

ISSUE TWENTY-FOUR
FIRST CLASS I of II.2005
(now published Feb./Aug.)
SIX BUCKS

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First Class

SWING OUT TO THE VERY EDGE AND ENJOY **24**



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- Laura **DARROW**
- Janann **DAWKINS**
- Kenneth **DiMAGGIO**
- Gary **EVERY**
- Ed **GALING**
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ISSUE TWENTY-FOUR
FEBRUARY, 2005

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Cover Art by Christopher M

First Class #24 collects stories and poetics meant to draw you into a reflective and contemplative mood. What is the nature of nature, the nature of decay, the nature of human nature? Humans creep around the corners of our culture in a seemingly endless quest for beauty, destruction, pleasure, gain—perhaps a teetering combination of them all.

It is my hope that when you pry your eyes from the pulp it is to pause and allow your synapses to simmer a bit, then ponder a moment or two and ask yourself: what did that mean?

In this time of potential swelling darkness, with bogeymen around every corner, we must consider why and where beauty has fled, and how and where it can again renew itself, replenish itself, or, where action is needed to drag it out from under the gutters.

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

- Christopher M.

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War stories.

We all have them.

And in my profession, you get more stories than most professions. *Have shot glass, will travel* is what my business card would say. If I had a business card. What I have is an unpublished manuscript of my life behind the stick: *Bar Wars*. If anyone is interested in a stranger than fiction account of life in the wet lane, give me a call. I can be reached through the nearest watering hole: just state your name, how you can be reached and how much you are willing to lay out. Have no fear, the message will reach me.

The longer you stay in The Business, the more spectacular your stories become.

It's called The Business because there is no other one any whacked out, immoral, hard drinking, crazed individual would find him or herself engaged in. Take my word for it: I've been there and back more times than I care to think about.

"There" is wherever you end up when the pills, the booze and the adrenaline all run out at the same time and you come spiraling down to earth with a mighty crash. Just follow the wreckage and you'll find me.

One thing for sure, life is never boring when you're always on the edge.

Being there gives you this strange glow that attracts marginal personalities like insects to the flame; it isn't intentional but once you discover this strange talent you just go with it, if only to see where it ends up.

Some of my best experiences have begun that way.

And some of my worst.

Take, for instance, the party of four girls left over from some ill-advised costume party or fashion plate exhibition arriving at the bar under the influence of some misguided assumption that as a service person, I could give a shit. They have all these strange ideas about drinking that should be discouraged with a stick or a blunt object if no sticks are readily available. Their drink request begins as an inappropriate extended metaphor and proceeds along absurdist line to pure poetry, an extended haiku:

girls sitting at the bar,
asking for mimosas;
where do they think they are?

That was a succinct request that developed into an epic involving stolen indoor/outdoor cabin cruisers, a flotilla of armed men in uniform and plainclothes, trip flare fireworks displays and melodramatic dialogues

conducted through bullhorns.

And that was before we entered International Waters.

Telling bar stories is a kind of modern ritual that replaces the ancient ones.

These stories are now told over flat mahogany bar tops instead of around the old camp fires, plastic ash trays replacing the ceremonial log and brush, and imported name label brand hooch consumed to facilitate the telling process, instead of the magic blend pipes of many dreams passed among tribal elders.

I prefer the ancient blends to the hooch, recalling activist days, before the current Republican dark ages, that I spent in backwoods hippie communes of nowhere USA, smoking and ingesting illegal everything and still managing a manifesto or two before scavenging munchies for midday meals.

In the current give-no-quarter, no mercy Rockefeller republic, with repressive drug laws on the books, prudence suggested that braving the highways with a full head of rocket fuel and Dexadrine made more sense than mellowing out with some homegrown herb whose residues are enough to get you hard time in a place of poor quality with some serious felons.

Ah, dear old Prudence, I remember the days, reading Blake, singing along with Ed Sanders and his garage band arrangements of “Sunflower Weary of Time—”, all the pale virgins of time lying at my feet, including Dear Prudence, when she brought herself out to play, or was that from a hallucination on the surreptitiously angel dusted joints that the fiend of a line cook brought back from Hawaii and laid on me as kind of joke—?

Well as Robin Williams once said: “Wow. Reality. What a concept!”

Particularly in the service sector of the employment world: all the underpaid, overworked, harassed by what passed for a public. Ah, yes, that devious designation: The Public, a misnomer if there ever was one. The public is about as reliable, as mutable, as fickle to human nature as werewolves are around the time of a full moon. One thing for sure is you don't want to be around when they go off. More often than not, you have no choice but to deal with it.

Anyone who has done time behind a cash register or at a service desk has a million stories to tell.

Like the one involving a three card monte variation scam using twenty dollar bills for changes back and forth until the poor person behind the register is so confused he or she has no clue what happened. Half the time they don't even know they were taken by a tag team of innocuous seeming patrons skilled in matters of deception, of switch and bait bill changings that

leaves the victim breathless, confused and out half a week's pay. Half a week's pay if they are one of the lucky ones.

Waitresses will tell you about the Freddy Fast Hands slick enough to manage a good grope when she's loaded up with trays, on the way from here to there, leaving what looks like a fin tip but turns out to be the edge of a bill clipped off and attached to nothing.

There seems to be some kind of unwritten law around a full moon that allows the unleashing of whole armies of drunks, told to split up, do their worst, singly or in groups, told to go forth into waitress stations all over the country. And they expect the most amazing, impossible to deliver stuff...

"I'm sorry Sir, Absinthe is illegal in every civilized country in the Western World. I could see if we have any Pernod left—that's about as close as it gets to Lysergic Acid in alcohol around here. I'll ask Lloyd what kind of cocktail he can make with that. He's a sick bastard and he'll try anything once just to see what will happen."

"If that's what you really want, I suggest you hit up the ATM in the lobby, call a cab and ask the driver where he goes for that kind of relief when he hits a number."

"This might come as a complete surprise to you but I really don't get off on overweight, bleary-eyed, drooling people with sick sexual fetishes. You might try Burger King for what you just asked for. They make a living delivering on the promise, 'Have it your way.'"

"When the sign outside said, 'Stop in and say hello', It didn't mean at the top of your lungs, through a megaphone at the height of the Saturday Night dinner rush."

Blowing these people away, on a busy night, is the only fun you get and you have to be careful what you say in order to savor it fully, later, in the after hours bar, getting stewed to the gills with the rest of the still-standing-staff.

The really prudent waitresses hang on until after the check is paid and the tip added to deliver the really great zingers. Though a real seasoned pro understands that if you zip a great dig in early, they will have forgotten by the time the main course arrives, and by then, they'll pay triple to see a little more of what you've got when you lean as close as you dare without actually touching the subhumans.

By subhumans, we mean you, the public. If you, the waitress, bartender, support person, have a boss who insists the customer is always right, get a new job or get a new boss.

In Vietnam they called getting a new boss fragging and it was an acceptable form of winnowing the chaff from the management wheat. It still works though it is usually referred to as a capital felony now.

I am presuming, of course, there is something called management wheat. Those of us who know, suspect there isn't, nor has there ever been such a person, animal or thing.

You can always tell a veteran by how she conducts herself on the floor. The seasoned waitress knows that timing is everything and that the bottom line is: *Take the money and run*. Wilma Rudolph never ran half as fast as a good, highly motivated waitress under a full head of steam.

And nothing motivates a waitress to motor more than a five star obnoxious drunk who just mistook a Ulysses S. Grant for a George Washington. Watch her run, hitting the bricks at full speed at the end of her shift when there is some serious partying to be done.

Some people would be amazed how fast a young (or older for that matter) woman can transform herself from a uniformed drone with an officious bed—I mean, table-side—manner into a disco queen, hair unpinned before the apartment door slams shut all the way, filthy uniform discarded, tossed into a corner of the room, makeup and deodorant applied, partying togs donned, all in the time it took to light a joint, slam down a tumbler full of from-the freezer-Grey Goose, and listen to all the messages on her answering machine.

You can almost hear the last chords of “Rock ‘n Roll Woman” playing as she heads back into the wee hours of the night, “Stairway to Heaven” cranking into full gear as she fires up the three-months-overdue-on payments, fire-engine-red sports car, the wadded up uniform the last thing she will think about until the next afternoon, fifteen minutes before the Saturday shift is to begin.

Then she thinks, “Shit I know it’s around here somewhere. Just where in the fuck did all these Heinie bottles come from anyway? Who the hell do I know that smokes Lucky Strikes? I didn’t even know they made those anymore. I know that damn thing is underneath this shit, like Somewhere? And just whose clothes are these anyway?”

A dim memory from a distant past returns and she thinks, “Good Christ, don’t tell me we were playing the I’ll Give You My Shirt If You Give Me Yours Game again? You know how that usually ends. How could you? Well, the good news is, I’m in my own apartment, right? Oh, shit on a shingle?”

Twenty minutes to a half hour late for the Saturday night shift, dressed in yesterday’s greasy nightmare clothes, falls within the standard deviation of acceptable dress in the restaurant world.

Hell, she could and, probably will, say, “Hey, I showed up dressed, don’t bitch. If you knew what I had to go through to get here at all, you wouldn’t even think of reaming me out, in fact you’d put me in for some kind

of medal.”

That’s the kind of logic that is difficult to argue with.

Hey, a dressed body with two wide open eyes is better than no body at all, as long as you’re not tempted to ask how the eyes got the way they are and what it will take to keep them that way. A word of caution for future restaurant managers of America: Don’t pay your staff on a Thursday. If this is how they end up without actually getting a check, imagine what they’d be like if they started serious partying a day early. They don’t put that kind of useful information in any restaurant management manual I’ve ever seen.

Of course, in comparison to the wait staff, bartenders are models of exacting deportment and sobriety. With their added work responsibilities, vast knowledge of the insider trading of the bar world, or bar wars, as they see it and describe it, they can’t be bothered with the raucous carrying on and out of control behavior of the underlings of the dark world beyond the kitchen door. All bartenders are aware that the other staff members look up to them, seek them out for advice and clear counseling services on the knottier problems of restaurant life like: where they can score the best weed, where the best underage chicks are hanging out these days, who has opened the newest, coolest after hours bar and how much it will cost to get in.

No one ever really knows the true cost of these things, whether it is exacted in coin of the realm or merely in tokens of the flesh. Once years of dedicated substance abuse have been added up, there are nothing but zeroes on the bottom of the tote board and there is nothing he or anyone else can do to change that in this lifetime.

Not that anyone cares about the real tolls exacted, not when it’s Friday night and the wee hours of the morning are for “a getting down and a getting funky,” as the off-the-boat Italian lead singer of the lounge act used to say, after the secret shots of Sambuca in his coffee took hold and everything he said after sounded like Louie Prima on an extended drunken tour through the dive bars of a Hell’s Kitchen of his own devising.

After all, who do you think suggested where the staff get together after work? And who had the star power and the good drugs to pull it off days and weeks on end without apparently ever sleeping? There’s always a blank section on the employment form that asks, “Are you experienced?” And without the barest suggestion of a lie he can fill in all the blanks with a resounding, “You Bet Your Ever Loving Sweet Ass I Am.” No one ever bothers to check references to a reply like that one. Just knowing what the response is a punch line to, and what sixties madman cut an album under that title, is enough of a qualification to do what he will routinely be asked to do.

The bartender in this unfeeling world is the guy who gets to be the point man for unending waves of strange invasions, with no code or rule books for dealing with

the influx of the monied, walking dead craving extradry Beefeaters Martinis up with a twist of lemon and we mean *Extradry with the barest whisper of Vermouth* and you best comply or else my friends here Rico Rico, Yago Yago and Killer Kowalksi will take you out back, behind the dumpster and *show* you what cries and whispers are all about.

TRY AND TELL A HUN-
DRED GUYS OVER SIX
FOOT TEN AND THEIR
FRAUS, THAT TWO RYE
PRESSES COST SEVEN
BUCKS WHEN THEY'RE
USED TO PAYING
TWO-FIFTY

That's how a bartender's life becomes like the tired old joke, "Hey did you hear about the bus that pulled up outside?" To which he is wont to reply, "Please, I've heard that so many times it's not even remotely amusing any more." All good and, all bad jokes, for that matter, have a basis in truth or they

wouldn't be the lame stabs at humor that they are. All that praying to the porcelain God, the only one he has truly respected from Day Uno, does not change the shift to the other guy's, when your proverbial ship, or bus, in this case, comes in.

And it is filled with out of town lady bowlers from the forest primeval way upstate New York where there are only five sports in winter and most of them are indoor ones that start with F— and for good reason: not even a drunk Canuck will go outside with his ragged broom to push around his miniature flying saucer on ice or whatever it is they do up there for sport.

I'm told that game is the National Past Time of Canada, which goes a long way to explaining their strange behavior when introduced into social situations. Maybe they got that way by following the bear to see if he shat in the woods during the winter too and found him frozen to his load. That kind of revelation could do things to your head. In the long run, I don't know what your definition of cold is but that one works for me.

And once that great question was decided once and for all, I would not be in any kind of mood to deal with six teams of five overweight lady bowlers in their black dress team shirts, their names stitched on their pockets: Babs, Thelma, Kathy, Winnie and Marge of the Malone Maulers, charging into the bar under the impression that if they drank oceans of Black Velvet, the pounds would miraculously melt away and they would be transformed into those outrageous raven haired beauties we used to see on billboards all over town.

Instead, what we have resembles cattle call in the fourth ring, the side show of Buffalo Bill's Traveling Circus Greatest Show on Earth and they will be entertained, *Goddamn it*, or someone will pay, and I mean *Pay Big*, if they are not. If you think a 50-year-old Dunkin' Donuts veteran counter person, wearing a 300 game pin in studded diamonds, with the shoulders and forearms of a stevedore and answers to the name of Pearl is someone to be trifled with, you've got a lot to learn about life in the slick lanes.

That was the summer of the weird on tour, when I almost bailed out for a less dangerous profession: fire jumping. Anything would beat dealing with the lady bowlers followed by Tall Shriners in maroon outfits complete with fezs and floats parked outside.

You'd have to see it to believe it. You can take my word for it, those guys were special with a capital S. Telling a shrink about why you have so much pent up hostility, inner rage, doesn't quite dispel the image, the memory of what it's like to try and tell a hundred guys over six foot ten and their fraus, that two Rye Presses cost seven bucks when they're used to paying two-fifty.

The shrink doesn't quite believe your stories but the guy working on the other side of the wood you are telling this story to does. He was working that night as well and had suggested to the head Shriner person, they send the overflow to our place, just up the street from theirs. I still owe him a big one for that but I'm patient. If I wait long enough something truly bizarre will happen and I'll know what to do when it does. That's why I filled out under, "last position held" on my employment application: Legend.

Legend in his own mind, the wait staff would say. One in particular. If she gets too uppity I'll stop dropping hints about how she ended up in my bed two blocks East and one North of the Black Hole of Calcutta and really get specific. I have to wait a few days, though before I drop the whole bombshell in her lap. The pictures are still being developed.

You'd be amazed what even the most aggressive, independent minded, black-eyed woman of the night will do to prevent you from following through with... And I have the negatives in a safe place with instructions to ask her all the serious questions in case something unexpected were to happen to me.

I wouldn't really post those candid pictures on the Net, the way I said I would, but she doesn't know that.

The Fragility Of Life And The Durability Of Plastics

Laura Darrow

High school girls are like candy.

They shine and sparkle. They have long, long legs and perky breasts. High school boys are dirty and stupid and perfect.

Emily Ashby knocked out her two front teeth in the third grade while she was playing soccer. They didn't grow back. Ever. Her mother and father waited until her freshman year of high school to buy her fake ones that were a different color than the rest of her teeth. She was elected prom queen three and a half days ago.

Braden McDougal is a first generation Scot and he plays the bagpipes every year at the school talent show. He went into the boy's restroom in the gym yesterday and masturbated while he thought about his tennis partner. He hadn't taken a shower in five days and the last book he read was *The Plague* by Camus.

Last night Braden and Emily went skinnydipping.

When the boy and the girl arrived at the retirement community pool they felt illicit, like criminals. They hurried out of the car, trying their hardest not to giggle or trip, and the smell of chlorine hit them in the face and filled them with lust. The stars were out and the air was warm and cool at the same time. Braden pushed Emily up and over the pointy-topped pool fence, cutting her leg. A drop of crimson blood dripped onto his left shirtsleeve, but he didn't notice. She licked her finger and pressed it against the reddening patch.

They started stripping off their clothes piece by piece. Emily wore a cotton-candy pink underwear set and when she dropped her shorts on the ground a tube of juicy peach lip-gloss fell out of her pocket. When Braden pulled his shirt over his head it messed up his sandy blond hair and revealed the half moon tattoo on his right bicep. His sister Imogen had bought him the tattoo for his eighteenth birthday three weeks ago. He had bought her an ice cream cone in return. It was butterscotch, which was also Emily's favorite, but Braden didn't know that.

"Hey, do you think anybody ever died in this pool. You know, like had a heart attack or something?"

"Probably," Emily replied, not really paying attention, but engulfed in concern about the chipped pink nail polish she spotted on her toes. She was a week overdue for a pedicure.

Emily's grandmother had lived in this neighborhood. When Emily was a little girl she would come and swim in the pool on the hottest of summer days. She would take off her shoes and on the way from the lounge chair to the pool, she would burn her little unpolished toes on the searing cement.

In Braden's front hall there was a picture of Braden skiing in the Swiss Alps when he was too young to really know how to ski. Later, the same day that picture was taken, he burned his hand on the stove in the cabin where they were staying. He still had a scar on the knuckle of the fourth finger on his left hand. He had been reaching for a glass of strawberry nectar, the drink that Emily always drank on hot days at the pool.

"So, can't wait till graduation."

"Yeah, only three more days."

Emily and Braden had been dating since sophomore year of high school. They met at a party where she took off her shirt and did ten tequila poppers in a row. They went to both proms together. She won queen, but he didn't win king. Scott Harwood did. On their third date Braden brought her flowers and picked her up at her house. It was on the other side of the freeway from his house and it was the furthest he had ever driven. It was only ten minutes away. They held hands in the hall at school and went to lunch in his hand-me-down Honda Civic that Imogen drove before him.

They were both going to city-college and they planned to rent an apartment two blocks from Emily's parent's house. In it there would be no pictures of Emily before her false teeth, and Braden would make sure to hide all of his *GQ* magazines and French existentialist philosophy.

Last night they kissed and splashed water in each other's faces. They tried to keep their voices down, but the people in the neighborhood were old and had been asleep for hours. The time after midnight always felt different to Emily than before midnight. Something in the air changed when the clock struck twelve. When she was six years old she thought that if she stayed up until midnight she would turn into a magical princess, but she stopped believing in magic before she could keep her eyes open that late into the night.

After midnight was too late for skinnydipping. It was too late for giggling and kissing and running from the law. Braden climbed over the side of the pool and wrapped himself in a red terry cloth towel. Emily looked at him longingly for a moment. Then she held her breath and sunk all the way down to the bottom of the deep end of the pool where she lay flat on the bottom like a corpse with her eyes closed. She stayed down for as long as she could without oxygen and then shot herself to the top with all the strength in her legs... like a rocket ship into space.

From the side of the pool, where Braden was waiting for Emily to finish changing, he heard a loud thud on the plastic cover that he had placed over the pool seconds before.

The ambulance came sixteen minutes later. It was hard for Braden to find a phone and he eventually had to wake one of the residents, which was no small

feat. They said the blow to the head had knocked her unconscious and when she took a breath in shock her lungs had filled with water and she drowned almost immediately. On the way to the Honda, Braden picked up the tube of sugary orange gloss from the concrete pool edge. He put it in his pocket and he would wear it sometimes, when he felt sentimental, until the tube ran out. He also picked up her white plastic enamel front teeth that were knocked out while the paramedics pulled her out from the water. They had floated on top of the disinfectant tinted aquamarine water like two lone life rafts in the wake of some tragic accident. He would return those to her mother on the day of the funeral wrapped in a Ziploc baggie, because he didn't know what else to do with them.

Three days after the accident Braden would receive the first bill for their new apartment. He would pay it in full and move in six days later with a friend of his from the football team.

Braden and Emily would have broken up six days after the accident when Emily kissed Scott Harwood at a graduation party. She would have transferred her sophomore year to a private university and later she would have gone to law school. She would have married a successful businessman and lived on Long Island with her three children and her dog Skipp.

Braden will eventually drop out of community college to pursue a career in the performing arts. He will try to forget all about Emily, but he will feel unpleasantly nostalgic every time he smells a juicy peach. One day he will see her picture in the yearbook and cry about all the things he never knew.

I don't know if I'll go
be a cashier around here.
This area is scarier
than the place where I was raised.
The strangers are dangers
as are the neighbors. Cars
rust into steel-shaped dust,
with hoodlums in them
rusting, too. Every few
days a woman pays
her crack dealer; smack
also sells well.
I hide inside
my rented room, spend
days pondering ways
to make money. Take
hooking, or booking
lottery numbers. Very
poor ideas. But I'd rather do those, or
panhandle, than handle
the cash drawer of a store.
Even if the place had every inch of glass
bulletproofed to keep safety inside, I'd
still have a chance to be killed
if someone stuck a gun
through the cash window and smashed
my spleen or spine to smithereens.
I'd much prefer such
action as giving clandestine satisfaction
in the back of a car to some jack
who would let me, and want me to.

Minimum Wage Parking Lot Poem #1

Kenneth DiMaggio

Dollar Dreams

and as the billboard size sign
also notes

this Styrofoam white
warehouse

is the largest in the state

so are the food stamps

and the rehabilitation programs

what used to be

a fast food restaurant

now dispenses

miniature chemical
warfare tablets

that will poison half
of the hallucinations
in your brain

that looks like
the diner meat loaf
special after being only
picked at and used
as an ashtray

by the drunk

who drank his appetite

that is always hungry for
a horse named Revelations

at this plaza's
Off Track Betting Parlor

Holler

as soon as you see
the slow crawling vehicle
with the red blinking
nipple

It beats
going to school

and you will make more money
by keeping an eye out
on the cops

and for also finding quick a trash can
to throw in those illegal
freeze-dried dreams packed into rocks

Exit through your soul

but only after you shake shake shake your flesh

with the state of having
seizures at the old Laundromat
that is now a storefront Pentecostal

Oh and don't forget
the U.S. Army recruiting booth
that used to be

the drop off photo development hut

God may be able to float your soul
out of here on the chorus
of a schizo-babbling gospel

but a Black Hawk helicopter
to a combat zone is the only way
you will leave the land
of drive bys made by
kids on stolen Stingray
bicycles

and from guns
they were able to snatch

from their passed out mothers'
boyfriends

Just flow with the psychosis
or take some medication

you have almost the entire 7th grade
working as an outdoor
pharmacy in front of the boarded up
department store

and after you have shot up
like a rocket the man in the green uniform

will give you a parachute
to float back down

and you oughtta know better
than to think that you will land

in enough of one piece to look human

Minimum Wage Parking Lot Poem #3

Kenneth DiMaggio

Drunken white fraternity
boys

looking for \$10 hand jobs
and more from prostitutes
who will fast food your sex

on an air mattress in the back
of a rancid meat smelling van

But mostly
it's just baby powder that college kids
for a cocaine thrill will get

for their Saturday night
post bar closure tour

of the minimum wage parking lot

And here comes the ambulance

But because it is going
behind the Stupor market
and the neon fast food bunker

must mean

that somebody OD'd or left
pieces of their body
or their baby at the loading dock
or in the dumpster

And a crack vial's throw away

from where suspicious meat and overly sweetened
food product that no longer has
a shelf life gets dumped

is a dead car lot
of wrecked vehicles
that have all sorts
of multi purpose
illegal uses just

make sure you pay the big
tattooed guy called
Crocodile something
in cash

or something
narcotic in kind

before you get into one of "his" autos
to shoot up to go down or just to go—
and deep enough with no memory

so that you can sleep
even if it is only temporary

But the plaza with
a store front Pentecostal an
Off Track Betting Parlor and
a 24-hour Bail Bondsman service

never shuts down

there's always just enough

frayed human wiring

to jump start this dead battery

and light up enough
of the corruption

to let the other folks know

that all of the usual
suffering and waste

is open for business today in *Hell*

Holy Sedona

Gary Every

I visit the beautiful chapel,
and afterwards feeling calm and serene,
I take a hike;
strolling through the Mystic Hills.
There are the sounds of nearby cars,
the roars of automobiles rising and descending
along the rolling roads.
The songs of hammers and saws fill the air,
the busy sounds of commerce and construction.
No wonder the red rock of Sedona
is considered the home
of the New Age Harmonic Convergence,
it has everything an aging, fading, baby boomer needs;
natural beauty,
sacred spaces,
and easy access by automobile.

Eskimo Yellow Jackets

Gary Every

The Inuit elder was amazed.
He had been alive for many years
and yet he had never seen such a thing.
The old man was certain
that none of the ancestors had ever seen
one of these black and yellow winged creatures either.
There was no word for them
in all the Eskimo languages.
One of the black and yellow flying insects
alighted on the old man's outstretched finger.
They were so delicate and beautiful he sighed
they must be good omens
and softly stroked its back.

The whole village was buzzing with the news
of the new creatures in the world.
Who had ever dreamed of such a thing.
If elder brother had truly created all the animals
at one time,
in one day,
then how did one explain
the arrival of new animals into the world.
"Witchcraft!" shrieked an old crone
claiming that the bugs ugly faces
revealed their evil purpose.

At last, there was a useful reason
for the white people.
The Inuit elder managed to capture
several of the fast flying insects;
had them boxed and mailed
back to the government capital in Ottawa.
It was easy for the entomologist to identify
an insect as common as the yellow jacket wasp,
a regular visitor to any suburban neighborhood
but new to the Arctic.
The scientist sent facts and figures
about the life cycle of the yellow jacket wasp
and at the last moment remembered to jot a note;
"Do not touch these bugs—they sting."
He sighed,
yellow jackets so far north—
how many more signs of global warming do you need?
And how long before we all get stung.

you're fired
he said

just like
that

who the fuck
does he think
he is
anyway

i've worked
my balls off
for ten years
in this book
factory

long hours on
the press

puttin covers
on books

lots of times
i almost lost
my fingers in
the press

so how come
he fires me?

the plant is
movin overseas
he tells me

cost too much
to keep this
place open

he says again
with a small
sigh

fuckin government
i mutter

sorry he
replies
and walks away

The Twin Paradox

Elliot Harmon

But time and space, which we've thus far treated independently, are really different aspects of the same thing.

I wrote the first line of this poem about fifteen seconds ago.

There's some guy talking on his cell phone about his Nintendo.

He's making it hard to think all these high artistic thoughts and in fifteen seconds I've traveled exactly fifteen seconds or, if you prefer, about four billion meters in spacetime, but it's all time

so you'd probably call it fifteen seconds.

But wait.

But if, in that fifteen seconds,

I'd have stood up to go to the drinking fountain and come back to my chair,

I'd have still traveled the four billion meters in spacetime, but a very small amount of it would have been space, so there'd be just a touch more time and I'd be a tad younger than I am.

Really.

In fact, let's go ahead and screw up the meter and give you the formula for that one:

$\text{spacetime interval}^2 = \text{time separation}^2 - \text{space separation}^2$

And every two events you've ever experienced are separated by a spacetime interval and how much of that interval, for you, was time and how much of that interval, for you, was space depended only on how much you moved.

The guy talking on the phone stops talking.

I look over at him and he seems unhappy with the person listening to him jabber

and he feels me watch him and he looks back at me with this face that if we were in high school would say

what are you looking at nerd

but since we're in college doesn't

say anything

and he turns around and walks away so since he's walking away time for him isn't going quite as fast as it is for me.

$\text{spacetime interval}^2 = \text{time separation}^2 - \text{space separation}^2$

He puts the phone back up to his ear

and the girl on the other end is already in her car on the way to the library to pick him up

even though she's mad at him

so she's traveling even more in

space and less in time than he is.

He goes outside the library and there she is in her white sports car with the sun roof open wearing an Alpha Phi T-shirt and a

minus space separation squared.

And Lisa thinks, and it still makes sense,
but man.

And she thinks about when they were kids and their mother
always making them share a birthday cake

and she thinks about telling him about it
when she had her first period and him just scratching his head
and saying "that's weird"

and she thinks about her first weekend
at USD and her being the only girl on her floor who stayed
and wishing that her brother didn't have to get a scholarship
at that stupid art school

and every time they met since then she'd be so aware without
ever having to mention it that his life was imperfect as her
own

and so relieved not to look up to him anymore
and she hoped, though not sure, that he knew
the same thing about her.

And that in a couple of months Lisa's going to come back
and this idiotic little boy in the seat next to her,
that he'll be respectable and he'll have kids
who'll be taught to call her Aunt Lisa.

Sniffing and twitching, the clouds rolled down out of the sky and hung nervous against the windows.

»

Abel beat morosely at the makeshift snare drum he had manufactured by driving loose nails into the bottom of an aluminum bucket. *Tat*, went the drum, *tat-tat*, while Doag tried to teach the cat not to use its claws on people.

“No...no....no,” said Doag as rhythmic as the drum each time the cat, Trane, raised her paw at the boy’s pointing finger. “No, I said.” Which completely flummoxed the cat, who eventually tired of the game and stared off at something else in the small apartment.

Abel dropped the sticks on top of the drum, *click-tat*, “Why are you doing that?”

Doag looked up from trying to catch the cat’s attention again with a pencil, “Her claws hurt.”

“But it’s an instinct. I’d probably scratch you too, you stuck your finger in my face.”

“We’re like her...like, masters or something. She shouldn’t be doing that.”

Trane walked away, swishing her tail, to scratch at the sandbox in the bathroom and maybe take a piss if Abel had remembered to empty it this week.

“Well, stop. You’re going to turn her into a Persian or something. You ever seen one of those? Dumb as a shovel, and there’s not a bit of cat left in them. No instinct or nothing. That what you want her to be like?”

“No.”

“Then stop.” Abel went into the kitchen to put on the coffee while Doag put something on the stereo. Doag sniffed mysteriously at the bucket drum that still smelled of whatever chemical had been in it before it became a drum. Then the music started.

»

The streetlights rushed up to meet the clouds, filling the air with thick orange atmosphere and ozone, a bitter taste. The whole city held in a late winter box of this heavy breath. Flowerman on the corner turned up his boombox to the night, but the notes all fell around him in wet wool. He sold a geranium to a girl with glasses, then hunched on the milk crate in his damp clothes, slurping cold coffee from his fingers.

»

Abel brought out their cups and set one on the drum next to Doag. Doag, spacing on one of the many line drawings Abel had swiped out in a charcoal rush, then hung from the four walls with peeling tape.

“Why’d you put this on?”

“I don’t know.”

“I hate this song.”

“Well, change it.” Doag didn’t even taste how good or bad the coffee was, just how hot, and set the jelly jar—or whatever the glass had once been before it was a glass—back on the drum, *k-rick tat*. “What’s that one supposed to be?”

Abel changed the music to something that wasn’t any better, so he just didn’t listen to it playing, “I don’t know. Whatever it is.”

“You asshole.”

“What?”

“This is not a picture. This is not a coffee cup. This is not a drum. You suck.”

Abel grinned over his own ex-olive jar with the steam beading in his ragged beard.

»

In the shop across from Flowerman, The Clerk flinched at the ragged glass in his veins from the trucker’s speed and white crosses he had been gobbling for three days straight. Watching the shoplifter girls on black and white close-circuit as they milled around the back near the drink coolers, looking so innocent as to have to be guilty with the ash smears on their cheeks and the snotty noses. Night people filing in with shreds of cloud clinging at their coats, then filing out again, pockets filled with sugars and caffienes and all the processed and synthetic fuel they could get their hands on. Flowerman watched them and spat a coffee-colored glob of spit at the sidewalk. The Clerk caught his eye for a moment through the plate glass, and the two men looked at each other until the clouds grew too thick to see across the street between them anymore.

»

Abel coiled his scarf in a second loop around his neck. He always wore a scarf—at least ten months out of the year. Like a talisman or some kind of sacred polyester mantle, you would almost never see his neck without one. Once he had read a magazine article about a rock singer who wore a silk scarf around her neck for over a decade because she believed a witch from a rival rock group had cast a spell on her that if she ever unwrapped the scarf, her head would immediately fall right off her shoulders and she would die. Abel knew where that came from. This world is filled with all kinds of magic, good and bad, and there’s not a single thing wrong with taking your own personal precautions. He pulled the scarf a little tighter.

Doag checked his watch, spilling some of the coffee on his pants, “Man, where’s the heat?”

Abel looked into the thin, black pool at the bottom of

the jar, “It’s coming.”

“I’m fucking freezing in here.”

“It’ll be here. Just wait.” Trane mewed around his shoes, and he stroked at her back the way he had beat at the drum. *Rub. Rub-rub.*

They sat that way: not talking, the sounds of their drinking the last sips of the coffee, whatever the music was on the stereo, and Trane’s little contented engine purring soft in the close room. Until the steamheat finally came hissing in the pipes and brought Abel abruptly to his feet. The cat yowled and scattered to a dark corner to lick at her matted and outraged fur. “I’m gonna call a guy,” he was already at the phone and dialing.

“You know somebody?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna call him.”

“Well, why didn’t you? I mean.”

“I didn’t think about it before. Now I’m gonna call him.”

“Okay,” Doag bobbed his knees up and down, astraddle the drum. Tonight was suddenly looking very up, even with the clouds and the miserable gauze of the strangled cars in the streets. He launched into a Gene Krupa *ratta-ta-tatta-ta-TAT-TAT-TAT* of joy, nails flying everywhere.

»

The taller guy, the one with the wild black hair flying in limpid swirls across his head bought a rose boutonnière, and his buddy with the cigarette smoking in the corner of his mouth went with a single violet, the stem pulled through a coat buttonhook. Flowerman took the old bills and made the change and watched the boys first walking away then being swallowed whole by the mandarin night. Cars did their best to be like the fog, rolling down from the upper streets and upper lights, their chrome and headlights muted like sharp rust until they went by in a rush that had never been. The noise of their engines lingering, part of the air now, until they finally faded without a sound. Flowerman slept.

»

“Help me with this pin,” Abel fidgeted the rose against his lapel.

“Well, stand still a second.” Doag held the cigarette out with his lips so the smoke wouldn’t go in his eyes. “There.” The flower already looked black and wilted at its upper petals. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Depends. Can you cook?”

“Shit. You wanna cigarette?”

“Yeah, gimme one.”

The violet flickered by matchlight, then went out again.

“So, who’s this guy?”

“Just a guy.”

“But he said come over?”

“Yeah, he said come on over. Me to come on over. I didn’t tell him you were with me.”

Doag suddenly looked very hurt. He already knew what was coming. “So, what then?”

“So, nothing. You’re just gonna have to wait downstairs while I go up.”

“Ah, man. C’mon. I hate that shit.”

“It’ll take like five minutes.”

“No, it won’t. I know these guys, man. They want you to hang out and make them feel comfortable you’re not the wrong guy. Ya know.”

“Not this guy. He’s just business.”

“Right.”

“Five minutes.”

“Yeah.”

»

It didn’t really matter if Doag was pissed about waiting downstairs or not. If he didn’t, the thing wouldn’t happen. So, he’d wait, as long as it took—five minutes or whatever. Then Abel would come hopping out on the stoop, warm as toast and stagger bloodshot and grinning up the street without even looking back to see if Doag was coming or not. Abel always wore scarfs, and Doag always waited. That’s just a big part of who they were.

But first there were the twenty blocks to navigate downtown to the guy’s place, the boys’ fists in their pockets, and the smoke from the cigarettes pulling them back to where they had just been. Across the narrow freeway overpass that separated the safe zone of the University with its blue lights and emergency phones—and back down again into the few fizzing bulbs of the rest of the dead city, flickering over the broken brown bottles and diamond dust set in the raw, uneven pavement.

At one point just at the arc of the overpass, you have to stop and look. The myth of the school hangs glowing behind you with its feet barely touching the ground, leaking through the scrim and sucking its teeth at your leaving, saying as you go:

Once you step across that line—then I guess there’s no more to say. Whatever befalls you in that other place is no more interest to me. I have cried enough before for all my wandering sons, to know the tears are wasted.

»

Cars fluff by underneath, their dull eyes barely lighting ten feet in front of them, their faint red, back-staring glances drifting away with the lids half-lowered.

Then you’re going down again, and the shiver creeps

into your clothes wherever it can find a way in. Down and on down to where the painted ladies look like half-finished portraits; they keep their lips closed except when talking business to hide their chipped teeth, smeared with nicotine and lipstick. And the rough men pour antifreeze through a loaf of bread, drink the filtered juice and sleep warmly the night through in alleyways and whatever prone position they may have fallen into when they dropped.

»

Doag shivered and wished he had Abel's scarf. His fingers were too cold to light a cigarette, so he kept them in his pockets. The right pocket had a hole in it where the cold could get in and make him sad. "Man, why didn't you call your guy on campus?"

"He's not holding."

"You already called him?"

"I spoke to him yesterday, and he said he wasn't."

Alright then, so, alright. This was it, then, so, alright. But any minute something was going to come out of the dark and the fog and that would be that. And there wasn't anything two boys could do but hang their heads low in their coat collars and just keep walking.

»

The cat sat on the windowsill in the dark apartment, her stretched shadow falling across the radiator and floor behind her. Only the tail working every once in awhile across the coarse wood. The radiator pissed and moaned, sending out its waves of steam like a surging, seething bout of rage. She sat with the heat rolling up from under her, watching the street through the closed window and the crowding night. Her eyes narrowed as she thought.

»

Somewhere along the way, the violet had worked its way out of his buttonhole and fallen underfoot on the pavement. Doag didn't notice it until they were standing on the steps out front of the guy's place, and by then it was too late. He let his breath out on a long, gray sigh.

Abel rang the buzzer. "You be alright?"

"Whatever, man. Just go up."

A one-eyed car cruised by on the street, slowed, then went on.

—*Who is it?* the electric box crackled and fuzzed.

"It's Abe."

There was a tense moment, then the lock buzzed and Abel pulled at the door. "Five minutes."

"Yeah."

The night got colder.

Doag wished he had a hat to hide under. The shadow would have fallen across his face and eyes except

when he drug on the cigarette, and then the windows across the street and the dark doors wouldn't be able to tell how scared he was. Ash dripped on the tops of his shoes. Like any minute that one streetlight at the corner was going to go out completely and then it would be total dark. That's when it would happen.

»

Shuddery, hand-blowing lust. The only thing Picasso Girl could see from her knees was the man's gold tooth. She shuddered and blew into her fists, trying to not let the alley shards tear at her stockings. He was weaving with his gold tooth glinting, scratching his back against the dumpster he leaned against like a bear, hesitant for the short, harsh pleasure that would go off like a cold gun then be gone. Picasso girl pulled at his legs, and the light from his gold tooth was cut off by the massive stomach against her face.

»

Doag watched the larger and smaller shadows suddenly emerge from the black hollow of the alley and go their separate ways on the sidewalk. Only, except, the smaller one was coming toward him now. The click of her heels softening *clud clud* in the fog.

"Hey." Even up close, her face was impressionistic and blurred, no sum of parts coming all the way together to make you think she was even really standing there.

"Hey."

"I get a cigarette from you?"

"Yeah." Doag hicked his breath like he always sat on steps like these handing out cigarettes to prostitutes or whatever it was she had been doing over there in the dark with the other shadow. He held out the pack to her, and she took two.

"One for the road?"

Doag scratched a match, "Okay."

The smoke made her face look kind of better. "You wanna go out?"

"No, that's okay. I'm waiting on somebody."

"Is she pretty?"

"It's not like that. It's. My friend's up there."

"Okay."

"Yeah."

"You got any money?"

"Nope."

"I bet you do."

"I don't."

Her laugh was wheezy, and he was more than happy when she left. *Clud-cludding* wherever she was going so long as it was away from here. Eventually the street

was empty all over again. God, he missed that flower. He missed it almost more than anything he had ever missed in his life. Tears burned in his cold face, and he decided not cry. Just to hurt was better instead and sit here missing the flower. That was Abel for you. He knew how things got lost all the time, so he had bought one with a pin so it wouldn't get lost until you decided to lose it. Except it was already turning black before they had even got a block away from the Flowerman's stand. Things will lose themselves whether you want them to or not. There's nothing you can do about that, either.

»

What was here before? Before the concrete rivers flowed and welled up in the jello moulds of all the buildings. When all the glass and metal still lay on the earth and was still a part of the earth. The Hands moving to shape things out of what was given, there had to be something before that, back before there was even anyone to give it to. Then it just was, and I bet it was better for it. Just being. Because look what we've built instead. Look how we took the things that used to be and made them something else. Back when we were clay.

»

Abel stood beside him on the steps, grinning for no reason. "You ready to go?"

"Hell yes, I'm ready. It's fucking freezing. What took you so long?"

"Ah, the guy wanted to talk a minute."

"See, I told you. Man. Dammit."

"What?"

"This guy's all business."

"He is."

For a minute he hated Abel standing there warm as toast. His hand made a bony fist in its pocket; for just part of a second he saw the whole thing at once—his fist like a stone and a brother bleeding in the hot dust at his feet—then he walked away from the other boy, up the street, loosing and flexing his stiff fingers.

"Hey, Doag, man. Wait up."

"I lost my flower."

"What?"

"My fucking violet. It fell out or something."

But that was just a candy paper or a condom wrapper. A withered flower of blood that dripped from the brother's head, the bones all bashed in and the drop falling to splatter and bloom on the concrete. In this harsh, awful, not-seeing light, Doag picked up everything that might possibly be it but wasn't as soon as he had it in his hands. Ticket stubs and broken glass, he started putting everything he found into his pockets, whether it was the flower or not. Some of the stuff fell through

the hole in the bad pocket. Some hung up in the lining and stayed or was too big to fit through the hole.

“Is this it?”

“Ah, man, that’s a fucking rock. What’s the matter with you?”

“Sorry. Jesus.”

“Look, don’t help, okay. Just don’t. It’s okay.”

“Fine.” Abel dropped his handful of bottle caps and cinders in the gutter and walked up the street to sit on the curb and roll a joint. “You should’ve got one like mine.” The rose was almost completely all black and dead now.

WHAT WAS HERE
BEFORE? BEFORE THE
CONCRETE RIVERS
FLOWED AND WELLED UP
IN THE JELLO MOULDS
OF ALL THE BUILDINGS.
WHEN ALL THE GLASS
AND METAL STILL LAY
ON THE EARTH AND WAS
STILL A PART OF THE
EARTH.

“I know. I know I should have gotten one with a pin. But I wanted the other one.”

Abel twisted his neck in the lamplight, so the shadow of his head fell on the ground beside him and not over the hands with the papers and the plastic baggie. “I mean, what’s the big deal? We’ll get you another flower when we get back.”

“Because this is important.” I can’t explain it, but this is the most important thing right now. I don’t want to be one of those people who always loses things. This is everything. And maybe if I can find it, then I won’t be one of those people. People, they just shake their heads. They don’t know what I’m talking about. But I have things to say. I’m not this flower. I’m not lost. If I could just find it, I’d be able to show everybody that I’m not some kind of waste of time.

»

He’s all cool metal. The black menace lines cruising where the radio talks. Something electric and fierce, a heavy steel force on the obscure night. How the overhead lights come down on his shiny black mirrors, the mirror of his hood, the mirrors of his glasses giving nothing and reflecting back everything to itself with that new ingredient of fear he carries and adds to everything he passes through.

»

The trooper hitches his left cheek and farts a short *brrrnt*

in the upholstery. The radio talks in the dash. Lights slide over him and the cruiser as they make their slow swirling rounds, tying this city in knots. In air like this, you can tell what everyone is thinking—like in the comics, their thoughts float above their heads in bubbles. He sees the world through store-bought mirrors so as not to get any of it on him. Light comes in and reflects upside down on the back of the eye, then the brain rights it into some kind of usable explanation, or else we'd all be walking on our hands to see the way we suddenly used to. The mirrors don't let this happen. Maybe he's blind back there behind them. Maybe he has no eyes at all back there and only moves on the instinct of what he is. And when he raises his gun in the twin screens of those robot eyes, it will not be him firing, but the weight of an entire frightened people who created him, pushing the plunger down until the bullet squirts out on a thin column of fire. The night gets quiet again, sucking all the sound into its sponge.

»

“Doag, man, stand up.” Abel shoved the whole loose works into a pants pocket, scattering about five dollars worth on the wet sidewalk. “Fuck.”

“It's not here. It must have been somewhere else.”

“Stand up, man. It's the fucking cops.”

An echo of blue light ricocheted off the buildings and street, raising Doag's head up, blinking. And the short *BOOoont* blast of the siren. The car did a slow drive-by, and for the instant of passing, Doag saw himself standing in the cop's eyes and raising his hand in a small wave, because he didn't know what else to do. Until the liquid of the cruiser dripped back into the darkness it was born from. Only the light catching briefly on its mirrors even reminds you it was ever there.

“Shit. Let's go, man. I'm serious.”

But Doag refused to go very fast, with his hands shoved in his cramped pockets and his neck shoved into his collar, scanning the ground as they went. Because any minute it could be there and almost like he hadn't dropped it. Even at the same time the need for the flower started to fade, but he refused to admit this to himself. It was just for a second that it had been important, and he didn't want to lose that, too. Because then he would be like all those other people. And what all those other people said when they were talking about him and they didn't think he could hear. He simply refused to be lost.

By the time Doag had almost forgotten about it, Abel found the flower.

“Here.”

“What is it?”

“Looks like a violet to me.”

“I didn't even know you were looking.”

“Well.”

“Thanks.” He put it back in his buttonhook, then took it out again and held it tight in his fist.

Abel removed the rose on the pin and flung it out in the middle of the street. It was dead anyway. The whole thing was just too much for words.

The Flowerman folded his shop up into a box and hooked the padlock in its clasp. The fog had lost its mystery by now, and he waded across the street to get another cup of coffee.

»

The Clerk watched him through the big window, tasting barbed wire in his blood as the man appeared out of nothing in a knit cap and heavy wool, nodding briefly on his way back to the big urns near the snack cake display. But it wasn't real yet, not yet, this man, until The Clerk saw it on TV. He turned to the close-circuit and breathed a sigh of relief that this wasn't a ghost. And it wasn't, because there he was in black and white, pouring the milk first then adding the coffee so it mixed right. No sugar. Ghosts take sugar, because they're like junkies for the sweet stuff. But this wasn't a ghost. Just the Flowerguy who came in every night for that last hot cup to get him home on. The Clerk had been seeing ghosts for three days, so it was better safe than sorry. He crunched another of the bitter white pills and ate a stick of peppermint gum to chase it.

»

“Man, don't get anything with salt or sugar in it.”

“Why not?”

“Cause then you'll eat it.”

“I thought that was the point.”

“I mean, you'll eat all of it.”

“What am I supposed to get then.”

“Just not junk.”

“It's all junk in here. This is a junk store. Why do people come in here?”

Abel held up a package, “Apple sauce. The perfect food. It's good for you. Good for cotton mouth. And you won't shit blood in the morning.”

“I never shit blood.” Doag put back his package of beef jerky and wasabi flavored peanuts. Ice cream was healthy. Maybe he should get ice cream.

“You just shouldn't put so much crap in your body.”

“You're one to talk.”

“I know, that's what I'm saying. Apple sauce.”

“What about ice cream?”

“Whatever man, I'm getting this apple sauce and a cup of coffee. You want one?”

“Yeah.”

“The Abel way?”

“God, no.”

»

The Abel way was made the way any man who wore a scarf ten months out of the year would make it. You take:

1 Pack of Instant Hot Cocoa

1 Cup of Milk

Pour the two in the bottom of an extra-large big gulp size paper coffee cup (double-cupped if The Clerk let's you get away with it so as it's not too hot to carry), and fill the rest with coffee.

The Flowerman moved aside from the counter as the two boys stepped up with their assorted purchases. Doag had opted for mandarin orange slices and a bag of unsalted sunflower seeds. Abel set the applesauce proudly beside his coffee concoction and the other cup for Doag, very black and very strong, having festered in the urn for a good six hours before they got to it.

The Clerk made some noise with the buttons on the cash register, and the drawer miraculously opened to tender change, and then they were back out again and lost on the sidewalk.

»

An hour later, after Doag had finally made Abel stop playing the drum and Trane tired of weaving in and out of the coiled smells of their fresh legs, the cat lay in a corner bathing herself while the boys stretched out in their new bodies and felt fine. The music was pretty good now, too, with the window open so the smoke could go out and forget itself.

Abel took up a blunt piece of charcoal and the blank white sheet of paper across his legs. It was terrifying how empty this thing was. He immediately made a mark across it, so at least that would be something, and the drawing would come out of that. “What was that tonight?”

“What?” The other boy tipped back his head and dropped in an orange slice.

“That thing with the flower or whatever it was. What was that?”

“I don't know.” The words weren't there. The words were all lost. “I don't know.”

“You freaked me out. I mean, I didn't know it was so important to you.”

“It wasn't. It.”

“But you said it was. It's like you were drowning.”

“I know.”

“Then, what, man?”

Doag took out a handful of the things he had put in his pocket and sorted through them until he found the violet. “I don’t remember.”

“Then that cop.”

“I know.”

“Fuck.”

»

I just saw myself waiting down there when you went upstairs. And suddenly I like got this all crazy idea that if I could find that thing I’d lost then I wouldn’t have to be myself anymore. I wouldn’t have to sit on the steps, and you wouldn’t have to go upstairs to meet the guy. We could be somebody totally different or like who we were before we were like this. That’s what it was. It wasn’t the thing. It’s what the thing was right then. Then after a few minutes it wasn’t that anymore, so I like lost the chance for us, the chance to change or be something else. By the time you found it, it was already gone. It was too late. And we were just who we were. Me and you and Doag and Abel. How did we get to be this way? Right now, I guess it’s okay. But tomorrow I’m going to be so sick when I think about it. My only hope is that this fog will never blow away and show me the truth ever again.

»

By the time it was over, Doag couldn’t remember if he had said any of it after all. Abel sketched a stamen in its crown of thorns, then put the pad on the floor. The cat was asleep. The coffee and strange foods gurgled in their bellies. If it had been said, there was nothing left to be said, so they left it at that.

»

The truth is, though, that by morning, the sun will have burnt the fog to a cinder.

A Day Without A Name

B.Z. Niditch

They came to your house early
before the full sun
crept on the dusty floors
they wanted information
in their laughing insults
with fathomless muscles
to impress with
bad cop questions
and good giggling answers
but the big man
walked into the kitchen
with a deafening dumbness
staring at a Spanish painting
knocking over Mexican postcards
sneaking up on all of us;
sister hides in the pup tent
along a sun-rising road
hearing the cicadas sing;
and suddenly realizing
they have the wrong location
walk out without apology
their helmets adjusted
for a motorcycle roar
along a deserted highway
sister wanting to murder
a red orange
and some plums
losing out on breakfast
she puts on overalls for work.

A few shadows
appear on the back steps
a young orthodox soul
with commentaries
in his small hands
talks to a ballet dancer
practicing at the bus stop
making no secret
of her falling strap.

A mother with a coughing boy
demanding entrance to
the closed post office
watches two patients in leather
like unknowable angels
being put in a van
after road rage
and I, pretending to be foreign,
or to be asleep
unwilling to be a witness
of those whose liability is this life
walk away with the young woman
hawking newspapers
announcing another war.

True Poetic Justice

David S. Pointer

Ideally
when
a whale
or dolphin
has to
beach
itself
because
of pollution
or pressure
trauma from
naval sonar,
or some deadly
something—
there would
always be
a sunning
sinning
corporate
CEO on the
beach to
be detected,
aquatically
redirected,
and taken to
tour the
bubbling
risky blue.

Slug In Lancashire

Donna Pucciani

Slippery finger
at home among the rhubarb,

or sucking the underside of hosta,
is lost,

its trail of slime obliterated
by unexpected heat.

Stranded among the paving stones,
stalked by August skies,

it inches across a highway overpass
alongside cattle and

the occasional horse and rider,
risking sudden destruction by hooves,

asphyxiation in thick manure,
or, more probably, slow death by dehydration.

Its feelers reach vainly for moisture
in the feathery air, or, on the ground,

the gorgeous former wetness of itself,
a path homeward in its own lubrication

gone, like Gretel's bread crumbs.
Tomorrow's corpse glues itself to gravel,

shrinking its caked membranes inward,
the mere ghost of its juicy bean-body,

once tortured by schoolboys with sticks,
now whispered into heaven on snails' wings,

escaping its desiccated torso,
remembering rain.

Back When People Were Truly Mad

Bill Roberts

Back when people were truly mad,
we called them crazy, cuckoo, loony,
nuts, bananas, and put them away
in a crazy house, asylum, madhouse,
loony bin for the mentally ill,
and tried to forgot about them until
their numbers grew so big
we stopped calling them crazy, etc.
and released them to the public,
fruitcakes walking the streets without
any government warning label.
Now we tolerate the mad, call them
unstable, spies, terrorists seeking
the company of seventy-some virgins,
investment experts, CEOs of corps
with paper-thin storefronts, zero profits.
And these too we release on the public
because their number has grown,
spilling them into streets already clogged
with their unbalanced predecessors.

dead trees rising up where
the highway falls away on either side
and the sky which is everything

which is everywhere

and the cities which are belief and then the
points where they end

houses giving way to fields
and then to desolation and then to
machinery

the way the earth is scraped bare
then torn open

each cross made of rusted metal
and the hands of every priest smeared with filth

the blank stares of lovers turning
to something darker

a pregnant woman found in the trunk of a car

stabbed twenty two times and
her blood is everywhere and
the sun without mercy

the glare of it off of christ's nails

off of chrome and broken glass
and at some point you leave one place
far enough behind to finally arrive at another

you call it home
or you check into a motel

you watch the interstate from your window
and consider how much farther
you'll have to go

you listen for whatever sound
the sky will make when it begins to fall

American Battery Cafe—All Items Ala Carte

J.T. Whitehead

“good old American pornography”

— *Rush Limbaugh, on the torture at Abu Ghraib*

One booted toe...

(ribs, lean, crack like crab
a second swifter kick,

(liver, rare
one bottle of beer goes to the head
(strawberry skull—soft boiled egg
one stick to the under-chin
(just a taste... of bloodied *tongue*

chicken heart, fleshy cut, tender loin & gin blossoms,
their knuckles:

soft-white noodle shells,
with flecks of seeming marinara...

& they're eating this up,
regal as the khan's guard.

wordmakers

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,' 'The Leper's Kiss,' and 'Death Angels.'*

Laura Darrow » *Lives and writes in Prescott, Arizona after going off to the big city to be educated.*

Janann Dawkins » *Lives and writes in Ypsilanti, Michigan.*

Kenneth DiMaggio » *These poems are based on the blue collar culture of his youth, and where its former roots have been burned out. He lives and writes in West Hartford, Connecticut.*

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.*

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

Elliot Harmon » *Elliot Harmon went to college at the University of South Dakota. An active performance poet, he was a member of Team Omaha at the 2004 National Poetry Slam. Now he's in San Francisco, working toward his MFA at the California College of the Arts.*

David Kear » *Lives and writes in Brooklyn, New York.*

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.*

David S. Pointer » *Lives and writes in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.*

Donna Pucciani » *Widely published, with over 100 poems in print. She seeks to integrate nature with the human experience. She is the vice president of the Poets' Club of Chicago. This poem originally appeared in 'After Hours.'*

Bill Roberts » *Semi-retired scientist who lives and writes in Broomfield, Colorado. He still gets down to the infamous lab at Los Alamos to "help those misguided folks stay off the front pages..."*

John Sweet » *His new chapbook 'Famine' is available from www.leafpress.ca. A new e-chap 'This Human Noise' is available for free at www.thundersandwich.net. Sweet lives and writes in Endicott, New York.*

J.T. Whitehead » *The first man in his father's family not to farm, currently a labor lawyer in Indianapolis, on the workers' side, prosecuting companies that kill and endanger workers by violating safety regulations.*

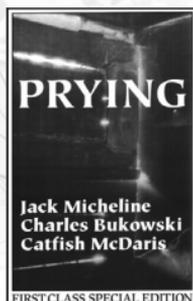
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— 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 as well as images by Sinisa Dugonic (Belgrade), Jouni Vaarakangas (Finland), Carlos Serpas (Mexico), and Mike Tolento (USA). *Glossy cover/bamboo paper/28pp - \$5ppd*



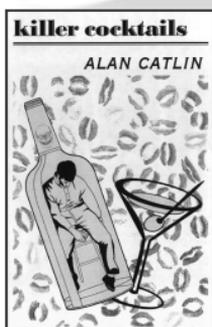
John Bennett

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - a sweet collection of John Bennett's finely honed style of 'shard writing': stripped away convention beating like a pulpy red heart. The very sharpest cutting edge of his talent, and a most eloquent assault on post-modern sensibilities.

Perfect bound/finest offset multi-color cover/72pp - \$9ppd

Alan Catlin

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



Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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*

Alan Catlin - NEW!

DEATH ANGELS - is 'Killer Cocktails' spun out of control. Blending poetics within prose, mixing characterization with chaos, and serving up a hell of an ass-kicking booze-drenched nite-cap; Catlin continues to call 'em as he sees 'em from his side of the bar. *Craft cover/24# paper/44pp - \$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 ON EARTH - 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, one of the more prolific writers on the scene today. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/50pp - \$6ppd*

Michael Newell

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

Michael Newell

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

B.Z. Niditch

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

B.Z. Niditch

MASKS AND BEARDS - loaded with a continuous flow of killer short pieces describing absurd characters and their even more absurd actions ala the great Russian master of the absurd - Daniil Kharms. Modern and Post- meet on these pages. *Gloss cover/24# paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

B.Z. Niditch

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

B.Z. Niditch - NEW!

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

Charles Ries

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

Charles Ries

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

Robert Roden

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



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. Vonasek was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *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.

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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.

need a chap?

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"Lockout Press." There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design, as well as inclusion on the Lockout Press page of the Four-Sep Publications Web site. 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: layout, design, **shipping**, printing, binding, and proofs-til-you're-happy.

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