

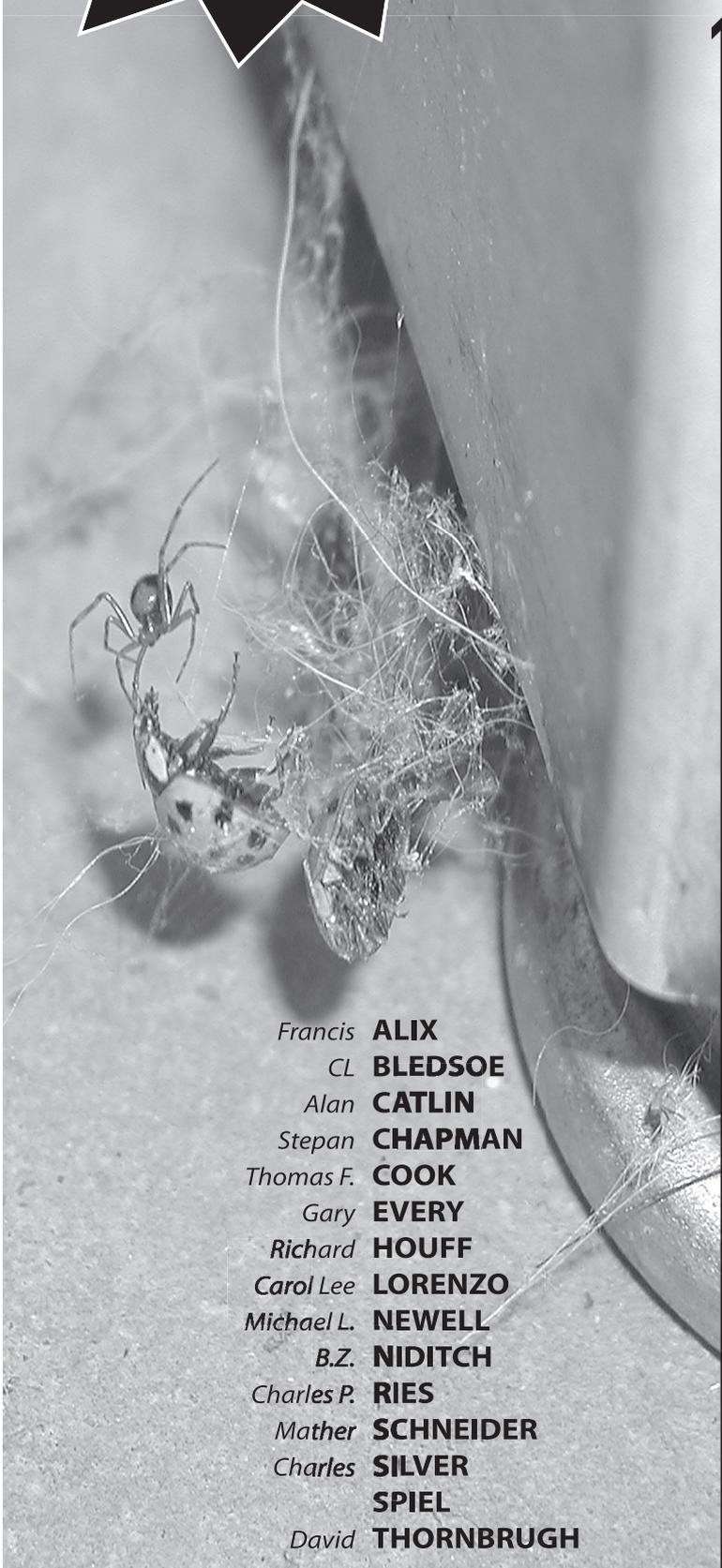
ISSUE TWENTY-THREE
FIRST CLASS I of I.2004
(now published Aug./Feb.)
SIX BUCKS

*...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**

SMALL, CLEVER AND
STICKIER THAN
23



Francis **ALIX**
CL **BLED SOE**
Alan **CATLIN**
Stepan **CHAPMAN**
Thomas F. **COOK**
Gary **EVERY**
Richard **HOUFF**
Carol Lee **LORENZO**
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B.Z. **NIDITCH**
Charles P. **RIES**
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Charles **SILVER**
SPIEL
David **THORNBRUGH**



ISSUE TWENTY-THREE
AUGUST, 2004

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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.

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First Class #23 is the first issue of the new printing schedule. We've moved to February/August from May/November due to the need for a 3-month cushion after the birth of progeny #2 (the beautiful Nora). Rather than hacking out something half-assed, we adjusted, and you hold the killer results in your hands. Thank you for your patience.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of poet Steven "Catfish" McDaris... who, unfortunately, is no longer with us. The very first submission I received in the First Class pobox after issue one back in 1995 was from fellow Milwaukeean "Catfish" McDaris. The first issue of First Class was a simulated lit-mag: a co-conspirator and myself created the writers and the stories they wrote, just to see what would happen. If it were not for Catfish's enthusiasm, First Class would not be. The second issue featured Catfish, the renowned Antler, Jim Buchanan and three faked writers: Dick Butkan, Slim Bitters, and Father Perry Didier. The very first chap from Four-Sep Publications, 'Prying', was instigated by Catfish's persistence, talent, and the fact that he brought along two killer writers (one living/now dead, one dead.... and, come to think of it.... they're all gone now...), some great illustrations and a few nasty stories of his own. If it were not for Catfish's persistence, Four-Sep Publications would likely not have the impressive catalog it has today. He was so damn into the poet's life that it could get on your nerves sometimes, but he always believed in his calling; how many of us can truly say that? I've got stories of times with him that I'll never forget, and his "Heeyyy, Chris, man..." is riding the aural memory waves in a special place in my brain. Some petty shitbags out there in this petty-ass small press world (egos incompatible with his; bigger, smaller or otherwise) made it their mission to despise him. He's pissing on every last one of you whenever the rain whips your flesh. Open wide....

Again, I am pleased that your eyes are on these pages.

- Christopher M.

700 People Dancing

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

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

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

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

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

- Steven "Catfish" McDaris

Killing Fields

Francis Alix

This is not fertile ground
as we know it,
though the grass, ripe with greenness,

and blossoms unfurling on the bush
show us the possibility.
Blood is the fertilizer

keeping this meadow renewed,
land stuck between war and peace
with brutal consequences

for farmer and child
who walk on their homeland won
with piled bodies and truces.

Land mines poised for friend or foe
remain to execute their *raison d'être*
forgotten from years of peace, normalcy.

Enemies shrug their shoulders
about their war waste
as if they were only pennies

dropped at the checkout counter,
and accept the reason for birth
is death.

Dull acrid smoke like kissing Kentucky, or burnt rice.
Mouths taste like what they consume. Upon examination

this seems profound. Some eat air, some breathe food,
either store these things as though a dark stranger
named Famine

were knocking on their door. I knew one once ate dirt,
smoked cheap cigarettes and bled when she urinated.
A person can become

addicted to dirt, to stupid pain. It isn't the taste, its the
act and the skill of the marketers. If the sun fed us all,

they'd sell us night, make the man in the moon a woman
in a short red dress with legs that go all the way up to
heaven,

driving a Porsche down moonbeams. Package sleep in
pill form, sell it separately. Wisdom washes over me slow
and thick

like new paint on my father's barn
when I realize I will crumble into dust for lack of varnish

long before they tear down this world's old bones.

Upstairs-Downstairs: The Wives

Alan Catlin

*“What is knocking?
What is knocking at the door in the night?
It is somebody wants to do us harm.”*

- D.H. Lawrence

Upstairs is the lawfully wedded one,
rooms with a partial view of sunrise/sunsets
over swamp land, sunrises she doesn't see,
sunsetting she dreads;

Downstairs is the common law one,
back rooms built into a hill,
partial views at ground level through
uncut grass and weeds, of small creatures,
birds, insects and septic tank cover,
dampness leaking in;

Upstairs, does she turn the radio
volume up so that conversations might
remain unheard? play vinyl records
by the stack of all the recording artists
the other one can't stand? play them
for days and nights without end? leave the tv
on 24/7 especially the test pattern's
white noisome hum, assuring no peace
even when the man of the house is away
or otherwise occupied? no electronic sound
making devices, no artificial noise can mask
how the bed springs creak when the people
upstairs become as one;

Downstairs, does she leave her radio on
between stations? turned on all the way
past loud? making noises meant to unnerve
the reluctant listener even when she is
fortified by strong spirits, several quarts
of local beer, as she staggers from room to room,
dropping empties on the tile flooring, breaking
others against the brick hearth, turning on kitchen
faucet to that place where it sticks and rattles
the pipes, sputtering spouts of water while
running off all the hot in the shower she turns on
for hours whether she needs to or not. Every time
the toilet flushes there is sure to be an overflow,
a mess that settles on the floor, the ceiling, walls,
there is no way to disguise the smell;

Does he have some sort of schedule
he keeps to, odd days for the Down
stairs wife? Even ones for Upstairs?

or

Does he act upon impulse, desires, three sheets
to the wind, presiding over his downstairs bar, four
stools available for the wife(s) and two friends or just
for the downstairs one, friends, himself,

reenacting how they came together over whiskey,
and beer nuts, cigarettes and bottled Bud?

or

Does he stagger home from the nearest bar that
still serves him? struggling with his keys, the one
that fits the closest door is the one he falls through,
is the place where he spends the night?

When he finally succumbs to:

heart failure

stroke

kidney disease

liver damage

or

kills himself driving drunk

falling in a ditch

a pond

a lake

breaks his neck falling off

the rotting porch deck

struggling with his knot of keys

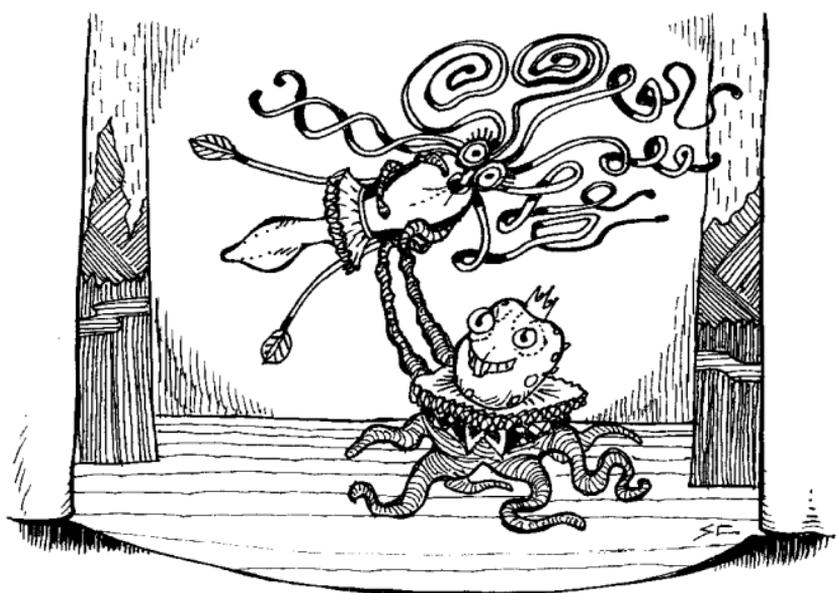
there will be no church service

no viewing hours

nothing

but a small urn containing his cremains

Neither woman claims the ashes



...Life On Earth tried to impress itself with its accomplishments...
from 'Life On Earth' by Stepan Chapman

Perpetually late, Harold Johnson left his apartment, and told, as he usually did, his dog to guard the house. His dog had developed a neurotic fear of this daily departure. Harold often told his dog, a nervous red-haired dachshund, that “every day I leave and every day I return,” but these words did nothing to ease the dog’s dread of that moment: the moment when Harold would say “guard the house,” open the front door of the apartment, wave goodbye and close it—disappearing into a great unknowable thing beyond. It was the worst moment of the dog’s day. Every day began with this fear: a knot of billowing dark brown clouds that were roiling just beyond the door. In a dog’s world, however, time behaves properly. The terrible moments of life quickly recede and everything gets better from now on. After a few barks and whines, Spark returns to his fluffy and smelly bed for a long day’s work of comfortable sleeping.

Harold, waiting at the elevator of his New York City apartment building, could hear his dog crying behind the door he had just locked: barking short sharp yips to make him return to the apartment. It was Friday the 13th, December 2002.

I’ve forgotten something. What? He gives me a strange feeling in my stomach. Such an odd sense—like my gut is going to burst through—fall out of my body in a flood of feeling, no longer restrained by abdominal. Funny how you can react to a dog—why does it go there?

This elevator is so ugly—supposed to redo it but with the tax increase they’ll put it off. El. What a world. We’re attacked; buildings destroyed; thousands killed and the mayor raises taxes and hands out tickets for smoking. Braille buttons and bell bings for blind travelers. Thee. I hope it’s not Albert on duty today. Oh damn it, it is.

—Johnson! Johnson! My man Johnson!

—Good morning Albert.

—Have a good one!

Did I smile enough? He knows I can’t play the game. His pals-y game. I wish he’d go away Mr. Talking Toothache. Must fake a smile every morning for the guard. Every morning—Johnson! Johnson! Why does he have to shout my name? I know what it is. Sixth Avenue to Houston. Remember saying to Robert, “you can’t know a man by how he begins his day; only by how he ends it.” “Who said that?” he says, curious, until I said “I did.” Didn’t believe me. “That’s just a platitude,” he barked. How can it be a platitude, I just made it up. The lassitude of my platitude, dude. Rapper. Candy Rapper.

We leave the world of silence and single dimension, induced by eyes through fleeting dreams, to this wak-

ing world where we're slapped, and conditioned. Why should we be happy in the morn? Not again, born again, again. The sniggering Buddhists knew all along.

Oh I'm so tired. Irrational headache. And late again to vex Betty, HRM, who'll tsk me as I walk through the office door. If I could just not have to kiss arse for a day. Boys won't make passes at boys who wear glasses and also kiss asses. Asses. Arses. Parses. The ass with the big ears and arse, dejectedly following a cruel carrot, parses by the riverwalk. Riverrun.

Houston Street we have liftoff. So noisy. How

PEOPLE DIE EVERYWHERE.
EMPTY SPACES. CHAIRS AT
TABLES, EMPTY. SOMEONE
DIES. SACRED GROUND.
CAN'T WALK ON IT ANY-
MORE. IF EVERY PLACE
SOMEONE DIED BECAME
SACRED GROUND, BE
NOTHING BUT
HOLES EVERYWHERE.

much louder can the world become? Not as loud as my head. Cycles and trucks and busses, setting off car alarms along their way, like chimes. Ban car alarms, I wish they would. Why should I care if someone steals your screaming machine? Like the big hole.

World Trade

Center. World Slave Center. Tomorrow they unveil the footprint finalists. But why leave the footprints? People die everywhere. Empty spaces. Chairs at tables, empty. Someone dies. Sacred ground. Can't walk on it anymore. If every place someone died became sacred ground, be nothing but holes everywhere. A jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces thrown away. Oops, don't walk there please, someone died there. Mind the gap. Watch the Brussel Sprouts. Like an old mansion with all the rooms roped off. We used to live here. That was my reading lamp and I had a good fuck on that couch, once.

Oh such a headache today I've! I am what I'm. If I could I'd. If I'm able I'll. Able was I ere I saw Elba. Forgotten something but can't. Can't. Oh the hell with it. Life doesn't care about me. Cars have alarms. Not people. If someone stole me I'd go quietly. I wouldn't screech or wail. Matter's in books, though, movies. People say, "I didn't like the main guy." So what. But them's the conditions. You must like the main guy, have a well defined want, a powerful opponent who kills without pause or question, remorse or sorrow. Jesus H., Harold why can't you walk to work without thinking about everything under. Something's bugging me. Bugs bugging Bunny bugging me HCJ.

I want my heart back. Someone took my heart. I had

a heart once. I know I did. I know because I sense its absence. Phantom limb. Truth is you can't know who will steal your heart. Life is a thief. The people you love. Thieves.

And who did I hurt I wonder? Who did I wound?

Will ever be happy, I? Happiness. A little girl with an unopened flower. Sentiment of rosebud, sneering rearward, running forward. Smiling chase me's! Girl, smirking with giggle of fledgling roses. There's no beauty in suffering. All life is suffering. So can life be beautiful?

Here we are Touristas. Come fam-i-ly. Saint Anthony's Catholic Church. Admire with wonder the huge imposing church. Regard its impressive fragility. Fret as distant war approaches apace, like a race, brought by the man who suffers from a serious case of mental metathesis. Ponder the significance of this crèche. Hablo ola, fam-i-ly, to the baby Jesus, little pudgy arms stretched up to the unblinking sky, con el mama Maria y papa José y los tres amigos, o reynas, I can't. But why three kings when they're called the three blind men, no wise men, no magi in the Bible, bearing Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. How dare you, they'd say today, that's so morbid Harold bringing embalming fluid to the manger! Away! Away! No crib for. But, uhhh, leave the gold 'kay? What if I said, Hey everyone, guess what? I'm Jesus. That's me when I was a baby. We didn't have photographs so we used dioramas. It's true. I've finally returned. Aren't you happy? They'd all go, "prove it" and I'd have to take out my God Master Card. Get walking, you're late again. No time to waste staring at Jesus, with poor Saint Alphonsus looking on like a dumb orphan, poor bastard.

But I always want to say Hey Nun-Lady, Hey Miss! You tell everyone Jesus is coming back but how are you gonna know? He'll look like his picture. The crucifixion was a Kodak Moment, she'll say, and these words make sense to them and their kind, but not to me. Creatures of Habits hate my guts. Would kick me if I fell in front of them, while all the brothers lift up their fearful Jesuitical Tutus and hightail it back to the friary. It's Didymos! Waaah! Did he miss you? Did he miss me? Quiet Miss Johnson! Quiet! Prior Tucket says muff it Harold! Let's go up Thompson for a change. Jaywalk. Never much traffic west to east.

Member how mom said that thing once. About power. People crave power. Girl that threw me out of Starbucks. I'VE GOT THE POWER! She might as well have screamed it. American football jig. I've got the power! I am electricity! I am buzz with harmonics of ppphhhhZZZZZttttt.

This is my neighborhood. Tourists come to ask where Ground Zero is. If I tell, will you explain to me I 'ave a 'eadache? Forgotten something. What is it? Can't. Troubled tumbleweed. Micturating mum. Ruminating rosebud. Still why was I? What was I thinking about? Oh Coffee. Yes. I want to sit down with my dog in my

lap and have a cup of coffee, like Mister Flea with his franks and beans, but this vicious girl has the power to throw me out. City rules. Corporate. GET OUT OF HERE!! WE'LL BE SHUT DOWN IF YOU DON'T GET OUT!! TAKE YOUR DOG AND YOUR COFFEE AND NEVER COME BACK YOU FUCKING MORON ASSHOLE JERK!!! Ready with a comeback, was I. You forgot DooDoo-Head, I said. Ha Ha Ha! Did they make you a deputy, Barista Bunny? Coffee Rabbit. Dicks are for Tricks. Ivy's for Lambs. The creatures of Habits suck eggs. Nonsense.

Yet another pharmacy. Used to be the famous Village Gate. Now it's another drug store. So afraid of the tiny bugs that kill us. I'm being chased by a treacherous bacillus! My cholesterol's got a gun!!! But this was once—well it's a nice old street, in't it? What it was like once? Whinnying horses. Applecarts. Smelly. Hot. And this old chess store. Used to be five, but now there's only two and each, trying to make the other, O.O.B. Like evil shrub to mustache. You must die now. No you must die now. No you. No you. Die Die Die! Couscous and Cookies?

Security guard. Highly employable now. New recruit of the brand spanking new civilian Army. Spanking army. That'd be interesting. Send in the American spankers! Wankers. Thank you sir may I have another! Was it Kennedy when that security guard. And I talked back. Was that September 10th? Day I left. I can't remember. September 10. September 10. Makes me feel weak. So much I've lost. My memories. Me memes. Still can't remember arriving. Leaving. Waking. September 10. Why can't—it's like all the other —

Another aggravating aposiopsis. All the other what?

I need to sit down. I've been walking for months. I'll sit in the park. But I'm so late and Betty said she'd write me up again. So what. Washington Square. Famous park. Have a rest in ye olde Potter's Field.

Watch a squirrel while I smoke. Hope there's no cops cause I think smoking's illegal now. Everything's illegal now. Long way from Mr. John Reed sitting on that arch—demanding that the Village secede. Can't even touch the arch anymore. Big fence around it. Caged in for our safety. Well it's weather-beaten so they had to. Give them a break Harold. For fuck's sake Frankie. That's what the Virgin Mary played by Skinhead O'Connor said in that wonderful Irish movie. For fuck's sake Frankie. Frankie Say Relax.

Hello squirrel. Why did I sit? Cchwwwww. pfffffffff. Oh. September 10. So unlikely. Why can't I remember? Don't even know what possessed me to go to Vegas. Must have wanted to be somewhere where I wouldn't have to think about computers; or Miss Stupid. Spend a week as a person instead of a computer geek or human resource. But then Tuesday, I'm there in Vegas and can't remember how or why or booking the ticket or taking the plane, and poor Spark, stuck

in that kennel just four blocks or so from the Center. Don't remember leaving him there, either. Pphhhhhhh. What that poor red sausage has gone through. I don't even know all the details. Have to ask Ryan. I was so certain he was going to die of dehydration when he was stuck down there, all alone. National Guard wouldn't let Ryan pass to rescue him. Too bad they said he said. And I'm in Vegas staring at all those people sitting in front of the New York New York Casino, with candles and t-shirts and flags and signs and crosses and cards and crying and weeping and praying. I wanted to say Hey! Hey people! Do you realize that you're praying to a casino? That's not real. That's a hotel. Soup art, art soup, remember Jane? Huh, they go, huh? Cry some more into tissues, sleeves, shoulders. Does it matter?

Pphhhhhhh. hhhooooooo. That hotel is our corpse. New York died the moment that casino opened for business. They destroyed us. Suggests we are marketing a shared prefabricated history, which can be replaced and upgraded, whenever. We enjoy a quasi-religious nostalgia which can be plunked down anywhere, like a portable ancient fountain flown in and lowered by a Black Hawk, to create mood and peacefulness: the calm lie of a realized utopia, anywhere we invade with either the army or the internet. Three dimensional chimera through which we maunder, like robots, frenetically obeying the ground rules of the sidewalk; the Terms Of Service of traffic signals. We think, erroneously, that we are enjoying ourselves, doing something, being active, when we are only exploring the plush cream lining of our collective coffin.

Pphhhhhhh. hhhooooooo. But someone asked me Is your dog okay? That was real. How did she know? Was I crying in the elevator? I can't remember. Yes. I was. I remember now. A small piece. I was in the elevator and I said, "For all I know he is in a cage and starving to death." Bolted down I felt, almost, and dead. Unable to move anymore. I remember now. Yes. I thought this is something I have to deal with. I have to deal with this. Be strong, don't complain, stiff lip, upper and all; not the worst that's ever happened. He's just a dog. No one cares. If he's dead by the time I get back, then it will be a loss to me. No one else. That's the way it is with pets and Bin Laden will smile. But Ryan got the ASPCA marshal and rescued him. Not like heroes—only like people—what is a hero to a dog but just another person? Ryan saved my dog. He is a hero and that's all we need to know. Spark cries and barks now when I leave the apartment. He cries because he remembers the dust that blew through the gate of his cage the last time I left him. Impossible to understand someone else's pain. Even a dog's. So if that's the worst that happens, what's the use of wond'rin'. Pphhhhhhh. hhhooooooo.

Get to work. I like smoking but nearly sacrilegious to say so. Making it so hard for me to enjoy anything. So long cold bushy squirrel. Close to winter now. Do you know where your nuts are? You will always make

me happy you little nut thief. And I have no doubt that you would also eat me if necessary. I never saw a Sparrow cry. Is that how it?

Jesus what is this nagging? Physical thing in my head like a swelling, edema. Such cute things these students. Like me, once. Paul and me, once. Life's a game. I shoulda had a game plan. I wanted to read books. My entire game plan. Get a job. Read my books. That's all. We walked under the arch, graduation day. 1984. NYU purple and I stuck a twig in my hair as a joke. It's a thorn. Saw that Doug guy from my class. Have you seen Pilate I asked. Where's Pilate? Nobody got my typical bad joke. Who knew what waited us all. The Gods. Hello Garibaldi. How are you sir? Sword of his statute points permanently to the path where the old lady lost control and knocked people over like bowling pins. Fifty miles an hour they said. Killed five people. The pedal stuck she said, looking around in shock. Isn't that how we are, so much of the time. Anti abortionist too. Terrible. Live for scores of years just to kill or be killed on a beautiful day. Forgotten tragedy. Mrs. Maychick's victims. Should be a plaque somewhere I'd think. They must have rebuilt this water fountain.

Main Building. NYU Main Building Prison. Which cellblock is Media CI in? That'd be Cellblock IXXI. Locks are made to keep people in. Paul said that. Sweet Paul. Not like Sour Robert. You're always so negative Harold! Robert said. We live in a democracy! We have the right to vote! Gee Robert, I said, you sound like the president. Walked away from me again, again, again. Always walking away. Rolling his eyes.

This is that building where all those women died. Locked in to sew shirtwaists for some exploiters. Locks are to keep people in. Paul said that. Sweet Paul. Triangle Shirtwaist Fire I think it was called. Thump thump thump. Bodies landing right here on the sidewalk I'm walking on. Better to die than to burn. Oh my God those poor women. Can you imagine? Those young girls landing right here on this sidewalk, where I'm standing now; landing on my feet; on my head. If I stretched out my arms. There's a plaque on the corner. What does it say? Mark? What? Oh Martyrs it says. It calls them Martyrs. More romance. They were slaves. Locked in to sew. The only way out through a window. Then thump and farewell fair women! Oh those poor women. Maidenwomen. Makes me feel weak in the knees again. Something about falling cuts right through to my bones. As if I can't picture the suffering. It's just too—Walk. Keep. Get back to work.

Why am I getting so upset? Hurry up and get to work. Faster. Think about something else. Be still your mind. Those women falling from. Jumping.

Frail. Creatures.

Delion. Been here forever. Back when then was then. Paul and I would walk here from the dorm for late night bagels and schmears. Broadway was cold,

empty and windy. But now it's so crowded. Remember what it was, and now, what it is. And now. And then. Here to witness just a small moment of its long story. Animism invades these budglings. They talk to each other from either side of the ancient thoroughfare, like neighbors at a fence, with deep unheard voices, spanning centuries.

So busy now. Glenn's Green Thumb gone, long gone, along, and now, this that and the other, whilst higher up along the vertical, closer to clouds, my office, Smith and Kozack, so how does a city grow wrinkles when they keep replacing everything, except the sacred footprints of the WTC. My invisible footprints on this sidewalk. And Paul's, his. Are those wrinkles? Is this sacred ground? All these damned memories — wonderful damned memories. Nags. My memories are the buds of flowers exploding into oversized blooms as I pass. Giant pink taunting Peonies. Man's punishment for inventing the clock.

Yet we live on an island of reconstituted stones, so what am I supposed to do? Not do? Not open this door and walk into this Starbuck's just because I remember the old coffee shop that was once here? Riviera I think. Or forget and pretend it's all new? Or be a tourist today? I guess I'll stand on line, in line, on line and have my usual.

Be a tourist in my own city. There's an idea. That's the best idea I've ever had. But they might fire me. I'm already on such thin ice with them, with Betty. I'm always late. Lately. Lately late.

—Small Coffee please.

—Room for milk?

—Yes please.

Harold waited in front of the counter at Starbuck's on Astor Place, having walked across Houston Street, up Thompson, through Washington Square Park, across Washington Place to Broadway, up to and across Astor Place, for the young student behind the counter to fill a paper cup, safely encircled by a cardboard sleeve, with coffee, a process that was taking her an unimaginably long time, when he was suddenly struck once more by the thought of his old boss Robert, his first boss after he graduated from New York University, who had died nearly a decade ago, of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

I remember Robert issuing an order in his power voice, "you may not give my number to anyone who doesn't already have it," and then sighing heavily when I asked that which seemed so obvious: if someone calls, then doesn't that mean he already has the number? "I mean if you're at a party and someone discovers you work for me," he said, "I'm very powerful in this city and people are always looking for connections." So how am I supposed to know if the person already has your number? And if he did, why would he ask me for it? I posed these questions and he rolled his eyes to

the sky. “Why are you so stupid,” he was thinking, I could see, or, “Is there anyone who doesn’t hate you?” He rolled his eyes and I saw five, six, seven thoughts floating through the air around him—like cigarette smoke—clinging to his skin and pouring out his nose.

He looked at me with utter contempt.

I stayed with him once I knew he was going to die. I wanted to help. I think. I don’t know if he needed me. He never said ‘Hey Harold, I need you to help me.’ He called me into his office one fine day; told me everything about his illness as if he was asking me to type a memo to the file. But it didn’t matter because I needed to help him. I think. I’m not sure now. Hard to remember what I was thinking. I can’t seem to remember much of anything anymore.

Behind the counter, a small white electronic timer had begun to pierce the air with an insistent call and the young student, unperturbed, obeyed it and began switching out coffee urns before pouring Harold’s. While waiting, his eyes drifted from the back of her head to the tall overturned stack of cups on the counter in front of him. They were printed red, for the holiday season, to help convey the shared festive mood of the holidays.

Robert couldn’t ever admit to needing anyone or anything. He could only admit to paying for it. He found more honor in his purchasing power than in his human frailty. He said to Carol before she quit, when he didn’t know that I could hear him, “Since I’m paying Harold, I don’t have to ask him. He has to do it.” He thought that was a good thing. He knew he was powerful and didn’t need to ask for my help: that obscene mountain of paperwork; the desperate and pleading letters to this or that specialist that tried to sound so controlled and relaxed and even scientific, perhaps. I put a tape in the Dictaphone one Wednesday morning, pressed the pedal to begin transcribing and “Hi Harold this is Robert,” he says, as if I didn’t know it would be him, “the check you find here has to be hand-delivered to a doctor in India. I don’t know how you can arrange for that since it’s already Wednesday, but it needs to get there by the close of business Friday.” Okay Robert, I’ll, I’ll, I’ll do that impossible thing. And I did.

I’ll not flinch, either, Robert. I’ll not flinch when I hear you lose your bowels into the adult diapers you’ve secretly started to wear. I’ll not flinch. And I’ll pause outside your door because I can hear you crying in there, and wait until you’ve had time to gather up the bits of your fractured pride and recompose yourself. And Robert, when your time comes, I’ll stand in the back of your last hospital room, stare at the famous and powerful everything of you, there, in your very last bed, nearly comatose, and I won’t complain when I’m not given even a single second by any of your many fabulous New York friends to say goodbye to you—just to touch your forehead with the back of my fingers or to kiss you on the lips that can no longer move. Robert, I will pretend I don’t have a single feeling in my

body when your brain finally swells so large it starts to push down your spinal column and ends your life. I will pretend for your benefit, even after you're gone, and you will go, thinking that I did it all because I was paid. Everyone will think this.

Everyone did.

But he didn't know. I never told him— didn't really know myself—because how could anyone understand such a thing? I was too young to understand. This was what I wanted. I wanted to help him die and I would have done it for nothing.

Harold stared at the stack of paper cups on the counter in front of him, still waiting for the changing of the coffee urns; and still sensing a stone of quiet anticipation in his body.

Why would I want such a thing? Was it sick? Or morbid? Did I want to *watch* the disease kill him? It took two years from the time he told me. I spent seven years with a man that rolled his eyes at me—had contemptuous thoughts about me; thoughts that clung to his skin; thoughts that I could see. I wanted to work for a man that didn't like me, until he died. This makes absolutely no sense at all. Unless.

Although his coffee had now been poured and placed on the counter in front of him, Harold stood rigid and transfixed: still as stone. The young, cute girl with the pierced tongue asked him for money but he continued to stare at the overturned cups.

—Sir. Sir?

Mary covered her mouth and began to weep quietly for her newborn son, the moment she saw her child turn his head from the gifts of the Magi.

—Sir!

Startled, Harold shook his head, returned to the world and quickly paid the \$1.68 required for his coffee. By daydreaming, he had inexcusably delayed the people in line behind him. After putting the change in the plexiglass tip cube next to the register, Harold turned to leave, but something unexpected happened, then. He fell.

As he started to fall, he instinctively tried to pull his right leg farther forward to prevent his spill, but no footwork could stop it. He tried, too, to maintain his grip on the cup of coffee, but as his head was approaching the floor he had to let go of it, so the cup flew from him and broke apart upon landing several feet away. He tried, also, to throw both hands in front of himself to protect his head, but the fall came with so little warning that when he landed, he cracked the stone floor with his chin, and he was suddenly in great pain.

Everyone in the line was startled and shocked. There were several surprised "oh's" and by the time Harold understood he had fallen, some of the people were already trying to help him to his feet, while others looked on with concern. He held his chin, trying to

bear it, wincing, and someone suggested that he rub his chin while the student worker quickly hurried out from behind the counter to assist.

Oh my God are you okay?

Yes. Thanks. I'm sorry. I- I- I- I don't know what happened.

—Let me get you another coffee.

I'm so embarrassed. And isn't it strange how everyone helps, like what, like what, like life, like the church? Get up, get up, get up. Screaming car. Treacherous Bacillus. Cholesterol. Killer Maychick. Shirtwaists. Don't lose your way. Keep walking. That's why Mary weeps. Why did she have to cry? Because she knew. She knew the end of the story. There is something wrong with me. There's a reason I can't remember anything. There's something wrong. I'm frightened. Oh my God, my God. I'm so afraid. I understand now. I'm Jesus. Today is the day I will die.

—Here you go.

—Thank you.

After he thanked the young student for his new cup of coffee, Harold noticed that she had replaced his original small cup of coffee with a cup that was twice as large. He looked up at her suddenly, as if something surprising caught his attention. He seemed to regain his calm and composure and looked, perhaps, even a bit awed. She smiled at him, in a way that suggested she had been trained to smile without thinking about it, anytime she felt a pair of eyes glance across her skin. She proffered a professional American flash that conveyed by its bleached enamel the news that this unfortunate accident was over the very moment it was begun; that this episode was just another transaction to be rushed through and hustled away; that the only moment still extant in this world of calculated misfortune and accident was the gasp of something before the nothing that everything had become: the simple and candid moment before recognition, the unused instant before the smile starts to form.

Harold continued to stare at her with wide unblinking hazel eyes, mouth open slightly, as if he, perhaps, having been the only witness to the tiniest of miracles, had been suddenly transformed into a person he would normally mock. The young student's smile cracked, then, and in a few more seconds she would have become uncomfortable, but Harold finally spoke, relieving the tension of the moment, in a slight whisper that seemed extremely unsuitable to the bustling early morning hour. He spoke as if she was revered. He whispered, as if the two of them had just been swept up in a wind; washed in dust and water; reborn in a completely new world; and were wondering; now and here, alone - together, who and what and where and when and why they were.

—Thank you so much, he said, for giving me this coffee.

Big Daddy Joe

Gary Every

When the Civil War ended there were lots
of newly freed Negroes
who were seeking a better life;
a home of your own,
a nest for a wife,
a sanctuary to raise children.
Some of the first middle class jobs
were on the railroad;
serving as Pullman porters,
graciously serving rich curious travelers.
Railroads, the iron chain which bound the nation
from ocean to ocean;
after the nation nearly came apart
from internal strife and war.

Legends spread of the most famous of the porters.
Big Daddy Joe was so tall and strong
that he could change upper and lower bunks
at the same time;
flipping each bed with one well muscled arm. Once
he lifted a cow catcher,
raising the front end of a locomotive engine
so a mother could whisk her baby
from the tracks
before the wheels could cut her in half.
Once,
out on the vast stretches of the endless plains;
the Indians attacked,
fierce painted chiefs led bands
of Arapaho, Kiowa, and Cheyenne warriors,
charging towards the train.
Big Daddy Joe climbed on top of a passenger car,
and began to barter blankets and food
in return for safe trespass.
Imagine,
one of America's first working class heroes
paying for a home to raise his children
(a house he never sees)
by traveling across the nation,
performing good deeds
all across the continent
and his most famous act in battle
was the outbreak of peace.

Out in the Arizona desert amidst the vultures and barrel cactus in a town called Gila Bend, there is a hotel decorated with glass bubbles and metal spacecraft replicas. The Space Age Lodge was built during the days of Gemini, Mercury, and Apollo; when the natural expansion of the western frontier was considered the exploration of space. It was new school historians who disagreed and claimed that the Wild West was replaced by an age of hydrology.

I ate dinner at the Space Age Lodge listening to a bankruptcy lawyer talk with a farmer who was cradling his wife's fragile hands inside his own callused paws. The farmer offered to bear any financial wrath as long as his sons were spared his debts. He even offered to divorce his wife if it was enough to leave her the farm house.

The lawyer shook his head no.

She kissed his cheek.

"The price of water just got too damned high," the farmer said, holding back a tear.

Together, hand in hand, farmer and wife signed away the farm.

I stepped outside the Space Age Lodge, into the cool, dry, starry night to smoke a cigarette. Lighting up in the metal skeletal remains of an abandoned gas station.

I think about the Gila River which dries up near here and the Pima Indians who farmed this land for millennium until upstream dam diversions parched their crops. The reservation agent at the time bragged, that unable to farm, the Pima would be forced to work for the white men and how they would even be cheaper than slaves because you wouldn't have to feed them.

I take another puff, polluting my lungs, and marvel at how the silhouettes of twilight make the large metal gas station structure resemble a pile of dinosaur bones. The farmer steps outside the Space Age Lodge and stands on the edge of the concrete, leaning against the metal supports of the gas bay roofs, seeking shelter from the storm.

He shudders from the cold touch of the metal and fiddles nervously with his pen, the same pen he used to sign away the farm. The broken man absentmindedly crosses out the first letter of a graffiti word. "Rust in Jesus" the graffiti phrase now reads, the changing of a single letter completely altering the meaning of the sermon.

"Rust in Jesus," I say the words softly, like a prayer, blessing the metal skeletal remains of the gas station.

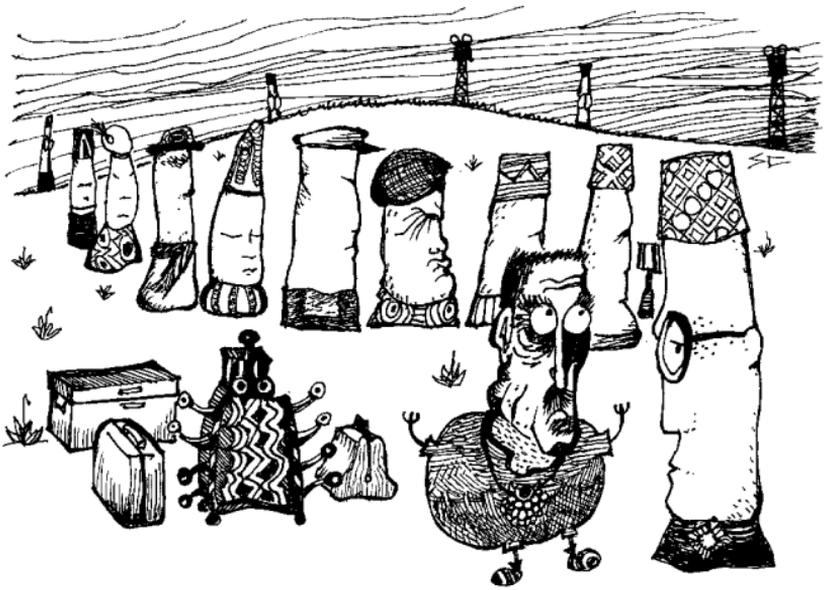
I pray for rivers which dry up long before they reach the sea. I pray for farm land scraped flat and good for

nothing but tumbleweeds. I pray for a space program which has collapsed beneath the burden of space shuttle catastrophes.

“Rust in Jesus.” I pray for the creakings and groanings of an aging industrial military machine, a worn out civilization with environmental disaster looming just around the corner.

I’ll say it again one more time, softly, like a prayer.

“Rust in Jesus. Rust in Peace.”



...Life On Earth traveled the world and stood in line with itself...
from 'Life On Earth' by Stepan Chapman

and then we went away
from this horrid place that
was always bad

the books were right:
someday, they said,
we'd all be stupid
like the people who took
non-think pills in orwell's 84
or was it huxley's brave new world

i'm kind of lost on that one
—blame it on computers
and technology overkill
with a need to go
further back

we just couldn't see it
all falling down

but nature went away
like the teachers and books

and everyone forgot
how to communicate
because there were too many
hand controls

The Compass Rose

Carol Lee Lorenzo

The night sky cracked open into morning. The air thinned. The tires of the car ahead tore dew from the road in ribbons. The weather was unsettled, hard to read which way it would go.

Her car had a compass suctioned to the dash, a plastic bubble, watery, jiggling the directions in black and white, it never stayed still. She had always loved the compass rose drawn on maps. As a child, she'd thought it was named after her, the symbol for her on all those maps. It promised travel.

She could see her sleep-frizzed hair in the car mirror, bright red dyed over dull dark. She'd always thought more things happened to redheads. Lately, she'd wanted to go back to natural. Her husband had paused her. "I don't know if I'd like you natural. I've never seen you that way." She hadn't risked it.

Charles was headed toward the city on his two-hour bus ride. She'd just sent him, with her determination, to get any job, for any money. For months they'd been living on money he'd not yet made. Now his boss had fired him and had given him a week to clean out his desk.

She made her car follow the only other car on the road, a small green one. She stayed in its wake, wanting to get home safely. There was no insurance—a lapsed policy. They should never have moved all the way up here. They were out of money. How to catch up?

The road was about to fork. "I'll take the short cut, the cross-over," she said and took it, though she was guessing where it actually crossed. The compass went into a wobbly swing. The change in direction woke Will, her son. Held by the seat belt, he'd been sleeping with his hands sealed to his mouth. He was so quiet even in his sleep.

Will was five and a good companion but he didn't talk enough. When he didn't talk, he was younger than his age; but when he did, he was older than he was. Maybe he was quiet because Rose talked all the time—to herself. She had to be a bit careful of adult pretend, sometimes Charles caught her at it. They had met a time back as runaways, but now it was different since they'd been settled down. So she said she was talking to the spiders. This house they were in now was that isolated.

She had jeans over her pajamas, her feet bare, she hadn't even had time to find her shoes this morning. "When we get back inside," she said, "I'll carry you upstairs," though he was almost too big to carry, "and we can take a nap together and feel good."

The road curved. It made her nervous to be careful. She'd never had an accident. It was Charles who did. He had bad luck with cars. He didn't like them, so now only Rose drove.

The road lifted alongside pasture. Even the huge cows had not gotten up but were still resting heavily on the grass. Ahead was an odd shape in the road. Something someone had thrown out she now had to straddle. Then the thing moved, reared up like a big hard spider, and she hit it. The wheels thumped. She clapped both barefeet onto the brake. "A snapper turtle," she screamed.

Will roused to look backwards and see what she had done.

"Is it alright, Will?"

"Crushed," he said.

"It must have been very old to be so huge." She ducked her head and her pulse went up her nose. "I'm sorry. I thought those things were supposed to live forever." She faced forward and started off again. Her toes gripped the accelerator. The road slanted. The next cows were dark ones; a few goats were eating wet wildflowers. Then she thought she recognized a grove of trees. "Look how this meets up!" She halted at a stop sign planted in the yard of their nearest neighbors, the ones she tried carefully to avoid, except when borrowing their extra food and using their phone. They were old,

nearly blind, and nosey. "We're close to home now, the short cut worked." She was thinking of the turtle when she went into the turn.

THE OLD NEIGHBORS
HELPED EACH OTHER
OUT PAST A
SLOPING SCREEN
DOOR. THEY SMELLED
LIKE TWO OPEN CANS
OF CAT FOOD. "WHEW,"
SAID ROSE SOFTLY.
"THIS MAKES YOU
SCARED OF MARRIAGE.
THEY'VE STAYED
TOGETHER TOO
LONG."

Suddenly the small green car crossed in front of her, and her feet were on both the accelerator and the brakes. There was a slap of metal. The compass dipped. She felt the frame give and the heavy hood curled. Will acted like a slingshot, he hit on the padded dash and the safety belt yanked him back. "The car bit me," he cried. She looked quickly; it was a tooth cut. "Pinch your lip so it won't hurt." It bled.

She yanked at the car key, gave a twist to her seat belt and Will's, and jumped from the car.

Will had hold of her clothes; he came across the seat with her. The road still seemed to be moving under her. The driver stayed in the green car she'd hit.

He said, "I recognize you. You were following me for miles."

“Guess what she hit before you? A turtle,” Will said.

“Are you hurt?” Rose asked.

“No, stunned,” he said.

“The turtle’s dead,” said Will.

“But aren’t you spattered with blood?” she asked delicately.

“No, I have freckles,” said the man. They were on his fingers and even on his lips.

She turned to Will. “If only your father wasn’t afraid of cars—then he could have had this accident and not me.” She felt tears scratching at the backs of her eyes. But she refused them.

Not a sound from the neighbor’s house; the curtains hadn’t even moved. Rose and the man both blew their car horns for attention, hard enough to vibrate ears. The old neighbors helped each other out past a sloping screen door. They smelled like two open cans of cat food. “Whew,” said Rose softly. “This makes you scared of marriage. They’ve stayed together too long.”

They were bent with age and excitement. “We’ve already been on the phone to the Troopers and the tow truck. They’ll be here soon.”

“I can never stand to wait for horrible things,” said Rose.

Will kept his hold on her jeans.

The tow truck arrived. The driver brought his mug of morning coffee and sipped it.

Tires whined; it was the Trooper who pulled up and asked, “Anybody hurt?” He got out to check the accident. “Your car?” Rose turned to face him so quickly her hair floated across her eyes.

“You sure punched him.” He whistled. The old couple’s cat came through a hole in the screen. The cat hadn’t run from the sound of an accident, the cat was deaf. “You should have hit right fender to left, right to right is wrong.”

“That’s because,” she waited for her explanation to catch up with her, “he wasn’t even there until I hit him. He just wasn’t there. Nothing was.” The Trooper’s book of tickets came out.

“Where were you going this early in the morning?” He nodded at her pajama top.

“I was on my way to take a nap.” She handed him her I.D. and her worthless insurance card. He wrote her a ticket and said, “I like this accident. Last one I wrote up the driver had cracked her skull from her nose all the way back to her neck.”

She reached into the car, the Trooper watching, to try to retrieve the compass until she saw it had split and was leaking. The Trooper, his finger on her I.D., said, “You’ve lost your compass, Rose.” She backed up, sighed, the cat came to her and she knelt to it.

“I want to touch the cat,” said Will, but he kept his fingers to his lip.

The neighbors said, “We like company. You know to come anytime. We’ve got a car and a phone, and things we don’t even remember; help yourself.” Then they helped each other find the door to go place a call for the freckled man to be picked up.

“We’ll just walk,” said Rose. She did it for her punishment. Her feet were as cold as the road. She stopped to warm her hands in Will’s hair, it was soft and brown as puppy fur. Then she warmed her feet with her hands. Will’s shoes sounded like little erasers rubbing along with her.

Way down the road they turned at a mailbox, name and number scratched off it so nobody could find them. Bad bills. It was dangerous to be out of money and down to eating from the freezer and the neighbor’s supplies.

On the steep drive, she stepped lightly so as not to shatter thin pieces of shale. The updraft from the ridge made the woods creak. A crow rocked above them in the crown of a tree. On the deck she peeked in her own window. It looked empty like they’d moved. Then she pushed the door, what was the point in using the lock except to lock themselves inside.

Later she’d need a phone. They had one but the messages beside it were old and it sat in cracker crumbs. Weeks ago it had been disconnected.

She’d have to call Charles. But he was still on the bus—not anywhere yet. At the thought of breakfast, she wanted nothing, shut her eyes and heard two voices. One said she’d had an accident that wasn’t over yet. Another said she’d lied to the Trooper about the insurance card. Was that punishable?

She washed her face at the wide kitchen sink. Then she caught Will and cleaned his cut. It made him shiver but he didn’t cry.

He went to his tv. The cartoons were on, where tragedy is hilarious and full of tinny music. “Oh, Will.” He sat in front of it quietly, a finger pressed to his mouth, a finger against his nose. “I never could get you to suck your thumb for comfort. I tried pacifiers but you always spit them out.” She gave him a honey sandwich. “We could still go upstairs and have our nap together.”

But he was already lost in cartoons. Once, long ago, he’d asked her how he could be Bugs Bunny. She’d told him he needed to be an actor if he wanted to do a part. It turned out that wasn’t it. He wanted to be a line drawing.

She went upstairs alone, pulled her clothes off. Away from her son, she was desperate and tingling to go into pretend. At the bedroom wall she talked to herself, her hands flinging up close to her face the way a child first gets balance to walk. She put herself into the compass now, walking on its water, her feet soft, her steps light, she almost gave a little somersault. Such relief—until pretend got away from her and the compass widened,

its water broke and she came out through the cut.

She crawled in bed. “Ten minutes only.” She’d meant to set the oven-timer and forgot. Both hands slipped over her eyes, it felt so good not to see. Her sleep filled up. She slipped into a dream of a cold wedding. She was the bride who sat on a hotel hall carpet; no one had gotten her a room. There was no groom—no mate—she had only gotten married to herself.

The minute she woke, she thought the clock had gone crazy. The digital told her it was 10:00. Rain was rolling down the roof. She got back into her pajamas and jeans. Downstairs Will was asleep on the carpet. The tv was off. Now she had to hurry and get Charles told. She drew Will a note—a stick figure of her, bent, one knee up, nose forward, and left it close to him. She kissed his clothes instead of his skin so she wouldn’t wake him. Since she couldn’t go by car, she added a jacket to her pajama top and slipped into shoes that didn’t seem to fit. For a minute she wondered if they could be Charles’ but that would make them much too long.

Charles’ old racing bike had been abandoned under the deck. She got it out of cobwebs and murmured her son’s name for luck. She hated bicycle riding. Then she hopped on, bent, one knee up, nose forward, and made the steep grade through dotted lines of rain and followed the road between a dense pack of woods. Her clothes flapped when she passed the twin ponds, two gray eyes skimmed by wind.

The racer’s seat under her was hard as stone. She’d have bruises from this. A male bar between made it hurt to get off. It was hard enough to get on. She was scared to stop. When she arrived, she moaned and jumped from the bike. The handlebars hooked into the neighbors’ fence. She shook her hair, it sprayed rain.

Her car’s headlights lay broken, still on the road, the rest gone. Broken glass looked like spilt salt but she couldn’t remember if split salt was a sign of bad luck or good.

The old neighbors were gone but she remembered the window that they left ajar for fire, surely for getting out, but she went in. The smell was intense, nothing you could get used to. The old couple had left their breakfast out. All soft food, they had no teeth. The cat was on the table. In the quiet, she heard the cat’s jaws open before it mewed. Rose left a dollar and change on the counter for the city call. Then she took the change back. While she poked numbers into the phone, she watched the wallpaper pattern of flowerheads stuck in a faint row.

Charles answered, his assistant had been fired first. She hated to tell him, it seemed like such old news now. “Charles, the car has had an accident.” She heard him breathing. Panting really. “I hit a man. We were all in cars so we weren’t hurt. Will got a cut but it’s drying up.” Now silence. Was he holding his breath till he turned blue?

He was back on the line. “You fucker! I’m going to kill myself and then I’m going to kill you.” He hung up with the sound of splintering plastic. She hung up on a wobbly dial tone and had to get outside fast—cold air. She took the door rather than the window. This wasn’t the first time he’d offered to kill them both. She went and stood with the cat in the mess of the backyard.

The phone rang in the kitchen behind her. Little black dots popped across her eyes.

She returned and answered. Her husband said, “You once put a spider outside so he wouldn’t get killed in the house by mistake.”

“I was trying to save it.”

“Only you put him outside in the snow. My legs right now are drawn up just like that. I may not survive you.”

“The old neighbors said they would keep helping. They’ve got a car and this phone.”

“I’ll call back when you’re not there. They’ll have to meet my bus tonight to get me home, if I can bear it.” He was forever telling people what they had to do, while he went around in circles. “As for you, I can’t stand to think of ever talking to you again, Rose. So shut the shit up.”

Well, job done. She walked back to the racing bike, the cat in front of her. For a minute it must have thought about keeping her company. But in a few padded slinks, it stopped and only saw her off. The way back put rain in her face, its cold was so hard, it scratched her. The temperature was dropping.

Will, looking out the door, had a surprise for her. He’d gotten into his set of face paints. He had what appeared to be a day-old beard and mustache with a crook in it to avoid the cut on his lip. He wore one of Charles’ old funny hats; the one that had been Charles’ favorite until he decided it might wear his hair off one day. She tried to play with Will but he teased her so, making up a small language and changing the meanings. She couldn’t keep up. “I don’t know what can hold me together now,” she said and picked up one of her library books, braced it on her lap, her hands went up close to her eyes, and she began talking to the book—telling it she was with her mother now. Her mother took her across a one-way bridge. ‘If it’s one way, how can we ever get back, Mother?’ Her mother said talk was messy, be quiet, stay clean. She was busy driving with her feet only and pinning her old beautiful clothes from her past life to fit on Rose. The straight pins hurt. Below the bridge was gelatinous red. A carnival tent hoisted itself up, below it a shaking funhouse, spotted lights, her mother said, “See the Abortion Fair.” Rose had heard the bedtime story that her mother had lost a baby—a self—before Rose was born from that previously occupied room. Rose stripped her mother’s old clothes off of her like pinned skin and threw them to the roof of the moon. All her mother’s old clothes tried to fly, fell, and failed.

“Stop moving your lips and doing your hands,” Will said, barely disturbed.

The light outside didn't stay true. Color faded first. The rain was pointed glass. She felt she was going color-blind with rain. She turned on a lamp and they sat sharing its light.

Before Charles could get home, bouncing checks came to roost. The house shut down. In an instant, the electric heat and the lights were gone. Now with coats and gloves on, they waited and watched the little, odd light from the wet, dropping sun. Will wore his coat like a sleeping bag. Finally, they were startled by the thump, thump of a car engine like something huge on crutches approaching. But it passed them by. The old neighbors going home without a Charles to deliver.

He wasn't coming. Charles had run away.

The chair turned into a spine, all that held her up, and she couldn't get out. Charles' grand and furious interruptions in her life, he'd kept her anchored, made her real, even when they'd hobbled along together. From deep in the chair she called her mother, pretend, “I'm here, Mother.” Then she talked for her mother. “Rose, you're the runaway,” her mother said. “You ran away from me.”

Rose wanted to throw up, but she hadn't eaten anything. She was beyond meals. “We can't stay here anymore, Will. We'll freeze.”

She'd try for the old neighbor's house, though it was dark. She could slip them in there, talk the old neighbors into her taking care of them and paying her for it in that awful stink. Until. And there was the cat for Will to be with—he liked quiet and the cat couldn't hear. She could find a way to take Will and the cat with her into her pretend. Pretend was safe and touched her with hope and gave her understanding but not too much to ruin hope, and she could keep them there to wait till everything warmed up again and she could get other work as ‘what.’ It was then she realized soon Will would have to start to school. Somewhere. It surprised her. He was someone all by himself—a separate self.

She touched Will's face, the face paints smeared onto her hand, she touched her face, she knew they both were beginning to look dirty.

“Hold my hand, Mother,” Will said. She did better, she lifted him. “Goodbye, house,” he said. They stepped out into dark and moon. “So close,” said Will. It felt like they'd have to open the moon to get past. Hard cold washed them. Under her shoes, the ground was distant. “Oh, it's iced over.” She slipped once but when she knew what it was, her shoes held on. She lifted one shoulder against the bad weather, and sideways went up the drive, to the rocking trees, the ground floating below them. What was ice anyway, but water that couldn't spill.

Such A Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation

Michael L. Newell

The bus lurches and sputters through the well-known,
the tawdry, the dissolute, the ragged streets of a city;

the driver ignores all questions of destination, or he points
to a tattered postcard above the rear view mirror of a rural

scene full of sunshine and smiling faces—there are
no shadows, questioning looks, or clouds.

Passengers near the front sing martial lyrics set to the tune
of “Nearer My God to Thee”—they sway from side to side

waving arms extended overhead. A conductor marches
up and down the aisle, a grinning death’s head emblazoned

on his jacket. To make room for new passengers at each stop,
anyone caught not singing is shot with a taser and tossed out

upon the boiling pavement. Now and again the conductor
makes everyone turn their pockets out; those with limited funds

are pushed out windows of the speeding bus. The singers cheer.
The driver smiles and pushes the accelerator to the floor. Ahead

there has been an accident—traffic has slowed to a crawl. The bus
lurches onto the sidewalk and speeds past; pedestrians dive for cover.

The bus reaches its destination, a shining edifice of concrete,
steel, and soaring pillars. Heavily armed soldiers patrol

the barbed wire perimeter, the windows are barred, and machine guns
loom out the watch towers. Passengers relax. All will soon be well.

You listen
to Coltrane
in the shower
at eleven PM
and the second floor actor
solemn as Saul
knifes a beer can
with his proud left,
the scooter bike nurse
puts her pet gerbil
in its frayed cage
of Nile green,
the sea-swelled sailor
once bound for Broadway
waits for nude negatives
in his mailbox
whistling Sinatra
in the dim lobby,
and the former station master
in blood orange drag
now a tarot card reader
with a broken elbow
will prophecize all night
to anyone who will forget.

Watching A River Flow

Charles P. Ries

The Third Street river is flowing cool
and slow. It's high and tight on Friday night.

Bum walks by imitating the hype
and clean...but smelling like a bar floor.
He's listening...to something on the
D Battery he's pressed to the side of his head.
It's not a tune—he's not humming.
It's not a prophetic vision—he's not glowing.

Bag lady dances near the dumpster looking like
a helium balloon. She's the gravitational center
of a plastic bag she wears for warmth. A planet
stuffed full of bathroom tissue and old newspapers.

She's humming...something too.
In her mind she hears a hit parade.

Damp and 50 degrees doesn't prevent Ms. Candy
Cane from showing off 80% of her six foot frame
with only 8% body fat. Her boyfriend looks nervous
holding this long, lanky love stick. Worried she
might float away like tissue in a soft breeze.

Bums and bunnies drift past me like minstrels in a
marching band. The river is leading me down-
stream.

Shining Example

Mather Schneider

Everybody's going crazy. I went to visit my mother and my aunt came along to the airport with her to pick me up.

My aunt was wearing a shiny windbreaker in the design of an American flag.

I told her she looked like a Harlem Globetrotter but she didn't make the connection.

My aunt hasn't been the same since nine eleven.

She lived in New Jersey twenty years ago, and this somehow means she feels it more than the rest of us, and is infinitely more patriotic.

Now she spends her time volunteering with the police drug task force and if it's not Al Qaeda she's talking about it's who the sheriff's fucking besides his wife.

In the back seat, driving away from the airport, she digs into her right ear with her finger, smells it, then wipes it on her sweat pants.

I suppose it only takes one thing to finally break a person, but I also think it's a culmination of a life lived, the personal decisions that have been made, how the brain and soul have been engaged.

Sometimes I want to strangle her, other times I feel very sorry for her.

Love? It's hard to say.

We drop her off at her house and she goes inside to her husband who is terrified of restaurants, only talks to the mailman, and is referred to by the rest of the family as "the lump", "that thing", or just plain old "it".

On the thirteenth day of the thirteenth month since the Bakersfield Uprising, Jonny Common woke up with a headache.

“It’s gonna be a hot one,” he told his wife.

“It’s always a hot one,” said his wife.

“It’s gonna be hotter than that,” he told his wife.

He pulled on his coveralls and ran a comb through his hair, slicking it back with a dipful of pine oil. He reached down and took out the hand mirror that his wife hid under her nightstand for her Sunday morning vanities and adjusted the handlebars on his mustache. Satisfied, he hid the mirror.

“How do you like your coffee this morning, Jonny?”

“White as a goose,” said Jonny.

“White coffee won’t turn an old black dog into a young kitten,” said his wife.

Jonny always took more cream than coffee in his coffee. If she didn’t ask, he took it black, so she always asked.

His wife handed him his lunch pail at the door.

“Boiled eggs and biscuits,” said his wife.

“My favorite,” said Jonny. He kissed the top of her head and mounted a rusted 10-speed that kicked dust into the wind as he wobbled down the drive.

The headaches came more often now, and Jonny guessed it was old age. Old age and the blunt billy club that knocked him senseless onto the scalding pavement thirteen months and thirteen days ago.

“Let’s wait,” he told his wife as he stood his ground with the migrants, and the almond growers hired ringers to do the work at half the wage.

“We’ll see,” he told his wife when the cops blazed through the migrant camp and ripped down every standing structure. When the migrants regrouped outside Bakersfield the following morning, Jonny smelled the acrid poison of vengeance dripping down from between the manzanitas. There wasn’t a mention of negotiation or appeasement.

“Don’t worry,” he told his wife as the mob thronged out to the fields where the ringers were sniffing the air and scratching their heads as if to forecast a monsoon in the dark clouds to the west.

But when Jonny awakened through a fog of blood next to mounds of damaged migrants heaped into the Kern County drunk tank, some with bone showing through skin, he decided it was time to go. His wife leaned back from the Deputy Sheriff’s desk, flashed a creamy hazelnut ankle from behind her skirt, and traded the last of Jonny’s tobacco in exchange for Jonny, and Jonny and his wife headed east.

It was twelve miles into Globe from the tin-roofed trailer home on Cedro Sangrante, and halfway to town Jonny pedaled through a one-mile detour just behind the gate to the Gila Mining Company Copper Lode. He walked the bicycle up a rocky incline laced with young cedars, tripping once on a crumpled can of Red Stripe. A flatbed truck bellowed down the road in the distance, and Jonny ducked low until it passed. He leaned the bicycle against a lone fencepost at the top of the hill, rolled aside a rock, and hefted a corroded iron pick out of a hole underneath. There was a dull vein of tinted copper streaking up and down across a knob of rock that bulged out of the hillside like a rounded nose. The tawny vein was pockmarked with speckles of jaded turquoise, and it was these varicose patches of cerulean blue that Jonny attacked with the pick. He chiseled out two chunks of the smooth teal rubble, wrapped them in a rag that he'd secreted in his pocket, and arranged them deliberately in his lunch pail, settling the eggs on top where they wouldn't be crushed. Then he replaced his pick underneath the rock, walked the bicycle down the hill, and returned to the road.

The 10-speed's derailleur fell off the bicycle the day after he'd traded his only bible for it, leaving the drivetrain shifted permanently into high gear, and Jonny worked up a sweat as he passed by the Mining Company gate.

The steel handlebars were hot to the touch by the time he turned into the Globe Salvage Lot an hour later. Blue's '59 El Camino, white with blue trim, was parked out front, and Blue was already lounging behind the counter in the one-room office, his sneakered feet up on the desk. He gave a start when he heard Jonny in the doorway, reached for the bat like he always did when some noise woke him up, then put the bat down.

"Gonna be hot today, Jonny. A hundred at least," said Blue.

"Hundred and ten," said Jonny.

"A hundred," said Blue.

"Sleep here last night?"

"The old lady wouldn't open the door. Said my breath coulda set the house on fire." Blue grinned wide through a stubbled lip. "I let in the back door, stuck a towel in a bottle of gin, and lit her up on the kitchen table. Then I came back here for the night."

"Probably better off here, then. Anyone been in yet?"

Blue pushed out a sigh and pointed his eyes at his eyebrows. He had comical gestures for every occasion—he practiced them in front of a mirror. "You're looking at him, Jonny." It was a running joke—the scrapyards rarely saw a customer in a day. "Hey, Jonny, did you hear the one about the drunken priest?"

"No, Blue, I don't believe I heard that one."

“Well, a priest walks out of a bar reeking of the drink, stumbling and tripping and carrying on. And a parishioner comes by and sees him bobbling about and says, ‘Why, Father, I’m sorry to see you walking out of a low establishment like that.’ So the priest looks up at him and says, ‘You’re absolutely right, I’d better get back inside,’ and he walks back into the bar.”

The men exchanged mechanical smiles, Blue’s a bit more genuine than Jonny’s, Jonny’s a bit more fleeting than Blue’s. Jonny stowed his lunch pail behind the desk and headed out front, where he and Blue would smoke away the morning in the shade of an old sycamore. “Oh, Jonny,” Blue called after him. “Was a man here to see you right after you left yesterday.”

Jonny stopped in the doorway and fingered his mustache.

“Didn’t drop a name, but I don’t suppose he was from town. Not from around here, anyway. All decked out in a shiny suit, you know that sleek look my cousin Al picked up when he turned car salesman. Tax man, or government type, maybe. Wanted to know where you live, but I figured you’d best keep that personal, man like that. I told him he might try back today.”

“Man say what he wanted?” Jonny asked.

“He left in a hurry when he heard you weren’t here. Said he’d come by after lunch, maybe.”

Jonny made for the shade and folded himself up onto a stool under the tree out front. Blue took the chair next to him, blowing thin clouds of smoke into the sky.

“Who d’you suppose the man is?”

“Couldn’t say, Blue. Haven’t sent a dime to the tax man, but then I guess the tax man would come to the house. No, I couldn’t say.”

The two finished the morning under the tree, discussing the unlikely visitor, the weather, the new governor, the likelihood of the city closing down the junkyard, the merits of Mabel Potter’s raspberry pies, and, again, the weather. The mercury thermometer outside the office topped 110. They placed a bet on whether a mini-twister would blow through the lot or turn back to the road, and Jonny won. It hit the road.

A dusty speck of a pickup appeared where the road came out of the horizon, got bigger, and stopped at the drive. Jimmy Clemens called out the window, “Got a crankshaft for a 1913 Speedster?”

Blue didn’t have to check the inventory—he knew they didn’t have one. “Try back tomorrow.”

He would. Most days he did. “One of these days he’s gonna slip up and name something we’ve got, and then he’ll have to buy the darn thing,” Blue said once.

The dusty pickup backfired, stalled, backfired again, then got smaller.

Noon came, and the sun poured down in waves. Jonny

pointed his bicycle toward the loose heap of wooden shops and sunbleached buildings that made up downtown Globe. He always took his lunch in town.

“Afternoon, Jonny. Got some rocks for me today?” Ada’s lapidary shop was dim and musky. It reminded Jonny of a dank mineshaft blown out of the hillside, and he couldn’t help looking around for an escape route in the event of a cave-in. He squinted toward the counter. The place put a tight feeling in his chest, and he was always glad to leave.

“Got a couple.” He fished the turquoise chunks out of his lunch pail and spilled them onto the table.

Ada had an eyeglass with a magnifying piece fastened to the center. She peered at the stones through the glass. “That’s fine rock, Jonny. Solid color, no lines on these. These’re bigger than usual.” She took off the glass and looked up. “Give you a dollar for each of them.”

“That’s fine,” Jonny nodded.

“That’s thirteen rocks you brought me this summer. Won’t tell me where you find these, will you?” asked Ada. She asked every day.

“Can’t say,” said Jonny.

“My buyers in Phoenix say these stones are the finest quality they’ve seen in these parts. I guess I can’t blame you for keeping a secret, though.”

Jonny pocketed the money and turned to go.

“Getting warm out?” By some quirk of architecture it was always comfortable in the shop, if a bit humid, regardless of how hot or cool it got outside.

“Hundred in the shade, Ada. Saw a lizard belly-up by the road, made me wonder if a lizard can die of heat.”

“Old Mavis said the shingles started peeling straight off her roof yesterday, sounded like gunshots going off. Burned her hand picking them up, she said, so she left them where they fell. She carried those shingles in a crate all the way from Iowa when she married George. Folks said fancy wood like that wouldn’t last a summer here, but they’ve been up there going on thirty years now.”

“Course there’s a reason folks are partial to tin in these parts.” Jonny pushed open the door and breathed in the heat. “Well, have a good day, Ada. I’ll be seeing you.” He escaped into the sun to eat his lunch in the square.

Blue was asleep at the desk again when Jonny got back to the office. The one-armed military clock on the wall pointed to 13:00. “Afternoon, Blue.”

Blue set the bat down.

“Afternoon.” Blue’s eyes followed him across the room, where Jonny coaxed a drink out of the faucet. “What do you go into town for every day, Jonny? You ride that bicycle far enough just to get to work.”

“It’s not the riding I mind so much, Blue. It’s the solitude. Two hours in, two hours back, there’s nobody to talk to on the road. I guess I like going into town every day just to say hi to folks. Going on a year now I’ve been riding that bicycle four hours a day, and I can’t get used to not having someone next to me to talk to. This morning, like, I was starting down the road and I saw about the prettiest sunrise I ever seen. Now, what’s the use of a nice thing like that if there isn’t someone there to point it out to?”

“Well, you just pointed it out to me.”

“No, but you didn’t see it,” said Jonny. “I could be telling you a story for all you know. Maybe the sun didn’t rise at all while you were in here sleeping, maybe it just came out of a cloud right before you woke up.”

“But I believe you Jonny. Why would you make up a thing like that?”

“Of course I didn’t make it up, but that’s not the point. The point is you didn’t see what I saw. I could tell you that it was flashing red streaks, kind of pulsing like, and you’d probably picture a flashing red ball, but that’s not exactly how it was.”

“Well, how was it, then?”

“What I’m saying is, I can’t tell you exactly how it was. Even if I stood there and watched the thing and wrote down everything I saw, I still couldn’t tell you exactly what it looked like. You just had to be there to know what I mean, and you weren’t there.”

The conversation continued in smoke under the sycamore, then Jonny spotted a red-tailed hawk diving for a kill, and the conversation turned to how long a hawk could hold its breath under water. Probably not long at all, but why would it want to, was the conclusion.

A gleaming black Cadillac, windows rolled up, coasted down the road from town and traipsed up the drive into the lot.

“That’s the man,” said Blue.

The man burst out of the car with more effort than Jonny thought it should take for someone to stand from a sitting position. He stretched his arms, smiled into the sky, straightened his tie, let loose a trumpeting belch, and generally ignored his two hosts, who studied his every movement. The Cadillac’s engine hummed along without skipping a beat.

“Not from around here,” said Jonny.

“Not from town, anyway,” said Blue.

The man stomped around the back side of the car, pulling his billowing trousers up over a considerable paunch. He charged at the two men, still beaming like it was the happiest moment of his life, and stabbed a hand into the air in front of him.

“You must be Jonny Common,” he said, “Pleased to

make your acquaintance.” Jonny shoved both hands in his pockets, and the man folded his arm around Jonny’s shoulders in a choking embrace. He spun Jonny sideways so they both had their backs to Blue in an instant. “Skip Arbuckle’s my name, and I drove all the way down here from Phoenix to see you.” The man had a way of shouting that would have been comfortable if Jonny had been a mile down the road. Jonny pulled away and the man clutched him closer, grinning broadly.

“Well, I—”

“I can see you’re a businessman like I am, Jonny—can I call you Jonny, my boy?—And by Jove, I know there aren’t enough hours in the day for a businessman on business, so I’ll tell you what I’ve got to say, and then I’ll be out of your way, quick as a wink, hmm.”

He nodded his head toward Blue and leaned down to Jonny’s ear, talking straight into Jonny’s headache now. “It’s a matter of some private business, see, I always keep my business confidential. Why don’t we step over to my office.” Without waiting for a response, he hauled Jonny across the dirt by the shoulders, grinning magnanimously at the horizon. He set Jonny down in front of the Cadillac and leaned back against the polished trim.

“You’ll be wondering what this is all about, by Jove, and rightly so. Rightly so, my boy.” Jonny saw that Blue had settled back into his seat under the tree, and he was turning his seat around to face the office. From this distance, the man’s enthusiastic holler would have afforded them some privacy had Blue worn earplugs and sandwiched his head between a pair of pillows.

“You see, Jonny, my boy, I trade in gems. Precious gems is my main business. I operate shops all around the area, see, and I’ve recently expanded as far as El Paso, Toledo, and parts west. You’ve heard of El Paso, my boy, hmm? Well, I’m getting into the mining business of late, going right to the source of it all. By Jove, if you control the source of it all, why then you own the whole business, that’s what I always say, isn’t that right, Jonny. Hmm.” As he talked he gesticulated incongruously with both arms, sweeping them out broadly as though he were planning to sell Jonny everything the eye could see, from one horizon to the other.

“I don’t—”

“Well, my boy, it’s come to my attention that some rocks of yours have been passing through my shops in the big city. Phoenix, that is, Phoenix, hmm. Some turquoise, it is. My boys say you’ve been sending up good, solid chunks of bisbee, and, well, it’s just some of the finest material they’ve seen, my boy. Fine material, just fine. Hmm. No webbing like you see on a lot of the rock around here, just good, solid bisbee is what it is. Well, hmm.

“Here’s what I’m going to offer you, my boy, now I know

you're a businessman and I want you to give some good, solid thought to it, Jonny. Good, solid thought, that is. Now I know you've got yourself a great big rock of turquoise somewhere, I don't know where you found the stuff, and you take off a chunk here, a chunk there, maybe you buy your kids a wooden dolly from Sears, you get your wife some new stockings for Christmas," a wink, "now, hmm. What I want to say is this. See, you can go on and get yourself a rock here and there, you can sweat away in the sun there, earn yourself a little money, you're a businessman, of course. Hmm? Or you can sell it all at once and let the professionals come in and take it all out for you. I'm offering to go in there with you and take that turquoise off your hands all at once, see, and we'll do it right, by Jove."

Here the man reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and pressed it into Jonny's hand. "I'm making you an offer, Jonny, and I want you to think about it. Don't give me an answer now, I just want you think about it, you're a good man, Jonny. You give it some good thought, now, and I'll come back tomorrow, and we'll do some business, alright, Jonny? Hmm." The generous smile faltered for a moment as though he'd just remembered that eternal bliss inevitably came with a cost, then he beamed down at Jonny. "You think about it, then, okay, Jonny." The man pumped Jonny's hand violently, clapped him on the back, then loped around to the driver's side. He opened the door, paused for a moment to smile expansively at the sky, collapsed into the seat, gunned the engine a few times, and shot out into the shimmering heat rising off the road.

A hummingbird bumbled out of the sycamore and tsip-tsip-tsippped into the air.

Jonny unfolded the paper in his hand. "100.00" was blazed onto the sheet in bold, childish strokes. Jonny thought it might have been crayon.

After Jonny returned to his stool and Blue scraped his chair back around to face the road, the two didn't say a word about the encounter for the rest of the afternoon. The Cadillac's dust slipped across the road and made for the hills in the distance, settling back down before long, too tired to push on in the heat of the day.

"You know, I heard that in the fifties, the Governor set up an executive order to pay for transportation by playing the lottery. They actually hired a guy to buy lottery tickets for the state, a few thousand Super-Lotto tickets, and even some scratch-off cards. Guy's job was to check for the winning numbers and scratch off the tickets. Actually made twenty thousand or so for the state before the press found out about it."

"Old Bob Ramsey, you know, the principal over at the primary school, he won a hundred thousand in the lottery a while back. He quit the school the next day, sold his house, and went off traveling somewhere in East Asia with nothing but a backpack. Well, he wasn't there more than a few days, he got jumped by some locals, and it turns out he was stashing the whole hundred

grand right there in his backpack. He came right home and went back to work.”

“Some wealthy Asians out there now.”

“Woman’s walking her dog in the park, and the dog runs over to a man sitting at a bench, eating some scraps of mutton. ‘Shall I throw the dog a bit, ma’am?’ says the man, and the woman says, ‘If you like.’ So the man picks up the dog by the scruff of its neck and tosses it into the bushes. ‘And if he comes back, lady, I just might throw him a bit more,’ says the man.”

Blue used to have a beagle that could run thirty miles an hour, he’d clocked him running next to the car once, Jonny’s uncle had a hound that lost its back legs to some canine version of polio or something, made him a little cart to scoot around on, and so on. Sixteen o’clock came around and the conversation dissipated into a strained silence. Jonny shifted his eyes toward Blue, Blue stole a glance at Jonny, and they both peered pointedly into the distance. The two never worked past four thirty. Jonny stood up to retrieve his bicycle.

“Hey, Jonny,” said Blue.

“What is it?” said Jonny.

“Oh—it’s nothing,” said Blue. “It’s just—it’s nothing,” said Blue. “I guess I’ll stick around and go over the books one more time.” Blue put a hand to his face so the last words were drowned in a wooden yawn. “The books,” as they both knew, consisted of a yellowed notepad which collected numbers and indecipherable scribbles in commemoration of a few of the lot’s transactions, most dating back to the early forties when the junkyard first opened. The state required them to keep a record book, but, as Blue often said, it didn’t require them to use it.

Jonny watched him for a long moment, then pushed off down the road. “See you tomorrow, Blue.”

“Okay, Jonny. Right, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Jonny pulled off the road behind the Mining Company gate and decided to wait for the sunset from the top of the hill. Sunsets are rarely spectacular on a clear day in the high desert, but it was the event itself that Jonny savored, more than the beauty. Jonny admired the constancy of the thing, the knowledge that the same scene had been reenacted at the top of this hill in much the same manner, day after day for as long as the hill had been there. He appreciated the daily corroboration of a timeless truth.

Jonny heard a car accelerate down the road, but he hadn’t seen its lights approaching. Must be a mine worker returning to town, he thought.

Later, he would remember that the copper mine had been shut down as long as he’d been living in Arizona, and the Mining Company gate probably hadn’t seen an employee in years. And later still, he would remember that the car may have sounded like a ’59 El Camino. White, perhaps, with blue trim.

Jonny walked his bicycle to the top of the hill and set it down, then leaned against a tree and closed his eyes to bide the time.

He awakened abruptly just as the sun was settling over the hills, then he straightened up and cupped a hand over his eyes and watched the outline of some distant trees creep up the face of the bloodshot sun as it made its way over a mountain and down the other side. Day became night in a matter of minutes, and twilight came and went in an instant.

In the crepuscular glow of the naked desert, breathing off its last shades of daylight, Jonny inspected the scarred rock with its striking dash of turquoise burnt into it over a thousand years of copper breeding with oxygen. The vein ran deep, and Jonny guessed that if he'd taken thirteen dollars' worth since he'd discovered it, he could take a hundred times that without bleeding it dry. He could pull a hundred dollars out of the rock in a single morning, and Jonny wasn't at all opposed to a bit of good, solid labor. Come to think of it, he rather missed the feeling of a good day's work. He took the folded slip of paper out of his pocket and buried it next to the iron pick.

Jonny rode home in starlight, whistling a dust bowl ballad to the rustling acclaim of an occasional brown bat.

Smoky dinner smells greeted him from the kitchen as he leaned the bicycle against the porch. "Welcome home," he called out.

"Welcome home," said his wife.

Jonny kissed the top of her head. "You smell rosier than I remember," said Jonny.

"I should think so," said his wife. "With this late summer, the rose bush is blooming all over again. I went out and did some pruning just as soon as you left me this morning."

"Did I leave you?" said Jonny. "I hadn't noticed. Well, it must not have worked out, because I'm back now. I think I'll stay for good this time." He sniffed his way into the kitchen, through rich spices and under simmering pots. "Any mail for me today?"

"The water bill came. And a letter from the Justice Group, or something, from Washington, D.C. I left it for you on the kitchen table. You can put that lid back where you found it, dinner won't be ready for half an hour."

"Just enough time for me to starve to death," said Jonny. He took the mail into the other room and set it on a low table across from the bed. He went back to the kitchen and saw his wife pouring things in pots, juggling them around the stove, tasting, wiping, and stirring. He sat down at the table and opened the letter from the Migrant Farmworkers Justice Fund.

"Thank you for your donation of \$6.00. The California chapter of the MFJF has used your generous gift

to provide shelter and basic necessities for migrant farmworkers in the Central Valley region. We appreciate your much-needed support, and we hope you can continue to assist migrant farmworkers as you have in the past. Please use the enclosed envelope for your donation.”

Jonny extracted five dollars from a drawer under the table and added to it the bills from his pocket. He took a pen and a sheet of clean paper out of the drawer and tapped the pen against his forehead, staring hard at the paper. “Best of luck,” he wrote, carefully sculpting each letter. Jonny packed his note together with the seven bills into the typeset envelope and sealed it shut.

He stood behind his wife in the kitchen and kissed the top of her head. “I brought you a surprise from town today.”

“Oh?” said his wife. “What is it?”

He breathed into her hair and kissed her again. “That was it,” said Jonny. “Surprised?”

On the fourteenth day of the thirteenth month since the Bakersfield Uprising, Jonny Common woke up with a headache, but it drifted into the background as he drank down his coffee, like the remote valley scenery tucked away behind a broad mountain. He pedaled with unusual vigor, and the lunch pail struck a frenzied beat against the handlebars. There was no sign of Blue or his ‘59 El Camino (the white one with the blue trim) when he reached the office—the old lady finally took him in, Jonny thought.

At nine o’clock, Jonny turned the “closed” sign to “open” and assumed his position out front. At nine thirty, Blue swerved into the lot and lurched out of his truck. He took his seat next to Jonny, and they were ready for business.

“Know what the penalty is for bigamy in the state of Arizona, Jonny?”

“Couldn’t say, Blue.”

“For the crime of bigamy, you get two mother-in-laws for life.”

The conversation was stilted, the jokes were thin, and even the weather, which never failed to season a withering dialogue, was unremarkable. After a week of unusual heat, there was a thin band of dark cloud pushing over the hills to the west. Now and then, a diaphanous puff would break loose and scuttle over the baking desert, where the sun would bleed it dry in moments. But the puffs grew bolder over the course of the morning and by noon there were scattered patches of shade bleaching the heat out of the scorched mesa.

The drone of the black Cadillac sprinting down the road disturbed the nervous silence just as Jonny was about to start into town for lunch. This time the man was wearing a bow tie, and the lap of his crisp suit was speckled with traces of breakfast, or perhaps it was dinner.

Jonny met the man at the car to avoid a manhandling. “Good morning, Mr.—”

“Well, then, Jonny, my boy, glorious day, today, glorious, that is.” The man’s sentences, belted out with the finesse of a bullhorn, were like snippets of some other conversation, dismantled and strung back together in loose order. He had a grip around Jonny’s shoulder before Jonny could step back. “I say, Jonny, some fine weather you folks get down here, fine weather, hmm, why if not for my business in the big city, I suppose I’d settle down right next door there and just watch the sun, by Jove, I believe I could live here, Jonny.”

Jonny considered the prospect of an iron-gated stucco mansion next door to the junkyard, marble columns, a fleet of limousines in the driveway, and a lush pool in the courtyard, all framed by a mound of broken carburetors and gutted automobiles in the background.

“Mr. Harbuck, I think—”

“That’s right, Arbuckle’s the name, Jonny, Skip Arbuckle, it’s a pleasure, hmm, just a pleasure, Jonny. Why, you don’t mind if I call you Jonny, do you, that’s right, my boy. Well, hmm. Now we have some business to take care of, nothing more pleasant than business on a sunny day, Jonny, wouldn’t you say, and I can’t see doing business without a stiff drink to wash it down, a good, solid drink, that is. Now you just hop on in the old cruiser, my boy, and we’ll see about that tavern back in town there, we’ll get right down to some business, now, hmm.” As the man leaned in close and his breath poured out of his smile, Jonny couldn’t help wondering if he wasn’t already familiar with the Globe Saloon.

“Now, Mr. Arbuckle—”

But the man was already in the car, and from the sound of it, the car was none too pleased. “Right, Jonny, hop on in, my boy, we’ll take a ride into town and see about that drink, hmm.”

Quick as he could, he blurted it out. “Mr. Arbuckle, I won’t sell you the rocks.”

“Hmm.” Something shifted in the man, and it seemed to intensify the smile somehow. The man looked into Jonny’s eyes for a moment. “Well, of course we’ll come to an agreement, my boy.” That seemed to bring him back to familiar territory, and he picked up pace once again. “I’m a businessman, see, I know the looks of a good businessman, of course we can do business. Now, I’m all set up with the contractors, we’re just ready to roll, see, we’ll do this thing like it’s meant to be done, that’s right. Why, you just hop in the car here and we’ll work it out, Jonny. We’ll do some business, my boy. You just come right along and we’ll settle this, by Jove.”

Jonny was amazed that the man could fill in a whole conversation without really conveying anything at all. “You don’t understand.” The man seemed to be listening now. “I just don’t want to sell it.”

“Yes, I see, my boy, of course we’ll do some negotiating,

real business-like. We'll sit down and talk it over like businessmen. Like businessmen, that is. Hmm. Let me tell you a story, my boy. Now when I was a lad growing up the big city, I'd run errands for the neighbors, make a little money of my own, you see, hmm. Now, I saved all that money up one summer, saved it up I did, and I decided I'd have myself—"

"Mr. Arbuckle!" Jonny raised his voice, and the man flinched, and the smile drooped. "I won't sell it to you, and that's that."

Jonny walked deliberately back to the office, retrieved his lunch pail, and pushed the bicycle out to the road. He could hear the man calling his name but he looked straight ahead and rode on into town.

Eating his lunch in the square, he fully expected the man to pull up in his Cadillac and get right back to work with his inapposite jumble of "business" and "Jonny, my boy" and "by Jove." Jonny was prepared to tell him off straight; it seemed that he wasn't as firm with the man as he could have been. But he finished his ham sandwich, salted his radishes, and nibbled his corn bread, nodding and smiling at the lunchtime regulars, commenting to Mr. Peeble on the break in the weather, asking little Joey Stafford where his nose went —oh, there it was, Jonny put it back where it belonged —and before long it was time to return to the lot.

As the junkyard pulled into view, Jonny saw that the Cadillac was still in the lot, and it was just now ambling toward the road. He braced himself for yet another encounter with the odious businessman. That's absolutely final, he thought, turning the volume just a notch past affable banter. Sir, I have my reasons, and I absolutely cannot make a deal. Jonny was by no means a shouting man, but he steeled himself for that eventuality. But while Jonny watched from his bicycle, the car turned right, not left—away from Jonny, not back toward the city—and Jonny's relief at not having to engage the man was almost sensual. Must be off on some other business down south, Jonny thought. He let out a long breath and pedaled into the lot.

Blue was guarding his post under the sycamore. He was ordinarily a bit on the chatty side. Jonny knew that, and he certainly valued a thoughtful conversation. But as soon as Jonny settled into the shade of the tree, Blue launched straight into a droning monologue.

"Back from lunch, Jonny? Is it one o'clock already? I hope all's well with the townsfolk. Did you run into Mae Potter today? You know, last I saw her she was telling me you've got the most handsome smile she's ever seen, said that in the short time you've been here, you've become a real credit to the town. Too bad we don't see the wife around here more often, she said. Not that I blame you, of course, you were lucky to find that place out there as cheap as you did, it's not easy to find a decent house in these parts, Lord knows. . . Well, but you must be happy to see the clouds moving

in, with that sweaty ride in and out of town every day. Just better hope it doesn't rain now. . . You know, I've been thinking of taking a vacation, Jonny. Ever done any traveling, outside of California, I mean? Well, of course, you've been down south of the border some, you told me that . . ."

Jonny wondered now if the man in the suit hadn't left behind some evil in his wake, condemning the lot to a dismal future of irrelevant, meaningless babble. It was as though he had scattered traces of himself like a slug's silvery trail across linoleum, which Blue had sponged up and was now spitting out in the form of blithering nonsense. Jonny didn't say a word, and Blue trailed off before long.

The two men passed the afternoon in mute witness to the darkening landscape, trading veiled glances at one another from time to time. Jonny shifted in his stool. In the excruciating silence he became intensely aware that the bicycle seat was as poorly shaped as the wooden stool, but in a different way, so that as he shifted from one perch to the other various bones and muscles were given the opportunity to cast their misgivings in turn. Jonny saw a roadrunner chase down a scorpion, watched the bird's foolish crown nod wildly as it masticated the desert delicacy. Ordinarily, he would point it out to Blue, who would claim that his grandfather used to sell boiled scorpions from a stand at the side of the road, called them desert shrimp, a real delicacy, and Jonny would tell of a cat with a peculiar penchant for hunting scorpions and tarantulas and dropping them incapacitated at the front door for Jonny to clean up. But it seemed profane to interrupt the blooming silence, and instead Jonny scratched his head and chewed on a twig and drew patterns in the dirt with his boot.

At sixteen o'clock sharp, Jonny wheeled his bicycle out to the road.

"Have a good night," said Blue.

"Right," said Jonny.

An hour later, the sky erupted in menacing shades of cobalt and charcoal. A single cloud of solid ink pressed down from above, and the murky skyline met with the desert floor in a violent clash of color. An occasional flare lit up the road, accompanied by a distant roar. Jonny came up on the Mining Company gate just as the first drops of rain stained his cheeks. He noticed some activity by the road and he slowed the bicycle. Some heavy machinery, a few pickup trucks, he couldn't make out the lettering on the sides of the vehicles. Men were unrolling bundles of barbed wire fencing, one man in an orange hat lifted a hand in greeting, but Jonny just watched. As Jonny coasted by he spotted the black Cadillac tucked in behind a backhoe. A flash of lightning tore the sky into a thousand pieces, burning the scene into a black and white snapshot for an instant, and then the rain closed out the view.

Jonny pedaled on ahead.

“You’re soaked,” said his wife.

“Yes,” said Jonny. “I’ve been watered.”

The following morning, Jonny’s headache was tempered by the desert’s brilliant portrait of bright sound and deep color. The sun baked the hills into a wheaten toast, squeezing pools of water left over from the rain until they collapsed in on themselves in puffs of steam.

As Jonny stationed his bicycle in front of the lot, a black raven cackled from above the office, and Jonny cackled back. The raven, miffed at Jonny’s untoward pleasantries, took flight and left Jonny alone in the office at eight o’clock in the morning. Jonny deposited his lunch pail on the floor behind the desk. Then he settled into Blue’s chair and faced the wall safe. Jonny had never had occasion to operate the safe, but he was entrusted with the combination. “If I die or run off or something,” Blue had told him on his first day at the lot, “somebody’s got to know how to get the money out.” Blue opened it on days when there was a sale in order to deposit the earnings, which he transferred to a bank account when the urge struck him—a few times a year or so, as far as Jonny could tell. Sometimes Jonny opened the office in the mornings to find the safe carelessly unlocked with the door open.

The safe was locked.

Jonny spun the dial left, then right, then left, and the door swung open. In addition to an oily leather pouch stuffed with cash, there was a grease-stained toothbrush and a set of used spark plugs. Jonny counted out one hundred dollars from among the ones and fives, replaced the pouch, and locked the safe. He stashed the money in his pocket. Then he sat behind the desk and filed his nails.

At nine o’clock, Jonny opened the lot for business and sank into his stool out front.

At nine thirty, Blue stumbled in and slumped onto his chair next to Jonny under the breezy sycamore. A fresh coating of beard tinted his face, and his shirt was crumpled and stained.

“Morning, Jonny.”

“Morning, Blue. Rough night last night?”

Blue put on a grin and squinted his bloodshot eyes against the sun. “Rough night.”

The two men watched a school of clouds swim from west to east.

Blue put both hands on his head like he was trying to hold something in. He turned to Jonny. “A cop sees a drunk relieving himself in the park, in full view of the public. ‘Hey, you,’ says the cop, ‘You can’t do that there. There’s children around here. You stop that right now and for God’s sake, put that away.’ The drunk buttons up his fly and bursts out laughing. ‘What’s so funny?’

says the cop. 'I fooled you,' says the drunk. 'I put it away, alright, but I didn't stop.'"

Wyatt Presley pulled into the lot in his Globe Auto tow truck and asked about a radiator for a '56 Bel Air. Blue thought he had a Bel Air, but he wasn't sure if the radiator was still in it, and Wyatt and Jonny followed him out back to check.

"Couple of kids coming through town up to Phoenix must have been doing a hundred," said Wyatt. "They dumped water all over the road, and sure enough, there was a rock the size of my fist jammed right up into the bottom of the radiator. I tell you, you don't make a hole like that driving grandma home from the library. They wanted me to solder it shut, I told them that'd be like fixing up your bathtub with a stapler. I don't find a new radiator, I guess they'll be riding the train."

They found the radiator. It took the three of them half an hour to lift it out in one piece. "How's five sound?" asked Blue. Wyatt handed him the bills, then headed back into town. Blue went into the office to deposit the cash in the safe.

A few minutes later Blue came back out front and took his seat next to Jonny. Blue looked at Jonny, hard, blinked his eyes a few times, then stared down at the ground.

"Say, Blue, why don't you come into town with me today and have lunch?"

"Sure," said Blue. "I think I'd like that." He stared carefully at Jonny for a few moments, then he followed Jonny's gaze into the distance. "Did you hear the one about the farmer's daughter?" asked Blue.

Jonny turned to Blue, and the two men watched each other for a long moment. A breeze lashed through the sycamore, rustling leaves and jostling branches, and a twig fell to the dirt at Jonny's feet. Jonny picked it up and stripped the leaves, slowly, one at a time. He clenched the bare twig between his teeth.

"No, Blue, I don't believe I've heard that one."

Setting up popcorn and a Coke each evening for the five o'clock news, curtains drawn, Mame's pupils expand as her heart bangs—first CBS, then NBC at 5:30. The fifth time this week. And the same, several weeks before.

Oh, and what about that glimpse she'd once had of sitting on Russell Crowe's chest? Ripping his fingernails out by the roots one at a time while he writhed in ecstasy. Surely it had only been a horrid nightmare brought on by her sleep medications. Heavens to mercy! It could not have been the real her. Or maybe she'd seen it on the cover of the *National Enquirer* while waiting in line at Wal-Mart. Yes, that was probably where it came from.

When Kent and Glenda packed up the grandchildren and moved to Duluth, her stomach had felt like a big fat sopping lump of dirty laundry for a month. Then Glenda sent her an affordable Dell computer for Christmas so she could keep in frequent contact with e-mails. And that benevolent young assistant at AARP had been so helpful in bringing her typing up to snuff, even taught her how to browse the net so she could study the kid's environs in Duluth, then, graciously, showed her how to block those filthy spam messages. She'd become expert in spotting them, then deleting them without opening them up. And though that pleasant Kenny at Office Max had sold her an additional nifty spamblocker program, those dirty tricksters still managed to find their way into her mail. What was this world coming to when a perfectly decent old woman could not communicate with her kids without being lambasted with filth?

Yet now she finds herself pinned to the prison tortures. Heaps of naked masked men. Finds herself stretching to see beyond the smudged-out portions of the photos. Believes she can spot a penis here or there, counting seven nude pictures on CBS in just one story, somewhat embarrassed to be rattled by interests she's never known she had. She takes the phone off the hook so no one will intrude as she switches to NBC where she leans forward and glares at the same heap of men once again. Then that puny smoking woman grinning with her thumbs up as she zeroes in on a masturbating masked prisoner, and stoic as she wields power over another, dragging him on a leash.

Mame is curious if, under such horrendous conditions, those men could raise an erection. Even her dear Randall (God rest his soul), had never allowed her to see his penis aroused—had always been prudent in expressing his love for her, using only the missionary position to mount her. Their cozy bedroom silent. Lights out.

Now she shudders at the instant recall of the awful time all her brothers piled upon her and, with a butcher's knife, scraped off her first-ever application of fingernail polish. Mocked her for being a girl.

Then realizes she is driving her pretty manicured nails into her kneecaps.

At noon on Saturday, Letha Estes drops by with a picnic basket—a thermos of mint iced tea, finger sandwiches (paper-thin sliced ham and turkey), and two large lumps of carrot cake on orange plastic saucers. They look like an afterthought. The cake has too much oil in it.

Letha says television has become “implorable.” Mame believes Letha always comes up with fancy words because she is so lonely and wants to seem important. “Implorable” seems plain stupid instead. She thinks Letha made it up.

Mame says, “I don’t think our small children should be subjected to all this torture we’re seeing these days.”

“Well, I guess not!” says Letha. “First thing you know, kiddo, these darling little ones are going to hook up each other’s thumbs to electric condits in their daddy’s garages, and then up an’ what? This whole town will have a black out, dearie.” Letha lifts her sleeve and wipes frosting from her mouth like she is cleaning up a major oil spill. “Mr. Dan Rather, an’ you know who *he* is, he says they’re selling those pictures if you go on your computer. Can you imagine, sweetheart? What kind of crazy person would want to go and see an American get his head chopped off? Dogs with rabies is what this country has went to. It’s implorable, kiddo.”

Sunday at one o’clock: Mame receives her daily e-mail from Glenda. They have been too busy settling into their new environs to go to church lately. She says this every Sunday. She wants to know why Mame has not sent them any e-mails for a while and is she OK? She says Duluth still feels cold but they enjoy the view of Lake Superior and Kent is finding his job at the University a real challenge so he is napping on and off today. Seems their oldest, Ronnie, got his nose crushed in a fight defending his sister’s red hair yesterday (against a gang of Hispanic bullies, hadn’t they left Mexicans behind when they moved north?). Ended up bloodied—head to toe. They had not expected violence in Duluth. Glenda threw his clothes into the trash rather than mess with the blood. She says Ronnie is a trooper like his dad but his sister is becoming withdrawn. She says they think their cat, Melissa Mame, has run off and they think she might be trying to find her way back to their old house and would Mame keep an eye out for her and wouldn’t it be just awful if she got smashed on I-80?

Again, Mame does not reply.

She studies the Sunday paper for new photos of Abu Ghraib. Absorbs every gory detail of how the officers and their flunkies belittled the Iraqis. She feels like she is going to faint but suddenly rallies as her interest is once again piqued by that young female with the leash—then wonders if Saddam Hussein’s warped spirit has consumed the American soldiers. *And America.*

Wonders why she is shutting out her own friends?

She goes out to Safeway for another box of Butter Lover's microwave popcorn. She spots Letha Estes down the aisle—probably yapping with the pharmacist about raising the dosage of her blood pressure medication—but chooses to avoid her.

Mame can't recall the name of that big smelly kid down the street who gave her brothers a quarter to hold her down. She and the boys had been having such fun playing hide-n-seek in the backyard when he showed up.

Then suddenly there was Ralphy and George and Arthur—not really sitting on her, just straddling her like a quarterback straddles a football, and Paul with the knife—not really a butcher's knife, a dull paring knife. It seemed like a butcher's knife at the time. Ralphy was twisting her arms and Paul was hovering over her face, pinching her fingers and scraping off her fingernail polish. She'd just gotten up the nerve to paint it on for the first time ever. Knew her parents would be furious.

And that big smelly kid. She couldn't actually see him though her eyes were about to bust out. She was so frightened. That big smelly kid's fingers were, well, inside of her.

And the only sound she could remember was all those boys, all of them bigger than her, shouting so loud it hurt, and taunting and taunting and calling her a *girl*.

About the time everyone else is sitting down for Sunday dinner, she microwaves a big bowl of buttered popcorn, fills a tall green soda glass with chipped ice and a Coke, then makes herself comfortable at her computer. All the curtains in her house are drawn. She always hopes this does not worry her neighbors.

She goes to her Search Bar. Types in: "*Abu Ghraib torture photos*." Bites the inside of her right cheek till she tastes blood.

Selling Sex Toys To Canadians

David Thornbrugh

One year I sold sex toys and crotchless panties to Canadians.

Canadians are more relaxed about sex than Americans.

Americans like sex but confuse it with making money.

Money comes in handy when making love with strangers.

Strangers came in our shop wearing masks of blandness.

Blandness is one aspect of their lives people want to banish.

Banishing guilt and shame was our job at the Love Shop where I sold vibrators.

Vibrators are tools for taking the effort out of making love.

Love-making without effort is like swimming in outer space.

Space is the distance between people we fill with sex.

Sex brought people into our store but comfort brought them back.

Back then I wanted to sleep with half our customers.

Customers told me about their orgasms and breasts but always left.

Left to my own devices I took out the batteries every night.

Nights I walked home in strange cities wondering what I was selling.

Selling sex is not the same thing as selling happiness.

Happiness exists but not in shrink-wrapped plastic boxes.

Boxes of vibrators from Hong Kong and Germany marked to move.

Move enough vibrators and edible panties and you can retire.

wordmakers

Francis Alix » *Writing from Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, her work draws on social and political themes. Published in several journals and in a chapbook anthology from Dedalus Press in Scotland.*

CL Bledsoe » *Born and raised on a catfish farm in eastern Arkansas, he is a widely published poet now living in Fayetteville, Arkansas.*

Alan Catlin » *Barmaster in Schenectady, New York. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. 'Killer Cocktails' is available from Four-Sep, as well as it's 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.'*

Thomas F. Cook » *A New Yorker who has been writing screenplays and stage plays for twenty years.*

Gary Every » *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.*

Richard Houff » *Poet, publisher and blues musician living in St. Paul, Minnesota. Creator of the widely-read 'Heeltap' poetry magazine.*

Carol Lee Lorenzo » *Recently completed a novel 'Under The Spell.' She won The Flannery O'Connor Prize for Short Fiction in 1995 for her collection 'Nervous Dancer.'*

Michael L. Newell » *Newell has returned to the States after twelve years abroad to discover he is a total stranger to his country.*

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.*

Charles P. Ries » *Milwaukee's 'Bad Monk' is currently working on a second novel. His chaps 'Bad Monk: Neither Here Nor There' and 'Monje Malo Speaks English' are available from Four-Sep Publications.*

Mather Schneider » *Lives and writes in Tucson, Arizona.*

Charles Silver » *Lives and writes in Pollack Pines, California.*

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.*

David Thornbrugh » *A Ring of Fire poet who was born in Tokyo, raised near San Francisco, has lived in Vancouver, BC, and now hangs out in Seattle.*

A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who 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*

Stepan Chapman

LIFE ONEARTH - travel along as Life On Earth is personified in the guise of creatures, characters and imagery (36 pieces of art!) from the inimitable pen of Chapman's distinctive ink drawings. It's a tragedy, that we are all living, as Life On Earth struggles to survive—a blasting stare into the mirror of our collective consciousness. *Gloss cover/24# guts/40pp - \$6ppd*

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 Kharms. 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

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

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

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*

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. Please do not "double space" after each period.

Name and address on the first page of each piece only.

Send along a SASE.

Disposable/recyclable manuscripts are cool and mandatory.

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.

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-Christopher M.

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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	\$195.25	\$3.91
50	36	24# White	178.53	3.57
100	24	Royal Linen	246.00	2.46
100	32	24# White	237.10	2.37
200	36	24# White	391.60	1.96

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. Due to a serious prick out there, half-down is now necessary after the first proof.**