The trick, Herman said was to wait for a car to get parked and sleep directly beneath the still warm engine. Herman had been beaten, robbed, and raped so many times that he had come to regard some of the more regular attackers as his friends. Other memories were so terrible that they were wrapped in shrouds of mental delusion. Herman would apologize for not remembering reality and I used to reassure him that he was probably better off.

Herman knew that I had no family in Detroit and since we were friends he invited me to spend Thanksgiving with him at the hospital. The last thing I wanted to do was spend a rare day off at work and a holiday at that. The truth was that I had no other plans, no place to go, and no other friends really. Just Herman.

Besides, the only nurse who ever flirted back with me was working on Thanksgiving. So there I was, on Thanksgiving, sitting and watching television in Herman’s favorite television watching place – the emergency room lobby. We were watching “The Sound of Music.” Herman wept after almost every song.

“Are you remembering to take your medications?”

Herman nodded as he shuddered with tears.

“Sure wish I had grown up like that.” Herman pointed at the singing nanny. “It makes me so happy that someone does.”

“Do you still hear voices from the television?”

“Just the ones who are singing.”

“Can you still read minds?”

“Not since you fixed me Doc, but I know what you’re thinking.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, you’re horny.”

I laughed. “You sure?”

“Doc, every time that nurse over there walks into the room you just stare and stare. I never thought about it before but you must be awful lonely without a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“How about if you let me out and I go back down to the ghetto and see if I can get you a girlfriend. I know lots of real nice girls down there and they are all looking for boyfriends. A rich doctor like you, you could probably afford a whole lot of them all at once.” I laughed and tried to imagine what sort of women a toothless, homeless crack addict could set you up with and what they might look like. I stood up.

Herman, I’m going to grab a drink. Would you like a cup of coffee?’

Herman nodded yes enthusiastically. I got up from the chair and paused to flirt with my favorite nurse. When I returned with the coffee, Herman smiled from ear to ear.

“You sure are nice to me Doc.”

I’ll never forget the last time I saw Herman. He came in to visit me during my last day of residency. That is right, Herman came in to the hospital. With the proper medications his cure was rapid and hopefully effective. Herman had graduated to living in a halfway house. Life seemed good and that perpetual smile grew even bigger, if that was possible.

I, on the other hand looked like crap. Not only was I exhausted from the long hours of residency, but I was also hung over. One of my brothers had arrived to help celebrate the end of my residency. We had jumped the gun a little early and partied the night before by crossing the international border and bar hopping in Windsor. I was incredibly hung over. Still, it was my last day of residency and life was good.

Herman arrived in the last minutes of the shift. I was walking towards the door.

“How are you doing Doc?” Herman asked with that incredibly big smile.

“Good! Good.” I replied.

“No offense Doc,” Herman said, “But you look like you might be lying. You look like death warmed over.”

I chuckled. It was probably true. “You on the other hand look wonderful.”

“Yes I do.” Herman replied, smiling so big that I could actually see a tooth way in the back that hadn’t fallen out yet.

There followed an awkward moment where neither one of us knew what to say. The awkward moment grew into a pregnant pause. So I did what seemed appropriate.

I stepped forward and gave that tiny tiny human being a great big bear hug. I squeezed him hard and it looked like Herman was about to cry. Seeing those big beautiful eyes moisten up was more than I could bear. I felt myself tear up and before I could embarrass myself; I started towards the door.

“Remember to take your meds,” I said as I started to cry.

“Hey Doc,” Herman cried out. “Can I have some spare change for a cup of coffee?”

Suddenly, I realized what Herman meant when he asked that question. It was why he had asked the woman in the car for spare change. It was why he shoved money up his butt. It must have been a habit from panhandling during his homeless days. When someone gave him spare change for a cup of coffee it meant they liked him; it was a positive affirmation from the universe. If he had coffee money jingling in his pockets it meant that everything was safe and sound. Of course, I had money for coffee.

I dug into my pants pockets and fumbled around before I realized that all I had on me was the spare change I had picked up the day before in Windsor. Herman didn’t accept Canadian money or at least he didn’t back when he was ill; maybe things were different now that he was better. I gave it a try and tossed him a coin.

Herman caught the shiny brass coin. “Thanks Doc. How come a rich white doctor like you is so nice to a poor black man like me?”

Suddenly I remembered that smelly smelly rectal exam and the mischievous parts of me thirsted for revenge.

“Herman,” I explained patiently. “You’re not black...”

His jaw dropped in absolute amazement.

“...but I am.” I said with an evil smile.

As soon as I said it I regretted it. Herman's toothless face imploded in confusion and doubt. He put his hand to his temple, massaging his forehead, the way he used to when he was hearing voices. His lower lip quivered and trembled as he struggled to get the next words out.

"B-b-b-but you're God."

"No I'm not, Herman, but you are."

Then suddenly his face broke out in that big beautiful smile and his eyes began to shine with that special radiance that was unique to Herman. "You're right... I am God."

He looked at the Canadian coin I had tossed him and muttered "Pretty bird," before sliding the coin into his pocket.

Naturally it was a loon.

"Bye, Herman," I said.

"Hey Doc," Herman cried out the last words he would ever say to me, "Hey Doc, you're cured."

Then I walked out the door ready to be all the healer I could be.



MOSQUITOS by *stepan chapman*

The Haunted City

Kevin Frazier

This is, I suppose, a ghost story, though the ghosts are people who never lived. I made them up, and now they haunt Helsinki and follow me wherever I go.

It's winter and the city center is covered in snow. I work the nightshift as an office cleaner, so I always walk through the dark to each assigned building and do my mopping and dusting alone. I move from room to room, floor to floor. The ghosts follow me through the halls. Sonja, my invented wife, steps out of a doorway or conference room and reminds me that I'm not a young man anymore. She tells me I should be careful lifting the buckets and pushing the mop. Then she rests her hand on the small of my back. Her touch is comforting, warm.

I usually finish by four in the morning. Then I walk home through the city streets. The storefronts are dark. The cafes are empty. There are no people around except for an occasional drunk.

As I walk, the haunting begins. The lights rise in the restaurants. Customers spread through the bars. My friend Ari comes out of a hotel and claps me on the back. He tells me his daughter is in town and asks me about my son. Then we meet more of my friends at a pub. Everyone calls my name as I enter. They clear a space for me at the head of the table and ask me how I'm doing, what my plans are for next week, whether Sonja and I could come over for dinner soon.

I know the ghosts are only idle thoughts, only phantoms spun from my mind, but that doesn't make their haunting of the city any less vivid for me. I depend on them. They comfort me.

I prefer them to people. My wife – my actual wife – divorced me two years ago. She left me for Timo, someone I'd worked with at the shipbuilding plant for seventeen years. After the divorce I told my bosses that if they didn't fire Timo I would quit. They said they couldn't fire a man for having an affair with my wife, so I left the plant and took the office-cleaning job instead. I also stopped seeing all my old friends and acquaintances. I've always had trouble talking to people. I've always liked to be alone. So now I can indulge this part of my personality without restraint.

I enjoy my sadness. I enjoy knowing that the ghosts aren't there. It gives me satisfaction to see the customers fading away from the pub, the lights dimming in the restaurants and office buildings, Ari dissolving into the shadows of the storefronts. Their disappearance heightens the emptiness of the streets, and sharpens the taste of my loneliness as I cross the Esplanadi and leave the city center.

I started seeing the ghosts last year. Sometimes when I walked home from work I passed a man in a parka. He wore yellow ski goggles and carried a metal briefcase. I thought of him as the Parka Man. The third or fourth time I saw him, I nodded to him. He nodded back.

He wasn't a ghost, but I used him as the inspiration for one. I turned him into Ari, my closest friend. I invented lives for both of us. We were from Lapland. We had come to Helsinki with our wives a decade ago. We owned a mobile software company. His daughter was dating my son. My sister was married to his brother.

I wanted to talk to the Parka Man and tell him about our imaginary relationship. I had an idea, a vision. I thought we could pretend to know each other. Together we could make up the terms of our friendship, our family connections, our mingled lives. Then we could find other lonely people and bring them into our story. We could look for a lonely young man to be my son and a lonely young woman to be Ari's daughter. The story would grow with each new participant, and we would draw more and more lonely people into our circuit. Eventually we might connect lonely people everywhere around the world, in an illusion that they could join as lightly or as passionately as they wanted.

It took several months for me to work up the courage to approach the Parka Man and start a conversation with him. Then on a spring night when the snow was melting and the icicles were dripping from all the buildings, I asked him if he would have a cup of coffee with me. We went to an all-night hamburger place and he told me a little about himself.

He was a marine biologist. He studied the nocturnal habits of bottom feeders in the Helsinki harbor. That's why I saw him so often when I was leaving the office buildings. His metal suitcase contained his recording devices and measuring instruments.

I told him my idea, my vision of us playing roles for each other. He took his goggles off. His face was bearded and grim and I tried to make the project sound like a joke or a game.

"Interesting," he said, hurrying to finish his coffee. "Unfortunately, though, I'm married. I have a family of my own. I don't think they'd be very happy about me using my free time to become part of some other family."

A few nights later I saw him on the Esplanadi again. He turned and started walking away as soon as he noticed me. I tried to follow him, but he went around a corner and vanished.

The ghosts have been with me ever since.

the first
time i heard
her sing on
that stage in
miami

the first
thing i
remembered
about her

was the way
she looked;

short,
squat,
brown hair
disheveled
like after a
midnight
drunk,

looking down
at the small
two a.m.
crowd in the
small room

most of us
half drunk or
asleep

she said,
out loud,
in an irate
voice,

wake up,
you fuckers,

and it was
the first time
i had ever heard
a woman
use
that
word
out
loud.

Window Breaker

Matthew Hamel

“Given what has happened before, how can I trust you?”

“I’m not like that anymore,” David retorted. “I’ve changed.”

“Huh. Did you get that hackneyed slogan off a commercial?”

David walked across the room and sat on the couch. He couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t accept him again. In his mind, he really had changed. She moved next to him but didn’t sit down.

“Just tell me why,” he asked, stating the question as if to no one.

“How can you possibly expect me to just forget everything that happened?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why are you here?” She kicked the couch with reserved violence and went into the kitchen. He could hear her pouring a drink. She greedily drank it down and poured another.

“I thought you stopped drinking scotch,” David said loudly from the other room. She poked her head around the doorframe.

“What the hell do you know about me? You just showed up here so don’t tell me what the fuck I do and don’t do.” She whispered a veiled “bastard” under her breath as she went back for a third.

David sat for awhile, listening to the muffled sound of clinking glass from the other room. Then he stood and went to the window. The city streets below were unusually quiet and serene. He shattered that silence by putting his fist through the glass.

“Damn it! You owe me another window !”

He turned and saw her slim frame silhouetted by the dying bulb.

“Don’t bleed all over my carpet. Do you have any idea how much it cost?”

She brought him a towel from the kitchen and wrapped it around his hand. The cold air rushed in from outside.

“You need a blanket,” he muttered.

“I know that idiot. Now it’s going to be freezing in here.”

“To cover the window until I can get a new one tomorrow.”

“Well you’ll have to come back because you’re not staying here.”

David sat down on the couch and watched the blood from his knuckles slowly soak through the towel.

She went into the kitchen for another scotch.

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“And you want me to trust you now? After you just smashed my fucking window? Sorry. but I don’t want you here anymore.”

“I can stay on the couch.”

“That’s what you told me last time you showed up outside my door. Then you broke all the mirrors and most of my dishes.”

“I won’t do it again, I promise. I’ve changed.”

“Not enough for me to take you back. Why did you just smash my window?”

She pulled a blanket out of the hall closet and went to the window. She fastened it to cover the hole as best she could. Most of the glass had fallen onto the street below.

“You were in the other room and I just felt like hitting it,” David said.

“But why? Your temper caused all the problems in the first place.

“I’m never angry when I destroy things.”

“Why the hell do you do it then?”

She picked up the few large pieces of glass on the carpet, looked at David sitting complacently on the couch, then let out a sound of disgust and went back into the kitchen.

“Do you have a pillow I can use?” he asked.

“I told you that you’re not staying here!”

“Don’t yell at me from the kitchen. Come out here to talk.”

“I don’t want to see you anymore. Now get out before I call the police. I’ll really do it this time.”

“You don’t mean that,” David said. “I think you like it when I’m here.” He unwrapped the towel around his hand. It was solidly soaked through and the bleeding hadn’t ceased yet. He dropped onto his knees and began rubbing the towel into the carpet. The fresh blood mixed easily and vibrantly with the whiteness.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

She came out of the kitchen and grabbed the towel away from him.

“Why are you polishing my carpet with a bloody towel? Lift your hand up damn it! I don’t want any more blood on the carpet.”

She raised his hand and sat him back on the couch.

“Now hold your hand up until I get another towel.”

She rushed into the kitchen and returned a moment later, wrapping a wet dishrag around David’s

knuckles. She looked down at the red stain and sighed indignantly.

“Are you drunk or something?”

“I don’t like alcohol. It’s not healthy,” he replied. “You should know that. We’ve been together for years.”

She sat on the far sofa and took a moment to think. The air from outside was lightly blowing the blanket in a miniature ballet with inconsistent choreography. Finally, she spoke softly.

“No more David. Every time you come here you do something like this. Now I’ve got to replace the window and the carpet.”

“You can get the blood out.”

“Why the hell did you do it in the first place?” She was becoming more exasperated. “The window, fine, but did you have to rub your blood into my carpet? It was very expensive. In fact, how did you even get past the doorman downstairs?”

“I told him who I was,” David said.

She stood and took the soaked dishrag from his hand. It was too late to clean up the stain now.

“Why do I take care of you?”

“Because you love me,” David replied as she tended to his hand.

“Maybe I did once. But you’ve changed so much. Look, I’ll let you stay here tonight, but after this I don’t want to see you again. Don’t come here anymore David or I’ll have you arrested. I worked hard for what I’ve got and I don’t want you messing it up anymore.”

“Just think of me as a lost puppy that occasionally needs a warm home,” he said.

“I can’t do that anymore. I expect you to be gone in the morning. You can sleep on the couch, but you’ll just have to deal with the cold from the window you broke.”

She started walking down the hall to her own room. Every encounter with David was mentally and physically exhausting. From now on there would be no more. She had to cut herself away from him completely in order to move on.

“Hey,” David called just as she turned out the lights.

“What?”

“Can I at least have a pillow?”

She went to the hall closet and pulled a pillow from the top shelf. She took it to him. He touched her hand as she set it on his stomach. It was the last contact they would ever have.

“Thanks mom,” he said.

The blanket did little to stop the cold wind rushing in from the broken window.

Joanne

B.Z. Niditch

Joanne collects the tickets at your town multiplex movie house but is so lazy she discourages you from seeing the movie. One night no one entered any of the seven theatres and the managers were concerned. They spied on her that night. "Oh, that's an awful movie, rated G, and the seats have bad backs, and there is gum on the floor and the students do dirty things and we find condoms the next day." They decided to fire her on the spot until they realized she was right in her criticism and promoted her to manager, but she declined. She said selling tickets was quite enough for her.

The Carpenter

B.Z. Niditch

No one knew why the carpenter had an obsession to desecrate graves and have his way with the dead. But a psychiatric panel agreed that Lancaster had to be watched. They took a camera crew and studied his obsession. One crew member fainted from disgust and was told the case could only be discussed in court. Lancaster was found guilty of sleeping with the dead and sentenced to be a gravedigger for life. The whole community was up in arms against the judge, who was lynched. Lancaster, in a show of loving solidarity, screwed him after the funeral.

These and other absurd peeks at humanity can be found in B.Z. Niditch's chapbook "Masks and Beards." Information is in the rear end of this issue or online at www.four-sep.com.

Near the Bottom

Robert Roden

My wife comes home with several boxes of food
From a local charity. We're apparently entitled
To aid, at this point, with four children and our modest
Beginnings at work. The opportunities
To feel poor have been plentiful, lately, though I try
To tell my daughters that our station is only temporary.

My youngest is embarrassed, until she finds
A box of *Trix* cereal in each of the large cartons,
Along with several fruit bars we would normally buy
In the store. I cannot get over the different cans of tuna:
One looks like something left over from fifties fallout shelters;
The other, *Sunny Select*, suspiciously resembles cat food.

The label on the green can of (possibly radioactive) tuna reads,
Donated by the people of the United States of America
For domestic Food Assistance Programs, and offers such
Basic instructions as: *Refrigerate after opening. Use within
24 hours.* The other can advertises that it's *dolphin safe*,
A product of Thailand. It does not state how long it will last.

Though I feel somewhat diminished, digging through these cans
Of unheard-of brands with pictures reminiscent of seventies
Technicolor, I feel a slight chill when I discover, near the bottom,
A six pack of soda bearing the name *OpenCola*. The cans
Are somewhat modern, and read, *CHECK OUT
THE SOURCE AT OPENCOLA.COM.* Beneath that

I see, *VI.0*, and, *open CAN*, "excitedly"; *join*
(\$can, \$mouth); while (\$colaRemaining>0)
{If (\$reallyThirsty) {\$chug}else {\$sip}}.
The cola is another product of the United States,
And I cannot help but think that so is everything else
About the way that I am looking at this.

It is difficult to know how to feel
About the packaging ploy going on here: with all the dollar signs,
Parentheses, and so forth scattered in the text on the can,
It becomes clear to me that I must solve this strange equation.
I listen intently as I pull back the tab,
And hear the bubbles whispering as they pop.

Mother's Mother Died Today, Or Maybe Yesterday...

Robert Roden

Uncle John is skating in the parking lot,
Spinning circles on a skateboard
With his fifth of canned ash in one hand.
Our family, a group of modern pagans—
Fourteen in all—have taken over
The Santa Monica pier. My brother
Is not here. Only three of my mother's siblings
Have brought their tins, but all of them
Sit on towels, on the tiered steps
At the end of the pier. A piercing
Shriek of helium fills balloons.
Each aunt has brought handfuls of flowers,
More jokes about the canisters,
The separated bones and ash.
What will the seagulls think today?

We can see signs on the railing
That read *NO OVERHEAD CASTING*,
So my family members will have to fling
The ashes underhand. Another
Sign warns that mussels and clams
Found here are not fit for human
Consumption, but there are no admonitions
Against tossing your mother over
The edge of the retainer.

Rey and his son Trevor
Have been at the far side
Of the pier, leaning.
(Rey will take his fifth
To Alaska, I guess.)
When he returns
To the group, he softly
Recommends selling
The balloons for a dollar each—
Make a wish and let it go,
He says. At some point
Aunt Becky flashes her panties
To the gawking passersby,
Tie Dye, she shouts while
Aunt Bonnie continues
Filling balloons, performing
Her silent task. Her husband, Dan,
Watches through the video camera.
We are waiting until sunset to begin.

As the sun goes, we let go

Of the balloons. Becky, a bit confused
About what she is supposed to do,
Throws all the flowers into the ocean,
Along with her tin of bagged ash.
She doesn't remove the ashes first
(Perhaps she's afraid to touch them).
The can floats for a few minutes
And the rest of us run to the edge,
Laughing, but soon it takes on
Water. Bonnie removes the bag
From her tin and tosses her portion
Over the side of the pier; a thin,
Gray line of ash floats out to sea.
John throws his into the wind,
And some of the remains
Blow back onto the boards.
The children running through
Them leave little powder
Shoeprints on the splintered wood.



HUNGER by *christopher m.*

Resignation

Robert Roden

In April birds nest above our ceiling;
They make their way through ventilation ducts,
Then we hear them mating in the crawlspace.

In late July one dies from heat; I find
Several feathers when I pull aside
A light fixture in the kitchen ceiling

Where maggots have been slowly dropping
All this morning into the stainless basin
Of the steel sink. I breathe the stink

Of something rotting, something forgotten.
I should have called the landlord sooner,
But I thought, *No harm in letting birds*

Have shelter. In November, I recall,
A black bird rested on our banister,
Stayed the night, Thanksgiving, puddling dung

Along the balcony. I shone a light on him
Then doused him with a rail of water,
But he hung on like a curse, so I went

About my business. I begin to sense
These birds have brought dark omens, so I take
To the sofa to relax my tightening

Stomach. But on the way I find that ants
Have taken over the whole living room,
Crawling on the carpet not in trails,

But in some dark, complex array of chaos,
As if what they've been searching for—
The sweetness—has disappeared.

These and other poems can be found in Robert Roden's new chapbook "The Bitter Suite." Information is in the rear end of this issue or online at www.four-sep.com.

Never Ask Directions From One Who's Lost

Kenneth Simpson

The first customer of the day begs me to take the money in his hand despite the fact that he has already begun pumping. Eventually, I break down and take the ten dollars from him just to watch him drive off after pumping twenty dollars worth of gas. Huh, a klepto with a conscience. I turn my back to the gas tanks and begin cleaning up the store with a commercial jingle in my head. I know people are driving off with unpaid-for gas but that doesn't bother me; I'm not in this business for the money. I'm just one who has nothing better to do than to help the lost find their way.

The young klepto, who didn't ask for directions, will be back. He'll never find the way. There is only one road, and it goes only one way, but without my direction no one can travel it successfully. I'm still the key even to this day despite the fact that I'm retired. This all sounds arrogant, I know, especially coming from someone pushing a broom in a convenience store, but it's all true. And yes, I can speak the truth despite what some might say.

I'm waiting on a hermaphrodite when the klepto comes back to the store. S(he)'s offering me a blow job when he walks in and begins apologizing for stealing the gas. The klepto breaks down crying halfway through his apology. He's lost, literally and figuratively.

"You're stealing gas again, aren't you? Except this time you don't have any money to pay me, do you?" I say, saddened by the boy's sobbing. This job never gets any easier.

"I don't want to steal from you again, it's just that, I don't know where I'm going. It should be just south of this store but it's not. I don't even know how I got here. I should be in Florida."

"Is that where you live?" the hermaphrodite asks.

His answer to that question is the same as all the others. "I've never been there."

"Then why should you be there?" the hermaphrodite asks, touching the klepto's shoulder. I don't think he knows about he/she's gender state nor should he be expected to, for s(he) looks very much like a woman. The only reason I know that s(he) is not fully what s(he) appears to be is because I have great deal of knowledge on the subject. I was created neither male nor female, contradicting many of the stories that I'm sure you've heard about me.

"I don't know. I don't understand why I'm here," the klepto blurts out and continues to cry. I don't understand why either, kid.

"I think all of us have a hard time understanding why things are the way they are," the hermaphrodite

says. I know why s(he) is here but I have a hard time accepting it. They clamp down hard on that rule, but how's one supposed to react to such indecision?

"Why don't you come along with me? I think we're going to the same place," the hermaphrodite says, already replacing me with someone else.

"What about my car?" the klepto says with very little strength, implying that he believes leaving it here could be a viable option.

"I wouldn't worry about it," I interject, and want to follow it up with a couple of bars from a song.

"Why not?" the klepto asks and turns to look for his car. "Did you watch someone take it?"

"No." I love fishes because. . . Sorry. "Chances are no one took it. That kind of thing happens around here. There was this one time. . ."

"What about my car?" is what the hermaphrodite interrupts me with.

"It's probably gone too," I say, feeling sorry for the both of them. "You see, something you have to understand is. . ."

"What is this, a town of car thieves?" the hermaphrodite asks with the kind of rashness that probably would've gotten him/her here anyway.

"Yes, just not car thieves, but every kind of thief. What you don't understand is. . ."

"I understand enough to know that you're condoning their actions."

"I don't really condone their actions. As a matter of fact, I once called a meeting to condemn the sinful actions of those that were not genetically inclined to do so, but no one showed up."

"Why not?" the klepto asks while the hermaphrodite shakes his/her head as if what I said was insane.

"People are always busy around here," I say, wanting to comfort him, but all I come up with is sales pitches. I don't remember ever using any of the ones that I'm hearing and that doesn't surprise me, that was another lifetime.

"You don't look too busy," the hermaphrodite says rudely. And to think s(he) wanted to suck my. . .well I don't have one, but the point is that's supposed to be an intimate act and now s(he) acts as if s(he) hates being in my presence. Humans never cease to amaze me.

"People are always walking through those doors."

"What are you talking about? No one else has walked through those doors since he came in."

"You just don't see them just like you didn't see your cars disappear."

“You’re out of your fucking mind,” the hermaphrodite says with a great deal of arrogance for one who doesn’t know a damn thing about this place. S(he) turns to the klepto and begins talking to him.

“Hey, if you want to walk with me I’ll show you the way to where you’re going.”

“You don’t know where I’m going,” the klepto says in response to the hermaphrodite. I don’t want to feel amused, but the forming of alliances here is always comical.

The hermaphrodite begins the foolishness: “You’re going south, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s where I’m going.”

“Shouldn’t there be more to it than going south?”

“You would think so.”

“There isn’t?”

“Not from what I’ve learned.”

They begin walking out the door when I relinquish my animosity against her/him and ask: “Aren’t you two going to ask for directions?”

The hermaphrodite has the nerve to laugh out loud at me. I showed a great deal of courtesy toward him/her by not laughing out loud during their planning session. I should be angry but I’m not, for I’ll see them again.

The store is full, but none of these customers concern me because they’ve all reached the point that they’ll never ask me. I get out from behind my counter and sweep the store. Most of them try to do some kind of physical harm to me, but physical touch only happens if I choose it to. I seem to remember needing to add a little physical touch to seal some deals. Those memories aren’t quite right. I’ve never done what my mind is showing me, in fact, I can’t. Maybe this was the reason I was forced to retire. Was I forced?

After I finish sweeping, I take a break and buy a moon pie. I put the fifty cents in the register and look at all the cash that is in there. Ten-fifty. It’s been quite a busy day. I sit on the counter and prop my tired legs on a stool. The moon pie is as good as always and the sky is providing a far more colorful display than usual.

The light approaches and retreats in an irregular pattern, changing colors with almost every movement. This aspect of the town drives a small minority insane, but these are probably the same people who couldn’t stand to have television channels changed quickly. Pink pulsates, not ugly clothes pink but like the shiny one that shows up in a rainbow or the glare of a CD. When I say that’s my favorite out of all of the skies’ colors people look at me strangely. They

all think they know what I should be like, but they would all be surprised to find out who I really am.

Enough about that. Contemplating the stereotypes I have to deal with will not get this place clean. I begin mopping the aisles of the store when the only real customer of the day reenters it.

“Back again?”

“It’s gone. It just disappeared.” The klepto is frightened. Poor boy.

“I didn’t realize the hermaphrodite had been here that long. My memory is getting really bad.”

“You knew?”

“Yeah. I don’t think s(he) appreciates what you just said.”

“What do you mean?” The klepto looks all around. “It’s not here.”

“S(he) is here.”

“Where?”

“Even if I were to show you, you wouldn’t be able to see.” He looks really shocked as I say those words. “What’s the matter?”

“You’re a goat.” The klepto is barely able to get the words out.

“That happens. There was this one time when I turned into a giant coc...”

“Where the fuck am I?”

“You’re not old enough to be talking like that. And you, you should be ashamed for trying to have sex with him. Yeah, well fuck you too! Sorry kid, I can only take so much disrespect until I have to stand up for myself,” I say and from the look on his face, I can tell that it was a bad idea to argue with someone he couldn’t see.

“You alright?” I say and hear a mixture of he/she’s verbal assault and some kind of ad for a new women’s television network.

“Where am I?” he asks. The boy is about to break down again.

“I can’t tell you that, but I can tell you where to go.”

“Where to, south? I don’t even understand why I feel like that’s the direction I need to go. I shouldn’t be here, wherever the hell here is! I should be in Florida.”

“It’s okay, you just don’t understand. All you have to do. . .” I can’t remember the directions. I wish that song would get out of my head. All it is is an overly repetitive dance song; it will be a hit. It already is. We don’t have music here. What’s happening to me? I’m the key, I am his only way. Why can’t I remember. It hasn’t been that long since I gave the directions, or has it? I can’t remember ever doing

it. I don't understand. This shouldn't happen to me. Where is that music coming from?

"You alright?"

"I'm fine, kid. I'm just. . . I don't know. You have to go south." I trip over my last words.

"I've already gone south."

"I know, I know," I say, trying to remain the one in control. "What was it like? Describe it to me."

"The sky was a scratchy mixture of grey and black and yet not all of it was. It was contained by an even darker sky."

"Isn't the grey ugly?"

"Annoying maybe. So you've been there?"

"Yes, I've seen it. Maybe from here. Did you walk into the dark sky?"

"You can't walk into the sky."

"What am I right now?"

"A giant coc. . ." He stops. "How did I not notice that?"

"The change is taking place. You need to go south and go into the sky before it's too late!" I watch the teenaged boy run out of the store. Good luck son. I have a son. How could I have a son?

The rubber gloves don't work with my new appendages but the bathroom has to be cleaned anyway. I used to have to deal with much worse where I once ruled – or is manage a better word? Man! Men are filthy pigs. Bad pigs are drowned in rivers. Isn't that harsh? Aren't there almost an infinite amount of punishments that could replace that one? Not if you're God. No, not God, someone else. Who knows, He/She has so many friends. They often yell Her/His name, "Oh God! Oh God! Fuck me!" That doesn't make much sense. That's why I retired. Everything has changed from the way it used to be. It was about a hard day's work back then. Nothing beats the feeling after a hard day's work. That toilet has never shined brighter.

The store is clean once again, but those who have passed by today have cleaned out every shelf. The store isn't empty, it's never empty. The shelves get empt. . . full. Everything is filthy. I'll get the broom.

"Hello," I say to my first customer of the day.

THE RUBBER GLOVES
DON'T WORK WITH MY
NEW APPENDAGES BUT
THE BATHROOM HAS TO
BE CLEANED ANYWAY.

“I tried to go into the sky like you said but I hit a wall,” a teenaged boy says. So young. This job never gets any easier.

“Excuse me?”

“I went past the grey and into the black, but there was a wall,” the young man says.

“Do you need directions?”

“You’ve already given me directions! What do I do about the wall?”

“If I’d given you directions you wouldn’t be here right now. Just go south and you’ll see what you’re looking for as clear as day.”

He stomps away, becoming blurry in my vision before he even leaves the store. What’s wrong with my vision? I know that voice. Where am I going? How will they find the way without me? I can’t wake up because I don’t sleep.



CHASE by *christopher m.*

“Bout three inches an thass no bull.”

“Oh horse pucky, Swilly. You’re so full of it.” Robbo is deadsure Swilly is making it up. Problem is – Swilly looks like he’s telling the truth – and besides, why would he come up with such a dumb-stupid lie?

Dwight Swilly stuffs his mouth with sunflower seeds and swooshes them round with this tongue till he gets them lined up just right and then he snaps the shells between his front teeth. His luscious great puff-lips look just like black rosepetals with sunflower shells shooting out the middle where the stamen should be. “You can measure it yourself if you guys don’ believe me. Goes up an down all a time. Keep me wake sometime at night an I git thinkin bout it.”

“Aww Swilly,” Chuck Winston says, “dontcha know not everybody believes that kinda stuff? Robbo’s right – yer full of it.”

Swilly offers his seeds around but nobody wants to bother with popping the shells to get to the meat. Jerry Grigby speaks up, “Wish we had some movie popcorn instead. Think they’d let us in at the Regis just to get some butter popcorn and not make us pay to see the flick? Three inches, huh. That’s pretty much. Does it ever go plumb flat? You say your sister’s seen it?”

“Georgia’s seen it. An whass amazin’ bout it is how it goes juss flat. And then firs’ thing ya know, it’s stickin’ out again. Aks Georgia. She knows.”

Swilly loves hanging out with Chuck, Robbo and Jerry Grigby. There’s always something weird popping up. He twistcrushes the shells against the basketball pad with his Keds. Says, “Less us do a few more shoots an then go over my place an I’ll show ya. Three inches – you can measure – less it’s up an gone flat again lass night. Ya never can know one day to another. Georgia’ll tell ya an I ain’t lyin’.”

“Is Georgia gonna be there?” Jerry Grigby asks.

Swilly’s family lives at New Dawn Estates – rows and rows of tightfit constipated littlehouses with backyards the size of playpens and bricabrac painted up in all colors of the rainbow. Pastels – some like it – some don’t. Tiny littlerooms so you can afford a separate bedroom for each kid and still have an extraroom for sewing your own clothes or a special TV room or a nice clean place for relatives visiting from OutOfTown. Your grandmother. Your second cousin. Swilly’s grandmother lives in the extraroom. Year-round.

Georgia Swilly’s as tall as her brother and he’s only thirteen and already too lofty for his pantlegs. The

two of them look even taller next to the nearly new New Dawn Estates littlehouse. Georgia is supposed to be practicing her violin when the boys show up but instead she's out on the frontstep jitterbugging to American Bandstand turned up and splatter-blasting out the frontdoor. Of course Jerry Grigby hopes she'll give him the eye as he and his buddies swagger up the sidewalk like they are here on big business. Jerry knows good and well that his mom'll have a cow if he starts messing around with a pretty Negro girl but he just can't help it. Besides, his mom sure doesn't seem to mind him being buddies with Dwight Swilly.

Of course there'd been a lot of nasty tongue-wagging when the town of Jefferson took in the New Dawn development and agreed to provide city water, but it happened anyway – in spite of what some people said. And before anybody knew it a Negro family'd moved in and a lot of cattymouth folks said, "Didn't I tell you this would happen?"

But as it turns out a lot of those same cattymouth folks end up living at New Dawn too. And pretty much everybody ends up liking the Swilly family and pretty much everybody only gets funny in the head about it when their sons and daughters set to love-eyeing Georgia and Dwight Swilly. Then they say, "You never know what could happen do you?"

Jerry Grigby is just one example. He love-eyes Georgia all the time and Swilly knows it. The townsfolk think the boys are probably too young to get really-real serious about girls. Thank the lord above, it mostly looks like ball is their main thing – any kind of ball – football first – and of course that's OK.

But Chuck and Robbo are real anxious about the measuring. They've talked about it a few times and figure it is just some kind of hogwash that Swilly uses to get the attention of girls.

Jerry Grigby hangs around the frontstep being all droopmouth and staring at Georgia and not saying anything. Just ogly-ogling the sweetflesh swelling up under her home-sewed sequin-Elvis sweatshirt. He doesn't really care much if Swilly's farfetched stories are true. It's all the same to him. The real reason he came along is mostly just so he can check out Georgia's mounds. Swilly grabs him from the backside and quicksnaps him into a halfnelson. Says, "Gitoutta here you piganimal. She's my little sister." The two boys wrestle around a little bit and Georgia just keeps on dancing like she doesn't know they are there.

Jerry pouts down his nose and then he and Robbo and Chuck follow Swilly singlefile into the bricabrac kitchen where Swilly's mom is fixing sweetpotato pie and mustard greens. She offers the boys fried peanutbutter sandwiches if they want to stay for supper. The littlekitchen smells like vinegar. Swilly heads straight to the fridge and downs most of a halfgallon

of homogenized milk – straight from the bottle – and Winella Swilly says, “Maybe your friends’d like somethin’ to drink, an how many times do I got ta tell you, don’ be drinkin’ yer cooties straight on the bottle, young man? I swear you’ll never grow up like your daddy, Dwight Swilly. I swear it. ‘Scuse his misactin’, boys. I bet none a you drink straight out the bottle!”

Nobody admits it but they all do it from time to time. Most of the time if their moms are not watching. None of them has ever tasted sweetpotato pie or mustard greens. The thought does not seem very inviting. In unison they say, “We have other things to do. We won’t be able to stay over for supper.” Robbo says, “But thank you for offering, Mrs. Swilly.” And Chuck adds, “It certainly smells nice in your little-kitchen, Mrs. Swilly.”

Swilly says, “Ahh come on. Seem like you guys never stay long at my place,” and then he notices Jerry Grigby is staring at his sister again and he thinks, Oh maybe it’s juss as well at least Jerry doesn’ hang aroun.

Chuck whispers to Robbo, “I thought we came here for the measuring ta see if it’s true or just a pile of horsepucky.” He stretches his neck into the other-room to see if *it* is still as weird as ever. *IT* – just hanging there – sofasize but up-and-down vertical instead of side-to-side horizontal like most sofasize and practically filling the south wall all the way flush-up to the ceiling. But Swilly shifts around and blocks Chuck’s view. Chuck actually thinks Swilly is probably doing it on purpose because what he’s been telling is a lie and he is going to try to get them back outside before they ever get a chance to see. This will be easy with Jerry Grigby. He isn’t much interested in the measuring in the first place but Swilly’ll have to pay Hell itself to get Chuck and Robbo out. They mean business and want to know once and for all since Swilly’s been telling it around school for so long.

On the way to New Dawn, Chuck had said, “Hey Robbo, I betcha tenbuck it isn’t true,” and Robbo had said, “I can’t bet you tenbuck, Chuck, because I bet the same – it isn’t true.”

Winella Swilly is aware that Chuck is trying to see into the livingroom and Dwight is blocking him. She says, “Is somethin’ wrong, Chuck? Seem like somethin’s botherin’ you? Is the littlekitchen too crowdet?”

“Oh nothing,” Chuck says as he kicks a dab of cooked sweet-potato across the gold-flecked linoleum.

Swilly says, “Chuck wants ta know if it’s true bout the pi’ture.”

Winella says, “Well you nice boys can see for yourself. My, my. It’s been a mystery to us all.”

The picture is an original oil painting on cheap thin canvas. Winella Swilly found it at the Goodwill. She just could not take her eyes off it even though she has never been much interested in religion. In fact, since Grandma Swilly went stone-silent, there hasn't much talk of any kind of religion around the Swilly house.

Winella had hung around and hung around the Goodwill that day. Counted her money over and over. Fretted that somebody else might snatch it up before her. She did her level best to figure if she could afford the eight-dollar-and-fifty-cent price marked with a china pencil on the hangtag. She figured the frame alone would be worth that. She certainly did not want to short her children on anything essential. Seemed like they always needed new Keds or something. But the urge to take the picture home just swept over her like a lovegush and her hands turned sourpurple as she doled out the hardsweat cash.

And when she got back to the littlehouse Mr. Goodall Swilly had said, "Winellawoman, whatever possess you? D'you think money grow on trees? Thass the uglees damn thing I ever..." and of course Winella felt ashamed. Then she kissed him on his luscious velvet-black pufflips and said, "Ohh Honey, I don' know, it seem like it juss pick me out and I couldn' help myself. We needet somethin over the sofa, an it has blue, same as the walls an sofa."

And then it was Mr. Goodall Swilly who actually ended up helping his wife hang it. And then the painting started getting to him too. And times followed when Grandma Swilly just sat all day on the opposite wall and never took her eyes off it. Georgia and her brother thought it was a dumb joke but they never told their mother. She seemed so spellbound and they loved her so much and knew good and well that she never spent a single dime on anything just for herself.

And then

the strange thing started happening.

And the whole family could actually measure it with a straightedge. Right at the bottom lefthand corner, the painting pulled away from the wall – and if they sat in just the right place on the cornflower-blue sofa, they could actually feel it touching crawly against their necks! – as if the Goodwill-Mary picture itself wasn't downright creepy enough!

Some amateur Sunday-painter had painted what must have been intended as the Virgin Mary all draped in smushy royal-blue with the Christmas-surprise infant under a white star with the baby kind of cradled on a bronzy-color kind of pillowlike thing with a fistsize knot at the corner and a thick-tassel drooping down at the bottom lefthand part of the picture. Nobody ever said it out loud but everybody,

including Grandma Swilly, secretly thought the pillowlike thing looked like a bronzy pair of a fat suntan woman's buttocks and the thick-tassel looked like a big old turd spewing out. Mr. Goodall Swilly had said, "That painter's not a very good pi'ture maker and thass for sure. That Marywoman look more like a ole Greek potata farmer with a one day growth a beard an the surprise baby look like it's a' lease eighteen-year-ode an one leg's too small an kine of polio twisty."

And when word got out of the strange thing happening, Nellie Hazlind heard about it around town, and she came out to New Dawn Estates to write an article for the paper. But when she got there it was flat up against the wall and she figured the Swillys had gone a little off in the head. She told her editor, "Such a pity. The Swillys used to be such nice people."

"Well," Chuck says, "uhh, Mrs. Swilly, Robbo an me were wanting to look at the picture again an Swilly told us, 'OK why don' you guys come on over,' and I sure hope us guys aren't any trouble to you Mrs...." And right now, Georgia Swilly joins the group and the littlekitchen really feels cramped up, and she says, "Step right up, Gennelman," and then she takes Robbo and Chuck by the hand. Jerry Grigby feels real jealous and tags behind. He wishes he'd said he was here to see the picture too.

Grandma Swilly is hunkerdown like a lost crow in the livingroom on a gold silk-corded ottoman with tassels on each corner that resemble the odd thick-tassel in the picture. She looks like an old black prune all shriveled up in too much sun and way beyond any possible imagined use. Her eyes are shrunk down the size of a nailhole and her pencil-thick toenails are dark amber and brittle. Her puny little head bobs back and forth like a dead leaf on an autumn branch that has just been shortly disturbed by the air movement of seven new bodies in the littleroom. She is dead-silent as usual but it is evident that she's keeping her shrivel-squint aimed in the general direction of the picture. Now her head bobs directed toward it and seems to say, Yessiree, you boys, thur 'tiz.

Of course the boys mean to be polite but none can cough up the words to greet her – she has never before paid any attention to them anyway. And besides, they just cannot help but stare at the grotesque picture filling the south wall all the way flush-up to the ceiling.

I don't think it matches the blue in the sofa all that well, Robbo thinks but does not say.

Doesn't anybody else think that tassel-thing looks like I think it looks? Chuck thinks but does not say.

Jerry Grigby stands real close to Georgia – smelling

her. He hopes she will play her violin so the attention will be drawn to her. Then he can look at her flesh mounds all he wants. He thinks he hears a critch-critch-critching sound – like a nasty beaver chewing at a tree trunk. Cold-ass fear rushes right through his spine and he believes it is because he's having dirty thoughts about Georgia. And just as he thinks them, he glances up at the picture and would swear that he sees the corner move. Just a hair. He hightails it to the frontdoor! And as he passes Grandma, he realizes the critch-critch-sound is coming from her bony little neck as her head bobs.

Chuck tries to remember the first time he ever saw the picture and had he noticed anything strange about the corner before? Was it flat against the wall? Or was it always sticking out? But all he can recall is the ugly short polio-twisty leg on the baby and the hideous turd-thing spewing out of the bronzy butt-pillow.

Robbo is stoopover-bent and trying to peek behind the corner in question and, Yes, he thinks it is probably at least three inches away from the wall. He, like Chuck, cannot remember if it has always been this way. He certainly had not noticed it when he'd been in the Swilly's livingroom before.

Swilly holds up the straightedge and measures right in front of everyone. His luscious black rosepetal lips pooch this way and that as he announces, "Looks like iss shiftet since lass night – two-an-three-quarter inch. Iss goin' flat again, Mama."

"How do we know it wasn't always like this?" Chuck asks and then hears the critch-critch-critching sound and suddenly jumps back – like he fears he has spoken out of turn and crossed some unseen line by doubting what he sees.

"It'll be flat by tamorrah," Georgia says and then picks up her violin and drags the bow all screechy across the catgut.

Winella says, "Why'nt you play somethin' nice for the boys, Georgia? 'Fur Elice', or somethin' real nice."

"'Fleur-ta-Lis', Mama. An, No, I won't. I didn' practice yet."

"Yeah!" says Robbo enthusiastically. "We'd all like to hear you play." He thinks it might be a good idea to draw everyone's attention away while he studies the lower lefthand corner of the picture.

Georgia begins to play – da-da dah da-dah-dee dum. Dah-dee dum. Dah-dee dum... and Winella hums along real sweetlike as Jerry Grigby sneaks back into the livingroom looking all goo-goo-eye and his sweat socks go smelly and his armpits are wetsop from thinking about Georgia's mounds and Grandma's head critch-critches and Swilly pounds the straightedge against his forehead in disbelief about

the two-and-three-quarter-inch measure and everyone's bodyheat cranks up moist just as Mr. Goodall Swilly arrives home from work with tractor grease under his fingernails. Goodall heads straight to the fridge and slurpgurgles loud at the last of the milk straight out of the bottle and Chuck looks at Robbo and Robbo looks back at Chuck and they each feel pretty creepy and crammed-in and want out of the littlehouse more than anything.

Robbo flicks on the forty-watt bulb in the wrought-iron floorlamp and takes one quick last forefinger measure so he can compare, if or when, he ever gets the nerve to come back. And soon as Georgia finishes her song, he and Chuck politely excuse themselves.

And as soon as they hit the frontstep, Jerry Grigby joins them and Robbo says, "Christ, guys, Swilly's practically our best friend. If Swilly says it was three inches last night and now it's two-and-three-quarters, then we have to believe him. That doesn't mean *I understand* it. Ghosts. That's what it is."

Jerry Grigby wisely offers, "Maybe it happens only when Swilly comes home all sweaty from the courts and it's too much moisture in the littleroom. Now let's go see if the Regis'll let us get some butter popcorn and not pay for the flick." But he still is thinking about Georgia's soft mounds and wondering if she might like to go out for a donut and maybe they can get the waitress to serve them stiff coffee and maybe Georgia doesn't even like boys yet.

On Sunday evening, Swilly walks all the way to Moore's Drugstore to buy his dad a pack of Old Golds.

Denise Monroe is here, all suntan-nice and dress-up in her dance recital outfit – gold lamé tights all slithering shiny like a skin-thin snake around her chubby trunk – and she tells Swilly, "I went and messed up the danceteam cause I've been daydreaming about cheerleading and I forgot to concentrate."

"You sure as sure do look pretty's a pi'ture," Swilly says and smacks his luscious black rosepetal lips like he is hungry and wanting something juicy as a ripe pear.

"Oh Swilly," Denise says, "you say that to all the girls! To tell you the truth, I'm feeling pretty awful about myself and lonely as something somebody just threw out. I guess I'm just wanting something and I don't know what."

Swilly says, "Lissen ta me, Denise, less you an me go and walk over the park around the lake."

And for the first time ever, for each of them, under a cluster-umbrella of giant blue spruce trees, in less than three minutes, Dwight Swilly gives Denise Monroe something he has never given away before.

And Denise Monroe gives Dwight Swilly something she only has one of and will never have another. Never.

Every guy at the gym will hear about it on Monday.

As Swilly dawdles and gawks starstruck back to his house, he pooches his luscious black rosepetal lips upintimate to his own nose where he still can smell Denise. He worries what he'll tell his dad about not getting the Old Golds.

Georgia stews all in a tissyfit on the frontstep like she knows he was supposed to be home a while ago. "You come in here, Dwight Swilly," she demands, "an see what happen!"

And what Swilly sees makes him swallow his Adam's apple. Georgia whines, "It juss jump right off the wall, Dwight, an we were sitting watchin' Ed Sullivan and ole Granny juss starta shakin' like a hard-rode railroad track an it juss jump right off the wall. Juss awhile ago an you were still someplace doin' something."

Mr. Goodall Swilly says, "Oh, Dwight son, ya shoulda got here sooner and not a been out doin' whatever you were doin'." Goodall is much too shaken to notice that Swilly has forgotten the cigarettes.

Winella anxiously scratches her fingernails harsh against her scalp. Her voice is pale-thin – like it is creeping in from another littleroom in the littlehouse next door. "My oh my my my," she pleads, "what have I brought?"

Grandma Swilly's entire tiny shrivel-up old black prune body wham-bams like a rockinghorse set loose in a squall and her nailhole eyes disappear to somewhere nobody can see and the critch-critch-critching is so loud that Swilly is sure that all the neighbors in all the littlehouses can hear it.

The eight-dollar-and-fifty-cent Goodwill Virgin Mary painting is sprawled and twisted all haywire across the back of the cornflower-blue sofa and the wrought-iron lampbase is thrust-up haphazard through the cheapthin canvas like a sharp sword at battleheat and gut-penetrating the very heart of the Virgin and the forty-watt bulb flicktwitters like a half-spent dying star.

Swilly swallows.

First waistdeep.

Now down to his toes. He gags on his own spit.

It

still tastes sweet.

Just like Denise Monroe.

He looks back over his shoulder

to see if

she just happens

to be

standing

right next to him.

Man won't survive *full stop*
They've been saying that
for decades *comma*
but they'll still be there to say that
for more decades *full stop*
Man won't reach out
for other systems *comma*
they say he'll never manage
to launch manned spacecraft
beyond Jupiter's orbit *full stop*
Outliving his destiny *em dash*
man won't make it *comma*
man won't make it *full stop*
Indeed perhaps man's doomed
to the very same fate as dinosaurs' *comma*
but then someone or something else
will take over all of it *full stop*
Man's not the ultimate ruler *comma*
man's not the ultimate discoverer *comma*
man's not the ultimate unifier *full stop*
Yet who or what
all such will ever be *comma*
all that will be fulfilled in the end
still is a man's real deed *full stop Full stop full stop*



SIGHTING by stepan chapman

The Other Side

Alessio Zanelli

Two selves, an Old and a New one to The Other Side.

N. What ... what happened?

O. You died.

N. What ... where am I?

O. You died.

N. What are you saying ... I'm dead?

O. No, not exactly.

N. What do you mean?

O. You died.

N. Then ... I'm dead!

O. You're here, you ARE, then you're not dead.

N. But ... I DIED! I don't understand ... where am I?

O. You died as a man and came to The Other Side.

N. The Other Side? ... I still don't understand.

O. You're not in a hurry.

N. I'm not in a hurry? ... What do you mean?

O. You'll understand yourself.

N. I ... died ... as a man, but ... I'm not dead?

O. Definitely, you're not.

N. The ... Other Side ...

O. The Other Side.

N. Died ... not dead ...

O. Exactly.

N. I came to The Other Side ... from where I was a man ...

O. You did.

N. Oh ... I now get you ... at least, I believe so. I'm so sorry ... I can remember now ... what a ...

O. Never mind.

N. So, there really IS another side ...

O. You bet.

N. We're there now!

O. HERE we are.

N. But ... if not a man ... what am I now?

O. Simply yourself.

N. Myself?

O. Yes, yourself.

N. And ... who are you?

O. Another one.

N. Like me?

O. A self like you.

N. I see ... but ... what do we do here?

O. All selves together make The Other Side.

N. Ah ... all selves! ... And are ALL more than two?

O. Of course.

N. All selves ... together ... I see but me and you, how many selves are there?

O. Once you'd reason in numerical terms ... trillions, maybe quadrillions ... let's say a great deal.

N. I see ... just a great deal ... so, here are found all the human beings passed away ...

O. Not only.

N. What? Aren't all selves ... human beings ... passed away?

O. No.

N. What, if not passed away?

O. They all PASSED away.

N. Then ... they're all the human beings passed away ...

O. I never said that.

N. What do you mean? Aren't they all the men who passed away?

O. Not necessarily, not all MEN.

N. What ... what else?

O. You'll understand yourself. Anyway, it's of no importance, here.

N. Here?

O. Here, at present.

N. No importance? But I'm a man and want to know ...

O. You WERE a man, now you're a self of The Other Side.

N. Not a man ... simply a self ... and all the others?

O. Just SELVES making The Other Side. No longer anything else.

N. Well ... again ... what's The Other Side?

O. It's where ALL beings become just selves.

N. All beings ...

O. Everyone.

N. And ... you ... but you ... were a ... MAN!

O. Be quiet, I was.

N. I'm so confused.

O. You're not in a hurry. You've got plenty of ... you called it ... time, didn't you?

N. I've got plenty of time?

O. Quite a lot. Infinite time, that is ... no more time.

N. Infinite time? But I still feel that ... time is passing!

O. You SEEM to perceive the passing of time. Such sensation will vanish soon.

N. It WILL? Soon? Then we're in time!

O. It so appears to you, but it's not true. I can't explain, you'll understand yourself.

N. Infinite time ... no more time ... how can it be?

O. Believe me, there's no more passing time ... no when ... there's only the present.

N. I'll never believe that!

O. You will.

N. Why can't you be less ... reticent?

O. I'm not at all. You'll understand yourself.

N. Just ... try to be more ... explicit!

O. There'd be no point, you've got plenty of ... the present.

N. Of time! You meant that ... TIME! Thus, we're in time!

O. We just ARE. The Other Side. You'll understand yourself.

N. I'm so ... confused ... so ... OKAY! I'm not in a hurry ... okay?

O. Definitely, you're not in a hurry.

N. Yet, I'm not in time ... then I'm in something else ...

O. In the present.

N. Okay ... what ... what will I be ... doing all the ... present?

O. Making The Other Side.

N. Oh ... well ... in other words?

O. UNDERSTANDING.

N. Okay ... understanding ... what?

O. Everything, that is ... nothing.

N. Hey buddy! ... You are no help at all to me!

O. I QUITE am. Just wait, you'll understand yourself.

N. Bah! I'd better go looking for another ... SELF to speak to! ... Anyway, thank you.

O. You're welcome. See you, then.

N. No ... wait! Stay here ... tell me ... what are YOU doing all the present?

O. I AM, I UNDERSTAND.

N. You are ... what?

O. The what, when, where, why, how ... have no more sense.

N. OKAY! OKAY! I'll understand myself, I've got plenty of time ... haven't I?

O. You'd better say you're not in a hurry.

N. Ah ... right! I'm not in a hurry ...

O. You're not, you just ARE.

N. I see, I see ... then ... what ... can I do ... meantime?

O. Again, you keep on whining about the what and when.

N. I'm sorry ... forgive me. I'm sorry ... I am ... am to ...

O. Just wait. Enjoy meeting other selves, you'll meet them all.

N. Them ALL? All the ... the ... great number you mentioned?

O. Yes.

N. You sure?

O. I am.

N. But ... do I have all that time? Sorry, sorry ... present?

O. You're no longer in time, you exceeded time.

N. Exceeded?

O. Time no longer has any significance to you as a self.

N. And I will be ... such ... forever?

O. See, you'll understand yourself. I must go now.

N. Yes, yes! Stay, I think I ... begin to understand ... one more question, please!

O. Okay.

N. I'll be meeting selves ... yes ... hem ... anything else? I fear I'll get bored!

O. You really won't.

N. I won't? How could I ever ... spend all that ... whatever it is?

O. You can. Definitely, you'll understand yourself.

N. I'm just ... terrified at the idea of having nothing to do ... nothing FOREVER!

O. You'll have SO MUCH to do.

N. Will I?

O. Forever. Without ever exhausting your energy, curiosity, satisfaction. Nor losing consciousness.

N. Really?

O. You'll be expanding your knowledge forever, without limit.

N. Ad infinitum ... everything, that is ... nothing!

O. You say that.

N. Listen ... is this what we once called ... perfect bliss?

O. Call it as you like, this is simply that.

N. The Other Side ... I came to The Other Side ... I'm one of the selves that make The Other Side!

O. That's quite the score.

N. Plenty of ... of ... I'm not in a hurry. I'll understand myself.

O. You no doubt will.

N. You're not making fun of me, are you?

O. I thought you had no further questions ... anyway, it's all true.

N. So, here I am ... so confused.

O. You'll feel better soon.

N. The Other Side ... how can it be? Why couldn't I be MERELY dead?

O. MEN die as such, selves don't. You already were a self sooner than a man.

N. ENOUGH ... ENOUGH ... I'll understand myself ... just let me inspect this place!

O. See you, then.

N. Oh ... see you, buddy ... when?

O. Always, that is ... never.

N. Okay, okay! I GO.

O. Just go, then.

N. How can this be? How can this be? I died, but I'm not dead. Is this rebirth?

O. You were born ONCE, you died ONCE, you're not dead, but you're a self forever.

N. A self ... forever!

O. Welcome to The Other Side.

N. The Other Side.

O. Farewell then, SHEER self, you're invited to meander through all The Other Side!

N. I know, I know ... don't add a word! I was born to eternity, to eternity since I died.

wordmakers

M.L. Bain » *Studies psychology, German and philology in Wyoming, Michigan. Published in Art:Mag, Penny Dreadful, and many others. These poetics are from the manuscript "Hybrid Methods for Living in the Postmodern Age."*

Alan Catlin » *Barmaster in Schenectady, New York. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chapbooks. '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.'*

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

Gary Every » *Has graced these pages numerous times. 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.*

Kevin Frazier » *Writes from Arctic Lapland, and works for MPE, a Helsinki-based film and television production company that makes international documentaries. Also has taught at the Russian State Institute of Cinematography and published studies of the Russian poet Khodasevich.*

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

Matthew Hamel » *New writer living in Colorado Springs, Colorado.*

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.*

Robert Roden » *Hard-typing poet out of Roseville, California, seen in many independent press mags. Two chapbooks are available from Four-Sep, including his latest, 'The Bitter Suite.'*

Kenneth Simpson » *Lives in Lubbock, Texas and works in a convenience store while finishing school at Texas Tech.*

Spiel » *A self-described 'reclusive duck.' A writer and illustrator with appearances in the best mags of the independent press. His latest book, 'Insufferable Zipper,' is available from Four-Sep Publications.*

Alessio Zanelli » *Lives in Cremona, a small town not far from Milan, Lombardy, in northern Italy. An autodidact of English with over 100 works published in nearly 50 small press magazines worldwide and two published collections: 'Loose Sheets' in the UK and 'Small Press Verse & Poeticconjectures,' just out in the US.*

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. 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

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

Ed Galing

TALES OF SOUTH PHILLY - chronicles the sights, sounds, smells and action on the streets and in the homes of a long-since-gone South Philly. Hard living turning out the best people, leaving behind a few, 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. *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. *Matte cover/linen paper/46pp - \$6ppd*

Michael Newell

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

B.Z. Niditch

DICTIONARY OF THE 21st CENTURY - wordplay and wit 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 Kharmas. Modern and Post- meet on these pages. *Gloss cover/24# paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

B.Z. Niditch

MOVIE BRATS - this novella takes a serio-comic look at the tumultuous world of Hollywood and beyond during an era of political, sexual and religious uprisings. A big fat book of Niditch's intense, witty and fast-paced dialogue. *Craft cover/24# paper/48pp - \$6ppd*

B.Z. Niditch - NEW!

3RILOGY - these three short fiction pieces explore art, humanity, political thought and the absurd underbelly of the 20th century. The fear of reprisal, unbelievable audacity and the mystery of murder - themes for a good read. *Craft cover/24# legal-half/34pp - \$6ppd*

Charles Ries

BAD MONK: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE - The Bad Monk, Charles Ries, marks shrewd, careful observations of the world around him, merging spirituality, a bit of beer, waffles and Milwaukee life. Bonus poem broadsheet! *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

Charles Ries

MONJE MALO SPEAKS ENGLISH - is the second chap from the Bad Monk, Charles Ries. A refined, yet rough voice out of Milwaukee, Ries matures with meditations on Mexico, mamas, love and religion that have been pubbed throughout the indie press world. *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

Robert Roden

THE SCOPOPHILIAC - 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*

Robert Roden - NEW!

THE BITTER SUITE - the is jammed with Roden's poetics pinning down new life, new death and new views, wrapped in the feel of dirty starched sheets, trapped behind the dual boarded doors of desperation and longing. *Craft cover/24# paper/28pp - \$6ppd*

Spiel - NEW!

INSUFFERABLE ZIPPER - you get fifteen cunning and outrageous stories and intense character sketches. It's the reclusive Spiel's world of weirdos, women and wild worldviews - like bubblegum stuck to hot sneakers, if follows you. Read what's been called a 'fresh blast to the face and ears.' *Craft cover/24# legal-half/44pp - \$7ppd*

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. *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*

need a chap?

Looking for better production of your words? For less than the copyshop? Locked out of the publishing loop?

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



Four-Sep Publications also produces chaps-for-hire under the imprint "Lockout Press." There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design with the option for partial distribution through Four-Sep/First Class. The foremost concern in this venture is to communicate your work with production matching the scale of your message. Professional layout and design along with crisp laser output will be combined with experience, skill and text-crafting ability. After dropping too many paychecks at the copyshop, I want to share the ability I now have to reduce the costs associated with this wondrous obsession, and increase the quality of the finished product. Plus, I'll be able to read more of all of your fine words. Nothing is impossible to work out, up to full-color covers and perfect-binding, and I assure you that you will reel in amazement. **Drop me a letter or e-mail (christopherm@four-sep.com) and I will work up a quote based on the info you give me.** Everything is included in the rates: shipping, printing, binding, and proofs-til-you're-happy.

Sample rates (remember to allow 4 pages for contents and title page:

Quantity	Pages	Paper	Price	Each
50	32	Royal Linen	\$190.88	\$3.82
50	36	24# White	174.78	3.50
100	24	Royal Linen	237.25	2.37
100	32	24# White	229.60	2.30
200	36	24# White	376.60	1.88

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

For additional information, testimonials, sample cover art and more, please check out www.four-sep.com and click on the "Lockout Press" link.

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.

There are a few important things to make sure that you do when you submit your work. For the computer users, please do **not** justify or force-justify your text. Name and address on the first page of each piece only. Send along a SASE. Disposable/recyclable manuscripts are cool. Lastly.....drop me a letter with your submission, it sure beats the hell out of a chunk of submission text and a SASE dropping out on the table without at least a brief greeting.

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

www.four-sep.com

Speaking of technology » » » stay up to date at : www.four-sep.com
www.four-sep.com

-Christopher M.

try these



A complete collection of all reviews can be found on the Web site at www.four-sep.com.

There are some fantastic books out in the “mainstream” press that are worth mentioning as exceptional pieces of fiction – fine friggin’ art – that deserve the attention of people who relish the unlimited intensity the written word offers the pried-open mind. Back to the indy-press next time around.

CHAPS AND BOOKS

THE SLYNX by **Tatyana Tolstoya**: Russian literature is populated by realists coming off as absurdists, gloomy satirists, and keen cultural guardians and critics. Introspective historical perspective, like a butterknife hacking at jerked beef, is much of the appeal. Tolstaya sneaks us into a world following the “Blast” where mice are a coveted cash-like commodity, Oldeners build subtle reminders of their past, half the population suffers from “Consequences” such as rooster crests and other bodily anomalies, and literature is stashed away – controlled by Fyodor Kuzmich (Glorybe). Not to mention the fear in the woods – the Slynx. Benedikt is a typical citizen, impoverished and slogging away transcribing stories “written” by Kuzmich, resisting any urge toward “freethinking.” A dash of 1984 in a clumsier society, replete with uneven social hierarchies based more on luck than privilege or intelligence. Caricature and satire abound as Benedikt slinks his way through Tolstaya’s carefully plotted tale. A sheer pleasure to immerse one’s mind into this simply awesome world.

IN THE HAND OF DANTE by **Nick Tosches**: At times one gets the urge to chuck this book on a fire, as a trite passage or two, raging with self indulgence, cannot help but dig animosity toward the author deeper under the skin. Suddenly, Tosches recovers with a blistering screed decrying the practices of the publishing house that printed the pages and supplied the ink for this text. Then there’s the plot and the action as a newly-discovered text, written by Dante, is chased, killed for and ultimately auctioned off, page-by-precious-page. This is a book within a book, told from several angles, perspectives and eras. His mastery of his craft is evident in Tosches’ ability to write a really shitty passage – bad enough to urge one to spit on the page – that is utterly necessary in fulfilling the demands of his story. A few lines later his prose swells with passages so elegant and gorgeous as to elicit tears enough to cut the saliva.

ROACHES HAVE NO KING by **Daniel Evan Weiss**: I first read this five or six years ago, and some of the segments are so gut-rippingly hilarious I found myself marking the pages so I could read them out loud to my friends. A cockroach gets pissed when his apartment owner has a new clean-freak girlfriend move in with him. The roaches thirst for revenge in so many dastardly ways. The segments where “Numbers” gets funkily intimate with Ruth Grubstein’s privates, or his experience hovering on the underside of the toilet lid, encountering human ass incite laughter elicited by intelligent disgust!

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