

ISSUE TWENTY-FIVE
FIRST CLASS II of II.2005
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SIX BUCKS

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**First
Class**

WHAT IN THE WORLD
ARE WE LOOKING
FOR? **25**



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Caleb **BROOKS**
Gary **EVERY**
Michael **PARKER**
Thomas **PATTERSON**
Derek **RICHARDSON**
spiel
Gerald **ZIPPER**



ISSUE TWENTY-FIVE
AUGUST, 2005

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by Christopher M

First Class #25 collects stories and poetics meant to thrust your mind through some of your fellow humans' creative interpretations of the beautiful, the engaging, the thought-provoking and the gorgeous horrors and wonders of humanity. It is my hope that you will be exposed to an idea that stirs up and electrifies your grey matter a bit.

Twenty-five is a secondary coming of age, a pivotal time of self-realization and a milestone in which a determination of our views, principles and purpose in life begin to solidify. The "life" of First Class is at that point. We're pretty sure that our purpose and motives are clear... but hell, one never knows when the train wreck or winning lottery ticket may cross our path... and those principles are put to the test to either entrench or morph...

What you'll find here is the very best that flowed through my pobox over the last six months. Every one of these poems and short stories demands further contemplation upon completion. You will be treated to expert use of symbolism, imagery, and rich, well-fortified characters. For that, you can thank the terrific writers who had the will, courage and skill to get it out.

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

- Christopher M.

- christopherm@four-sep.com

The Joshua Phenomenon

John Bennett

Velocity and gravity, those are God's juggling balls. Velocity, gravity and the speed of light.

Velocity and gravity warps space and mucks around with time like it's a yo-yo. It's because velocity and gravity speed up and slow down time that the speed of light remains constant, a brisk 186,000 miles a second. Maybe from where you're standing on a street corner in a boarded-up section of Detroit it looks like some space jockey is going twice the speed of light, but the way the space jockey sees it, he's at rest after a high-risk lift off, even if he is going half the speed of light. As far as light is concerned, it's going 186,000 miles a second no matter what sort of mind game you're playing.

If the space jockey were to go exactly 186,000 miles a second, space and time would vanish. The key word here is exactly. This sort of speculation gives a new twist to the word hypothetical.

But what if the space jockey gets really fired up and exceeds the speed of light? There's no room in Einstein's universe for such a move. If the space jockey pulls that off, Einstein and Newton and the whole gang are relegated to tree monkeys in the scheme of things.

The scheme of things. God may be juggling velocity and gravity for spectators, but what's he got up his sleeve? Einstein said in all modesty that he wanted to know the thoughts of God, but I wonder if God thinks. Thinking is a tool for figuring things out, and what's God got to figure out, being the Prime Mover and all? The Prime Mover and Shaker. The Big Cheese.

What happens when space and time vanish? Any Zen monk worth his salt will tell you it's not there to begin with, string theories be damned. But let's get hypothetical and suppose it is. There are those who say that if you exceed the speed of light, you break on through to the other side. You come out in another universe as Jim Morrison. It's the old parallel world business, the mirror image, the flip side of the coin.

It's all a toss of the coin. Three coins in the fountain, which one will the fountain bless? Make it mine! Make it mine! Make it mine!

And there's the rub--the make-it-mine syndrome. Belligerent universes out the yin-yang held at arm's length from each other by the speed of light, God's Cosmic-Bar bouncer.

Only the pure of heart access other worlds. They do it offhandedly, unintentionally, while taking out the trash or kissing their babies into sleep. The speed of light has nothing to do with it.

Zanzibar, Shangri-la, Never Never Land--they've been with us from the get-go.

Heaven is when self-erected barriers come crashing down.

The Joshua Phenomenon, I believe it's called.

There were three of them, and they took me by surprise by popping up out of the blanket of juniper along the lip of the drop-off at the top of the hill.

They came up to the driver's side window, and one of them tapped on it while another made turning motions with his hand. That gesture told me they weren't young, which I couldn't tell from their faces, because they were wearing ski masks.

The one who had tapped on the window handed me a scroll, and I slipped off the rubber band and unfurled it. Here's what it said:

"The Safe Neighborhood Committee has been informed of your behavior. There have been numerous complaints. You drive your suspicious-looking car into the hill-top neighborhood on a daily basis, park in what after dark is lover's lane, and ogle young girls. You sneer at old men who can barely walk and are on the verge of suicide. You shun Snake Boy, who is starving for attention that is not forthcoming from his socially prominent parents because of their busy schedule. You drink an inordinate amount of caffeine, which leaves you judgment impaired. You toss crumpled sheets of paper out the window of your car, most of which we have retrieved and sent to the Seattle FBI. The FBI flew in a team of handwriting experts from Interpol; the experts concluded you harbor a treasure chest full of lost dreams and that you fantasize marrying the world's best-selling author as a way to compensate for your utter failure as a writer. After examining all the evidence, the Committee's conclusion is that you pose a danger not just to the hill-top neighborhood, but to the entire freedom-loving world. We contacted the Bureau of Homeland Security, and they assured us they already had a file open on you and that although the hill-top neighborhood was out of their jurisdiction, you would never come anywhere close to an airport or a subway without taking five bullets in the head. They suggested we form a committee to deal with you, which we did. Which we are, standing right here beside your high-profile, gas-guzzling, dented and badly in need of a wash and a vacuum car. Know that you are being watched. Know that we follow your every move. Know that whatever you have up your sleeve, it won't work. The City Council is at this very moment drafting an ordinance which, if put into law, as we feel sure it will be, will require people of your profile to wear a tracking device in the form of an ankle bracelet."

I didn't laugh, but a big grin spread across my face after I'd read the scroll.

"I told you that's what he'd do!" one of the masked citizens said. "I told you he'd laugh at us!"

I recognized the voice of the local newspaper's editor, Tiny Tim, a man who didn't know a comma from a semicolon, leave alone a laugh from a grin.

"Tiny Tim," I said. "Is that you behind that ski mask?"

"So much for anonymity," said the second masked man. It was the pastor of the First Baptist Church.

“We weren’t supposed to talk!” said the third man, whom I recognized as the city’s recently-hired meter reader.

“Shut up!” said Tiny. And then, to me: “Sign it.”

I looked down, and sure enough, there was a place for a signature and the date.

“I’ll pass on that,” I said, and handed the scroll back to the meter reader.

“What?” said Tiny. “You refuse to comply?”

“Cooperate,” said the pastor. “He’s refusing to cooperate.”

“That’s what I meant,” said Tiny. “He an Aborigine.”

“What?” said the pastor.

“Someone who’s not normal,” said Tiny, his voice dripping superiority.

“You mean an abnormality,” I said, “but it still doesn’t fit.”

“This isn’t what was supposed to happen,” said the meter reader. “He was supposed to sign.”

I lit a cigarette and they all stepped back a pace, sweltering in their ski masks.

“You’ve been warned,” said Tiny.

“Advised,” said the pastor. “The mayor said to say advised.”

“Well fuck the mayor!” said Tiny.

The hill went as silent as death.

“You’ve been advised,” the pastor finally said, taking control.

“Advised and warned,” said Tiny. Tiny’d had it in for me ever since I ridiculed him for being tone-deaf to language back when I freelanced for the paper.

They backed into the juniper again and shimmied down three hemp ropes that ran down the drop-off, but not before the meter reader whipped out a Polaroid and snapped my picture.

I’m writing this down by the river. I was beginning to question my sanity even before the Committee approached me, sitting in my car day after day on the naked hill in the blistering heat, drinking hot triple mochas and venting on a legal pad.

It’s peaceful here by the river. I’m at a picnic table with my usual accouterments—a tin of pre-rolled cigarettes, a 16-ounce mocha, a legal pad and a ball-point. A few people have walked by, skirting wide around my table. I think it has something to do with the posters nailed to trees all along the river—my Polaroid likeness with a caption underneath in bold, 18-pt, Gothic letters: **BE ADVISED...**

It occurs to me I may be the last sane man alive.

They Have a Word

Caleb Brooks

Three cold cups of coffee and an open door. Here, in a linoleum dawn, there is toast

and damp white sheets hanging forgotten over an uncut lawn. *I'll do it today.* The family lies

in the early shadow of their neighbors' walls. Comfortable and informal, death wears a blue

house dress. A radio plays. Under the rusty grin of the mill, a man kneels, not to pray

anymore, kneels and takes the other's testicles in his mouth as the sight of a rifle watches, rapt. Dry, hollowed

eyes, he closes, with his teeth, he tears.

At a cinder siding idled in August, the girls were taken

from the train, from cattle cars (yes, cattle cars. You can't help but hear echoes clang und strum as images couple and roll).

After the sixteenth Irregular, one more than her age, blissfully she lost consciousness. Deep in the depths of the Drina

below an ancient bridge, a cutthroat trout hangs in a sheltering lie, breathing blood.

They have a word for the lonely and lost places like this: *vukojebina* — *where the wolves fuck*

a word for times when the wind slinks through trees at the end of a rutted road, where the field falls

to wood, where the last civil rows of corn at the edge are sacrificed, ravaged by deer and sun and sere.

Here there is a freshly turned patch of earth, rectangular — a postcard from Europe, summer 1993.

El Arbol de los Calzones

Gary Every

The migrants climb the steep slopes of the mountain.
The desert is hot,
the trek is tough,
they sweat profusely
and must stop to drink.
They sit beneath the shade of a tree
and sip from plastic water jugs.
All their belongings are on their backs
and all their dreams
are in their weary feet.
They drink judiciously,
there are still miles to go
and an international border to cross,
then miles more to walk
before they can begin a new life.
The landscape is covered with desert
and the water must not be wasted.
To be without water
means certain death.
Still there are greater dangers.

These illegal Mexican migrants,
dreaming of joining friends and family
in the safe haven
of the city of angels.
They sip their water cautiously
watching for bandits.
In these rugged mountains
the desperadoes hide in ambush
without fear of reprisal.
They strip their quarry,
searching their garments
for hidden pockets
which hold entire life savings.
They even steal underwear,
searching for hidden linings and seams.
The young girls and mothers stand naked and ashamed;
fearful—
but the bandits have raped so many women
they are bored.
They do not have time
to rape any more
and besides there are so many victims to rob today.
When they are done,
the thieves toss the underwear
into the highest branches of the nearest tree;
El arbol de los calzones.
The migrants are left alone
to resume long journeys
with nowhere to go
for who has the courage
to enter a new nation
destitute, naked, and illegal?

Mayor of the Town

Michael L. Parker

Shortly after noon Grogan Weiss, a lanky twenty six year old with blond hair and boyish cheeks, hurried down the city street toward his low rent building, a scarred five story structure lost among other buildings like it, in a part of Cincinnati where twenty six year olds with boyish cheeks didn't live. It was the part of town where street fights were common, and homeless people begged and bullied at street corners. Everyone told Grogan to move but he didn't listen. Underneath it all, there was something vital about the inner city... the current of life ran closer to the surface here. At night, he lay awake in bed listening. He heard the cries and the anger and the laughter of a hundred unknown souls, and he thought he could feel an actual buzz, a force that moved through the city air like static radio waves.

Grogan arrived at his building and before entering glanced down the city street to make sure no one slipped in behind him. You had to think of things like that, had to keep your eyes open. But today the only people he could see were a pair of middle aged Hispanic women who stood at the corner of Twelfth and Main nodding gravely as they talked. One leaned against the railing of a building where a couple of months ago a sweaty man in an undershirt had thrown a twenty year old girl down the six cement steps; her head cracked on the sidewalk at the bottom and she bled there until the police showed up. Their cars rolled up to the curb lazily.

Five black teenaged boys with lean, cut bodies now raced across the street to beat the approaching traffic. They were on their way to the public basketball court at the corner of Twelfth and Broadway, Grogan knew. When they reached the close side of the street, the shortest kid in the group shoved a tall awkward-looking boy who immediately shoved back. The two boys faced off with no expression for ten tense seconds while the other boys stepped back. Then, at some hidden cue, the two boys broke into laughter and touched hands in a lazy show of cool. Friendship in a different language, Grogan thought. As the group walked by, he nodded to them and his stringy hair fell into his eyes. The short boy nodded back, but not the way you nod to a neighbor or a friend. More like the way you nod to a cop.

The low-income building Grogan entered, 1212 North Main Street, had been his home for four years now, initially out of necessity when he and his ex-wife Sarah had split up, later because he became accustomed to the rent. When Grogan entered the building, he found a woman sitting on the second step of the staircase that led up from the foyer area to the apartments. Her name, Grogan barely knew, was Mrs. Reveshem and she was a big thick woman whose light brown skin fell in heavy wrinkles down the sides of her face. She lived in one of the four units on the second floor as Grogan did. Grogan sometimes heard her in her room talking

loudly, apparently to the television. She now stared at the ground and shook her head mournfully.

Finally, Mrs. Reveshem looked up. She saw Grogan, but only after her gaze fixed on him for a long moment did she seem to realize his existence. The vacant look in her eyes was replaced by an almost uncomfortable familiarity. In a throaty, soulful tone, she said to him, "Daddy's gone an' been bad again," and shook her head heavily. "That man can't keep from the drink, ya hear? So many people, so many *friends* watching him, and he just can' keep clear of the drink."

Grogan shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. "There's a lot of that going around," he said.

"He don' see what it do to his *girls*." She pursed her lips in disgust. "You said it right. *Lot* of that. Children hungry. Children got nothing to *eat*!" She softly pounded a fist on her knee, punctuating her last word.

IN A THROATY, SOULFUL TONE, SHE SAID TO HIM, "DADDY'S GONE AN' BEEN BAD AGAIN," AND SHOOK HER HEAD HEAVILY.

An uncomfortable minute passed. Grogan gave a quick nod toward the staircase that went unnoticed. After another long moment, he broke the silence. "Anyone who's been hungry remembers it."

Mrs. Reveshem's eyes opened wide. "You hungry?" she asked.

"No," Grogan answered quickly and patted his chest. "I was just saying... I know it's hard on those children."

"I got some dinners," the big woman said, and nodded in agreement with herself. "You come on with Edna. I got some dinners you kin have." And she got up, bracing herself against the banister, then pushing up off the step with her free arm. Grogan stepped forward to help but she didn't seem to notice. She was very strong.

"Got some dinners at my place," the woman said again. "They don' know what they doin' to us! Jus' like Daddy. Do you think they know what they *do* to a man like Daddy?" She started to ascend the staircase but stopped and turned to Grogan, who followed reluctantly a few steps behind. "Under it all, Daddy he a *good man*!" She pounded the banister twice with her last words. "He a good man, ain' he?"

"Sure," Grogan said and forced a smile. The woman continued up the stairs slowly. She moved her right leg up one step, put a hand on the elevated knee, and hoisted her other leg up. When they reached the second floor, Mrs. Reveshem leaned one arm against the wall and looked over it back at Grogan. For a moment,

she seemed not to recognize him. Then abruptly she said, "They don' know what they do to you, Daddy. They don' *know*." She paused and seemed to be thinking. "You come in here with Edna for some dinners."

Grogan took a step backwards. He felt uncomfortable as hell like he did at work when a difficult customer called and his tongue got tied. He took a deep breath. "Mrs. Reveshem. I need to go to my own room now," he said as forcefully as he could. "I am not hungry." He took another couple of backwards steps toward his room, which was diagonally across the landing from hers. The other two rooms were empty and had been for a few weeks now. Grogan's floor stayed mostly vacant because tenants chose higher floors in hopes of getting away from the street noise. It didn't really work though; the noise rose right up along with the bus exhaust.

In an instant the woman's demeanor changed. She glared at Grogan. Her face which moments ago had seemed almost motherly, contorted. "But thanks for the offer," he added and tried to smile. "Really." He opened the door to his room and stepped inside with Mrs. Reveshem still glaring at him. He slowly closed the door. "Well then, goodbye," he said and shut it all the way.

Inside his apartment, Grogan's fan blew cool air in from the city that smelled of garbage dumpsters and diesel exhaust. He sat down on his bed, a cot with a steel bar for a head rail, which squeaked hoarsely. The "apartment" was really just a room, and it was nearly empty because Grogan didn't own very much. What little he did own, mostly clothes, was visible because he didn't have a closet to put things in. A counter-and-sink combination ran along the South wall and under the sink two broken cabinet doors hung at diagonal angles from one another. Inside the left cabinet, a small once-white refrigerator labored noisily.

Grogan crossed the room and turned off the fan. He glanced through his dingy, nearly gray window to see if Jazz was home. She wasn't. "Jazz" was the name Grogan had given to the young black woman who lived in the room directly across the alley from his. She was tall and angular and somehow feverishly attractive without being pretty. Her chin and nose and cheeks, which were all high and pointed when she smiled, reminded Grogan of a gargoyle. She would wave back and forth with Grogan sometimes when he caught her eye.

A loud thump pelted the door behind Grogan and he ducked instinctively like when he heard gunshots. To his surprise the door didn't fly open. Outside, heavy, loping steps receded across the landing.

Something unpleasant had begun.

The next morning the whole incident, including the fist-sized dent he later found in his door, was nearly out

of Grogan's mind. He arrived at Western-Southern Life Insurance Company, the six story gray cement building located on the east side of downtown Cincinnati, a few minutes after eight o'clock. He worked there as a customer service representative. This morning, like most mornings, his six coworkers all stood so they could see one another from their desks over the four-foot cubicle walls. They were not yet "plugged in" which is to say their headsets hung loosely around their necks with the wires dangling down like umbilical cords. Gene, a moderately overweight thirty year old who liked to tell cooking stories, explained with exaggerated hand gestures how he had marinated and grilled chicken on his George Foreman Grill over the weekend. Everyone made appropriate grunts showing how good they thought the meal sounded. His stories usually ended like this, with a round of "Mmm's," and "Ohhh's." Grogan contributed an "Ahhh," then added, "You wouldn't want to know what a single guy eats every night." He bowed his head sorrowfully and his blond hair fell in front of his eyes in a way that made him look ashamed. Everyone laughed.

Grogan only worked halftime, eight to noon, because he could get away with it. He spent very little money on rent, had no car, saved nothing for the future, and owed his wife no alimony— Sarah now had her father's money and didn't need or want anything from Grogan. Three years ago, when he had asked to switch from full-time to halftime work, Kenny had said, "But you won't be able to save anything for retirement." Grogan had thought for a moment, then replied "I'm twenty-three, Kenny. I'm not thinking a lot about retirement." This was only half the truth. The whole truth was that Grogan had felt dead for several years, ever since Sarah had left, and he was more concerned with being alive now than with a future he couldn't see. And if he was honest with himself, he also made the change because he still viewed himself through his ex-wife's eyes. Through her eyes he saw a dull-witted cog, a lay-worker moving through a meaningless existence. That's what Sarah would have seen. And Sarah had once thought Grogan was exceptional.

"My God, Grogan," she had joked a full decade ago when they had been in high school, "You are the world's only true humanitarian." Sarah was deeply intelligent, very different from Grogan who was something of a class clown. Her skin had the slight tone of copper, a reminder of her father's Spanish blood, and she never wore lipstick or nail polish. Her short-cropped hair was brown bordering on black, and her jawline was strong, almost boyish.

When Grogan tried to deny her claim, she sat back in her chair and smiled faintly. "All right Grogan," she said, reminding him more of a teacher or a judge than of someone his own age. Even at sixteen it was somehow clear that she was destined for greatness. Grogan believed that he, on the other hand, was destined to tell stories about his high school antics for the rest of his

life. "Name one person you dislike," she said.

"Easy," he looked up from where they sat in the school library to see who was nearby. "Look over there," he gestured with a hooked thumb. "Dave Holt talks all the time, never knows when to shut up. And Joel belches tunes while he eats. Lindsay, she walks like she thinks her tits are made of gold."

Sarah laughed. "Yes. But you don't dislike any of them. In fact," she said, pausing thoughtfully, "You like each of those people all the more for their faults."

WITH A THUNK LIKE
WET CLAY,
A SINGLE ITEM
WRAPPED IN YELLOW
GREASY PAPER, FELL
OUT. SMALL BLACK
ANTS CRAWLED IN
FRENZIED PATHS ON
THE YELLOW PAPER.
STANDING BACK, GRO-
GAN TUGGED AT THE
PAPER WITH TWO FIN-
GERS UNTIL IT PULLED
OPEN, AND FOUND A
HAMBURGER INSIDE
THAT WAS PARTLY
EATEN AND SEVERAL
DAYS OLD.

After work, Grogan stopped by his room to change clothes. On the way in he heard Mrs. Reveshem talking to the television, which rumbled like the low notes pounding from a teenager's car late at night. When Grogan got into his room he found a brown paper bag sitting in the center of his cot. He stood still for a moment, then crossed to the bag and peered into its open mouth. Something dense was in the bottom.

Grogan made a short walk around the room to see if everything else was normal. It was. His clothes,

his sweaters and his book were all where he had left them. Grogan checked to see if the door lock was broken and it wasn't, but then he knew how easy it was to force the doors open in his building. You could do it with a credit card or even without one if you knew just how to lean into the door and pull backwards on the knob while you pushed forward with your body; he had done it for evicted neighbors who returned to pick up their things, but he couldn't imagine Mrs. Reveshem pulling off the maneuver. Maybe he hadn't even locked the door.

Grogan went back to his cot, picked up the bag and took it to the sink where he turned it upside down. With a thunk like wet clay, a single item wrapped in yellow greasy paper, fell out. Small black ants crawled

in frenzied paths on the yellow paper. Standing back, Grogan tugged at the paper with two fingers until it pulled open, and found a hamburger inside that was partly eaten and several days old. The top bun of the hamburger had half fallen off exposing its guts. The crust was not moldy but was dried out and pickles were wedged in a thick paste of ketchup and mustard.

Grogan threw out the hamburger, washed the ants down the drain and then sat down to think. The bag must have been left by Mrs. Reveshem. Or maybe not. If it was from her, was the hamburger, in her mind, a gift? An apology for beating a hole in his door? Was it something to keep Grogan from being “hungry?” Or was the decaying hamburger some kind of threat? And if it wasn’t from her? He briefly considered this, trying to think where else the hamburger could have come from. Actually, it was probably better that it did come from Mrs. Reveshem because she was a middle-aged woman. In this part of town there were much worse people to deal with than overweight, middle-aged women.

Monday afternoon Grogan decided to go to the Cincinnati Art Museum. Even though he didn’t have a formal job to go to, on most afternoons he stayed busy. On Tuesdays and Thursdays he volunteered time at the Jewish Hospital on Elm Street helping Latino patients explain their health problems to doctors— learning Spanish had been his only real accomplishment high school. Three nights a week he worked at the homeless shelter on Eleventh Street, and with the rest of his time he explored the city. Sometimes he went hiking, sometimes he visited shops and cafes or attended a Reds baseball game. Other times he hung out at the University of Cincinnati (UC) college bars and talked with people he met there, sometimes to students but more often to graduate students or professors.

At the museum, he walked quickly through whole exhibits that didn’t interest him, but found a few paintings he liked and puzzled over them at length. He stood in front of one called “Midnight Mass” for twenty minutes. It was a gray painting of a snowy night in Cincinnati viewed from a distance over the nighttime blue-white rooftops of sleeping houses. The painting should have felt cold, but the lit windows in a small steepled church almost lost among neighboring houses on the right side of the painting somehow made the whole painting feel warm. Grogan asked a security guard who was nearby whether he liked the painting.

The tall uniformed man walked slowly from where he had been leaning against a wall on the west side of the room with a slight ironic smile, as if no one had asked him about the art before but he kind of appreciated it. Looking at the painting, the man turned his head to the right and placed a hand over his chin, a finger across his fluffy mustache. “Sure,” he said after a few serious nods of the head. He then studied the painting for another minute. Grogan could see that the guard’s

eyes rested on the church with the lit windows. “Yeah. I like it real well.” He nodded again in agreement with himself. “You should look over in the far East wing. Some of my favorite stuff is over there.”

The painting *said* something, Grogan thought, something the security guard understood, too. Maybe something about all the people in the town sleeping peacefully. He wasn’t sure exactly; he could only understand how the painting *felt*.

Grogan had no idea what was in the East wing of the building, but he responded without cracking a smile, “Oh, the paintings in the East wing. You mean the fat naked chicks?”

The security guard flushed, then realized he was being ribbed and laughed a throaty, “Heh, heh, heh.” Grogan and the security guard talked for half an hour, some about art, but mostly not.

A week after the hamburger incident Grogan ran into Mrs. Reveshem sitting on the stairs again. He nodded and said “Hello” politely. The woman looked back at him hard through slit eyes and said nothing. Grogan pulled a sparse ring of keys out of his pocket, crossed the small foyer to the mailboxes, and opened the brass door marked “4.” There was a wad of mail wedged behind the door because he hadn’t checked it in three days. Grogan glanced at Mrs. Reveshem but she had not moved. She watched him with her forehead lowered, her jaw jutting. She muttered a stream of words that were not directed toward him but seemed to be *about* him. He made out phrases like “Nobody home,” “Little boy hurt Daddy” and “Dinners.”

Grogan leaned against the wall and started to look through the mail. Although he had occupied his room for four years now most of the letters were addressed to previous occupants —One to Lexy Freeman, one to Cole Smith and two for Jesus Hernandez. The others were addressed “To Resident.”

Mrs. Reveshem had still not moved and now repeatedly muttered... “Daddy a *man* under all.”

Grogan opened the letters one by one. Both of the Hernandez letters came from bill collectors. The Cole Smith letter was something about an automobile loan. Two of the letters “To Resident” offered fast cash at the same annual interest rate of 18.99%. He read deeper into one of them but couldn’t pay attention to the words. After a few minutes Mrs. Reveshem’s monologue trailed off. Her head angled downward and she seemed to be addressing the floor.

There might have been 18 inches of space to her left on the stairway. Grogan walked toward the stairs, muttered “Excuse me,” then placed one foot next to Mrs. Reveshem. The woman leaned in, trying to block him from going by. He muscled forward, maintaining his foothold. Staggering, he pulled the other foot forward, and grabbed the banister with both hands to force him-

self up. Mrs. Reveshem grabbed hold of his left leg. He was astonished both by the speed of her hand and the strength of her grip. He shook the leg, pulled harder, and finally lunged away. “Shit,” he yelled as he hurried up the remaining steps to the second floor landing. Grogan spun around to face the woman, who had fallen over and was now trying to push her large body back to a sitting position. He wanted to yell obscenities at her, to tell her there was something wrong with her, to tell her to stay the hell out of his way. Meanwhile, Mrs. Reveshem floundered like a turtle on its back and spat out words: “*Don’ push a mama,*” “*You can’ hurt, Daddy’ll come,*” “*Make little boys hungry.*”

“Shit,” Grogan repeated, but this time more to himself than to her. He turned from the woman, then looked back. She had struggled to a sitting position now and rested her head in her hands again. She sobbed loudly. How does she live, Grogan wondered. Where does she get money? How does she deal with people every day? How does she buy food? Grogan watched for a full minute, then turned and proceeded toward his room. There was nothing else to do. From that day on, Grogan pushed his heavy, metal-framed cot in front of his door before he went to sleep at night.

Grogan knew of course that Mrs. Reveshem was abnormal... crazy even. But where he lived, crazy didn’t really mean anything. To the people who lived in the mansions in Hyde Park or Mount Adams like Sarah’s parents, crazy wasn’t something you had to concern yourself with. Crazy was the Police’s problem. But in the north central inner city, crazy was a part of life. Government Agencies did nothing here (Grogan had called them and had gotten laughed at). Old men ran screaming from their DT’s down the middle of streets in and out of traffic. Drugged out junkies looked at you as if they were floating peacefully underwater and told you things, grotesque beautiful things, that made them smile like they had seen the messiah. Grogan once had seen a man on a park bench pull out a knife and cut his own arm open— blood squirted ten feet. Late one night just a month after he had moved into his room, Grogan heard loud crying outside his window in the alley. He looked down and saw a skinny white girl pulled into a tight ball spreading her hands out like cat claws, crying and hissing; she did this for hours. Another night he had heard joyful yelling and when he looked out there was a middle-aged bearded man with no pants masturbating on the wall. They were all crazy, but when you lived in the inner city, saying people were crazy didn’t change anything.

During the late afternoon a week later Grogan saw Sarah. She was walking with her mother across the city square, a surprise because after her break with him, Sarah had resumed her college career, a career that had been delayed by her father’s illness and her divorce from Grogan, out-of-state. She might be in medical school by now. That had been the plan.

Sarah's mother had always been more aware of her social standing than either her husband or her daughter and dressed accordingly. Her steps were short and dignified. Sarah, in contrast, wore blue jeans, a plain off-white linen shirt and a wide black leather belt with a silver buckle. Her face had grown more mature over the last four years, her cheeks slightly thinner. But somehow she hadn't really changed. Her skin still looked tanned and healthy and most of all she still looked intense and strong. Maybe that was an advantage of knowing who you were at a young age; when you got older, you didn't appear altogether different.

Grogan froze when he saw her like he had been caught doing something dirty. He imagined the scene that would follow if she saw him. She would walk up to him, uncomfortable conversation would follow. "Oh, your second year of medical school," he would say. "Well, of course. I never would have expected less. Me? I work half time. I fart around doing a bunch of nothing every afternoon. That's right, hour after hour of nothing. You never should have expected any more out of me."

She didn't stop though. Never saw him. It was probably for the best. Maybe she wouldn't have walked up to him. Maybe she and her mother would have rushed away. Sarah had some cause to avoid Grogan, he supposed. After all, he hadn't let her go easily.

When Grogan opened the front door of his building shortly past sunset, Mrs. Reveshem was there again, sitting on the stairs. She looked up and leveled her gaze on him. He paused, then stepped backward and pulled the door closed. He knew he shouldn't back down from her, but right now he just didn't have it in him to deal with her. For no reason at all, he headed north on Main Street. He followed the road for half a mile and when the road changed names and became Round Hill he kept on going, watching his feet but in his mind viewing the image of Sarah strolling past the fountain with her mother. When he replayed the scene though, she looked up in his direction. Her eyes fell on him but it was like he was made of air. She looked straight through him.

Once, when they had first been dating, they had gone to a video store to pick out a movie and argued about which film to rent. "But those movies are always so *contrived*," Grogan complained. "People getting into these tragic situations for reasons that don't make any sense."

"You want a *Steve Martin* movie because *this* kind of movie is contrived?" she asked, lifting the box up next to her face. On the front, two women's faces in profile stared deeply into one another's eyes. One of the two was Meryl Streep.

"At least comedies are honest about being contrived," he said. "Those kinds of movies are always pretending they're real."

The road climbed out of the “Over the Rhine” district and arched up the hill to Clifton. The city lay out below and as darkness fell the city lights gradually became brighter as if intensified by a single dimmer switch. But they seemed empty. Brassy. Indifferent to each other’s existence. Grogan walked on. The trip took more than an hour but he didn’t really notice. Night had fallen thickly by the time his road dead-ended into Calhoun Avenue, one of the two parallel roads in the center of UC’s nightlife district.

Grogan sat against a low brick wall and watched the college students walk by. He picked up a stone and lobbed it into the road without aiming, but half hoping it would hit a passing car. No car was close though and the rock skipped on the pavement then rattled impotently to a stop. More than anything else, Grogan felt empty. It was as if his whole life, which only hours ago had seemed unique, perhaps even on the verge of becoming *meaningful*, had now been exposed for what it really was.

Across the street a waving arm caught his attention. He forced a smile and waved back to a girl named Megan who he had been seeing off and on now for more than a year. Her short brown hair curled into a cute bob, and her voice had a nasal quality that made her laugh sound like a snort. She waited for a break in the traffic to cross the road.

After the divorce and a celibate period that followed, the world had suddenly become full of women for Grogan— some of them college girls, some from work, and a few he had met in his neighborhood. To Grogan’s surprise, women liked him. Jamie, from work, had once tried to explain it while they laid in bed together, “It’s like you *like* me, and you like *this*,” she waved her hand in a provocative circle. “So it’s all honest. And it’s all just... cool.”

“So the reason women...” They both laughed. “The reason *you* will sleep with me... is because I like you.”

“I think that’s it,” she agreed.

Tonight though, it was different. He felt very alone, and the night felt hopeless. Tonight, he didn’t like anyone. Tonight he would fake it.

A few hours of drinking with Megan led to an hour of suggestive touching that led to a late night drive to Grogan’s room and fast frantic sex. Then Grogan slept. When he woke in the middle of the night he knew Megan was no longer crowded onto his cot with him. He had felt her leave but didn’t really remember it happening. She shouldn’t have walked out to her car in this neighborhood alone. In a rush, Grogan realized that he must not have pushed the cot in front of his door. He opened his eyes.

There stood Mrs. Reveshem in profile at the foot of his bed. Her wrinkles hung heavily down the sides of

her expressionless face, bathed in blue light from the window. Grogan sat bolt upright but she didn't seem to notice, just stared out the window.

"Get the hell out of my room," Grogan said, his voice husky and whispery.

Mrs. Reveshem's eyes rolled around for a second as if she were just waking up. She focused on Grogan and her eyes narrowed. "Daddy," she said.

Grogan would not remember the next few minutes for more than a month, the time it would take for his concussion to run its course. Wearing only his boxer shorts, he stood up from his bed. He could still smell Megan's body, clean and sweet like strawberry soap, and he felt unbalanced from the alcohol. But he had to let Mrs. Reveshem know that he was in control and she had to obey him. "Out," he said. "Get out." And when she didn't move, he stepped toward her, intending to take her by the arm and lead her from his room. But as he moved she threw up her arms, maybe in self-defense, and caught him under the chin. His teeth cracked together, making the sound icicles make when they splinter from tall buildings and explode on the street. He reeled backward and fell off balance. The force of his body rushed through him and his own weight propelled his head like a battering ram into the metal head rail of his bed. His consciousness disappeared. Grogan's hands and arms and head and chest were gone. Even his mind no longer existed. His whole being disappeared at that moment and all that remained was feeling.

Grogan briefly regained consciousness and found himself lying on his bed with Mrs. Reveshem on a chair at the far end. She was watching a television that crowded the counter to the right of the sink. "Daddy never go back to that drink no more! No more!" she shouted at the T.V. "Daddy" was someone on T.V. Grogan realized, and for a moment he was relieved to have figured this out. But then he didn't know why he felt relieved and he didn't remember the television being there before. He didn't remember the chair either. The woman seemed familiar and he tried to smile at her but he didn't think his face moved. Nausea built in the back of his throat.

His front tooth ached and he could feel its shape with his tongue. Then he could see his tooth with his tongue. It resembled a mountain in Italy he had seen pictures of, high on one side, slicing down to a plateau half way across.

A mountain was in his mouth. He tasted iron.

Mrs. Reveshem laughed. He tried to laugh with her but she faded away.

The next time he woke, his arms were tied to the bed's

head rail. No one was in the room, but the television was on. Grogan was pretty sure he didn't own a television and he wondered if he was dreaming. Maybe this was one of those dreams where you realize that you are dreaming and then you feel like you're drowning because you are inside the dream and can't get out.

In what seemed like many days but ended up being only fifty hours, early Friday through early Sunday, Grogan's conscious moments occurred in occasional rushes of sensation. It was like coming up from underneath waves where sudden consciousness and light and sound rushed in, then just as quickly receded. Sarah appeared in dreams, though these dreams felt as lucid as his moments of reality. He didn't know the difference. Sometimes Sarah was the woman who had loved him, the one who claimed he introduced her to being alive. Sometimes she was the woman who had ultimately discarded him saying, "You want to skip through life, Grogan, and I don't know how to skip. And I don't want to know."

He had a dream that was a replay of the day Sarah's father had died after a year long battle with cancer. He found her on the front porch of their small rental home crying bitterly. He wondered how long she had been there. "The thing is, Grogan," she said. "Life is not a comedy or a drama. In the end, if you live long enough, you watch the people you love rot before your eyes. Life is a horror story."

He woke again and for the first time felt he could move. He leaned his head up and winced. His arms were pinned in position and he didn't have the strength to pull against the rope holding them in place. Mrs. Reveshem made an alarmed gasp as he tried to lift his legs off the side of the bed. He looked toward his window, wondering if he could signal Jazz for help, but her curtains were drawn. He lost consciousness again.

On Sunday, he woke to a more vivid reality. There was now no rope on his wrists and he would never know with absolute certainty if there ever had been. He hurt acutely from his mouth, his head and his stomach. The pain in his stomach hurt so much he didn't recognize the pain at first as hunger. It was more piercing, more acute, than he had ever known hunger could be.

In the mirror over the sink he saw his face— there was dried blood from his lips and nose all the way to his ear. More dried blood on the floor formed a crusty black pool that stretched out of sight under his bed. A sheet hung across his shoulders like a shroud and he let it fall, exposing his naked chest which appeared shrunken. It was like he had been dead and was now awakening. He checked his tooth in the mirror and saw that it was

not broken, but when he pressed his tongue against it, it made him yelp. He turned on the water and gulped from the faucet. The water was light like air and flowed through him without substance.

Grogan's thoughts were confused but he could feel, and what he felt most strongly was an urgent need to flee. He wanted to get out. He felt ill, felt frightened to stay even a minute longer. He put on his pants, stumbling and tripping, sure that he had been dead and if he didn't leave this minute, death would find him again.

When he tried to open his door it was heavy and at first he thought he was too weak to open it, but then he realized there was something in the way and his terror increased. The door felt solid as if a great bolder held it in place, but when he threw his body against the door, it burst open, skittering a wooden chair across the floor which must have been wedged under the knob. Grogan moved slowly across the landing toward the staircase and only then remembered that Mrs. Reveshem had something to do with all of this. He heard nothing from her room and hurried past. Was he being chased? Was someone behind him? He couldn't hear anyone else's steps, couldn't hear anything.

As he descended the stairs, one hand on the wooden banister, he became certain someone *was* following, was placing their footsteps down in sync with his own. He tried to go faster, tried to hear the person following. He missed a step, lost his balance and fell forward down the last six steps. At the bottom he swung his head around but no one was there. Grogan grabbed the banister and pulled himself up again. God, his stomach hurt. He stumbled across the foyer and opened the front door of the building.

The air outside was crowded with noise and Grogan felt he had come to the surface. He squinted in the early morning brightness. A man at the corner yelled up jovially to a woman who leaned out of a second floor apartment window. She yelled back and they both waved. Grogan's fear receded like the sound of a subway, once close and violent, only moments later distant. He didn't need to run anymore. Presently he sat down on the cement steps of his building. His chest was still bare and he hugged his knees to warm himself against the chill of the air. Down the street, a Chinese grocery clerk unlocked the metal gates that guarded the front of his store and rolled them back accordion style. Two girls stood at the bus stop; they teased each other and laughed. Cars late for church muscled for position as they rushed from the stoplight at Eleventh Street to the stoplight at Twelfth.

No one seemed to notice Grogan. Or, if they did notice, they looked through him or past him. Further down on the opposite side of the street, Grogan could see a man sitting on the front step of another building. He looked confused, like he wasn't sitting there because he wanted to be, but because he had no idea what in the world he would do if he moved.

Grogan would not remember very much of the last two days for a month— the doctor said his concussion had been severe. That Sunday morning though, as he sat on his front steps he knew that *something* had happened, and the more he tried to figure it out, the less anything made sense to him. The fact that he was barely dressed and covered in blood frightened him, but the fact that he lived in a neighborhood where no one noticed seemed ironic, amusing even. That there was another man sitting on another front step just half a block away who reminded him of himself also struck him as comical. And Grogan's intense hunger seemed deeply funny too, though he couldn't remember why. His blood-crusts lips slightly smiled.

He surely looked more grotesque for the effort.

Returning to the Line, Pacific Front, Autumn, 1945

Thomas Patterson

Look back,
the rifles in your line are rising and tilting,
waving at you like thrilled wobbling banners;

your own heavy cannon at the rim
beckon you, too, with their mouths agape
surprised at what's happened to your hands,

your arms, and shoulders;
you could have reached them just like that
your eyes squeezed shut, unreeling an imagined ending.

But that was only the first,
and opened you up as glibly as an expert surgeon's knife, a
sharpened nail against your back, not once

but twice and then a third; then, all three gleamed;
they wove beneath your tender skin and curled up to you;
nestling their soft kisses that hardened and then stiffened

like angry guns, coiled and waiting for another chance.
The red sun at dusk draped orange on you;
and after, the moon took her allotted time,

silky and transparent, lacing through the dropped trees
spiraling by encampments, their murmurings and great
gloves of smoke,
finding your purple mouth two hundred yards away

Miguel leaned against the center of his steering wheel; a sickly bleat sounded. The wheel of the Taurus was small—the absence of an airbag—he could feel the hard rubber budge under his palm. The stickiness of it bothered him. He reached down and moved an empty Diet Coke bottle from under the clutch to under his chair.

He honked again, the fourth time. The radio was playing commercials; he found the cheapness of radio advertising grating. He pictured overweight actors in red-walled studios commanding cliché voices. The front door of the Tudor opened, dim light wedging across the snow. Three kids came out—two guys in black peacoats, a girl in green down and a Santa hat. She turned around, put a bottle of wine on the porch, laughed. The guy on the left tossed a red plastic cup under green hedges behind the wine bottle. They ran across the snow awkwardly; a steady drizzle had put a thin crust on the powder, so they cracked down through with each step. The girl slowed as she neared the car; she delicately took two steps atop the crust without breaking through. On the third step she fell, disappearing from the window's view.

Miguel unlocked the parking break and turned down the radio. The engine ran haphazardly in neutral. All three passengers climbed in the back seat; the middle one leaned forward and put a hand against the plastic barrier walling off the back seat.

“Okay if we drink back here? I’ve got a flask, it won’t spill—cool?”

“No problem. You all are going to Arch Street?”

“Yeah, there’s this party over there. By like State Street, you know, Yost. There should be some lights on, we can call if it’s not there but we’ll be able to see it.”

Miguel pushed the clutch with his left foot. The muscles around his shin ached. First gear drove them in a U-turn across four lanes. The streets were empty; the cloudy night matched the grey snow clumped along the roadside curbs. The streetlights had all turned to flashing reds and yellows, turning the city into a crosshatch of fluid stopless traffic routes Miguel knew well. His car moved smoothly up and down the hills, staying at 35 mph through curves and intersections.

A gloved fist dully knocked at the partition. “Hey...so, Miguel? That’s you? Are you from Puerto Rico?”

“Detroit.”

“¿Habla español?”

“Yeah. Are you three from around here?”

“Grew up, you know. A bunch of us are back for holiday break. It’s pretty dead around here around Christmas, you know. Looking for parties.”

“Sure. No students, right?”

“No students, Miguel. So, are you like a taxi driver all the time? Is it cool?”

The girl laughed. “Looking for a job, Matt?”

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. “Yeah, hoping to start school in the fall,” Miguel replied. “I’m working a few jobs for the rest of the year.”

“That’s great,” the girl said. “It’s totally worth it. There’s a bunch of scholarships for kids like you, too—I know Yale saves a ton of money for minorities, one of my friends is Hispanic and he’s on a full ride. You should check it out.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I will.” A police car was waiting at the intersection; Miguel slowed down to fifteen and cruised through the yellow light. His eyes trained through the police windshield. Miguel briefly locked eyes with the patrolman in the passenger seat; the officer looked down and did something important with his hands.

The police car turned without signaling and lingered in Miguel’s rear view mirror after the intersection. Miguel rapped on the plastic behind his head. “Guys, cops behind us. Don’t drink, okay?”

“Sure.” They all laughed. He looked back—one of the guys was hunched down, the flask to his mouth under the seat. Miguel turned off the main road and entered a small street, surrounded by student housing. The turn signal bar snapped back to attention as he aligned onto the new road. He watched in his rear view—the police car slowed, then continued down the well-lit commercial avenue.

“That kid looks in bad shape,” he heard from the back seat.

“That was you two nights ago, Matt.”

Miguel looked forward in his high beams. A shape was slumped to the left of the sidewalk, head heaving. A brown paper bag lay next to him, soggy from the snow. A stream of saliva illuminated in the taxi’s headlights, climbing from dirty snow to the figure’s slack mouth.

“Do we know that kid?”

“No, hope he’s okay. Slow down, okay, Miguel? He might be one of our friends.”

The car slowed against the left curb. Miguel put on hazard lights and rolled down his window. “Hey, man. Are you okay?”

The figure lifted his head. Greyish stubble stuck to his face, glistening. His eyes blinked, and he shifted his weight onto one arm. He waved off the cab with his other hand, covered in layers of sleeves and gloves. He put his other hand down again, and his body arched with effort. A thin stream of spitty vomit slid from his mouth.

“Sick. He’s old. God, that’s sad.”

“He’ll be fine. I’m sure he knows his way around here. Probably lives pretty close.”

“And there’s like ten shelters in Ann Arbor. I worked at one last summer, spent the night there. They’re huge, I mean, there’s a ton of homeless people around here.”

Miguel pulled the parking break and put the gearshift into neutral. “Hey, guy, do you need help? You sure you’re okay?” The figure slumped over, collapsing on the ground.

“Can you roll up that window? It’s freezing back here,” one of the boys in the back seat shouted. He pounded on the partition twice.

“Or turn up the heat? I mean, we’re only like four blocks from the party.”

Snow had begun to fall again; the windshield wiper smeared rainbow streaks across the fogging glass. The broken plastic handle whispered as Miguel pumped it in circles, raising

the driver’s side window. The car idled, and the vents pumped hot air against the right side of his face. It tingled from the cold wind.

Silence. A voice from the back seat broke the stillness. “Okay, yeah, I called. It’s at Arch and Dewey. Like two blocks to the right. The party’s still going, it’s cool.” Miguel shifted into first again, spun his wheels on the growing sleet on the road. He turned the wipers up to full to clear the wetness, and pushed the fence-looking button on his dashboard to defrost the windshield. He turned off his brights, arcing around the crescent street. He checked the rear-view to see the figure; it was too dark.

All were silent the rest of the trip. A few minutes later, they pulled in front of a house; red lights flooded the windows. Four people, androgynous in winter hats and overcoats, smoked intensely on the front porch. A couple cuddled under a blanket on a porch swing. The car’s back door opened; bass-heavy Christmas music skittered across the snow into the taxi. Cold air hit Miguel’s neck through the large holes in the plastic partition. “Twelve dollars eighty,” Miguel called blindly

“YOU’VE GOT MONEY?
I’VE GOT LIKE FIVE, AND I
BOUGHT THE BEER.”

“LEFT MY PURSE AT HOME.
BOYS SHOULD PAY,
REMEMBER?
GROW A DICK.”

“I’VE GOT VISA. MIGUEL, YOU
DON’T HAVE LIKE A VISA
READER UP THERE, DO
YOU?”

to the back seat.

“You’ve got money? I’ve got like five, and I bought the beer.”

“Left my purse at home. Boys should pay, remember? Grow a dick.”

“I’ve got Visa. Miguel, you don’t have like a Visa reader up there, do you?”

“We take personal check with ID. Driver’s license.”

Silence from the back seat. “We can give you like five now, I don’t have a checkbook. I know like ten guys at this party, can we run in and get you the rest in two minutes?”

“I could call the police,” Miguel replied. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

“Dude, it’s cool. Here, five dollars. I’ll get ten more, okay? It’ll be a good tip. Really. Just sit here, okay, we’ll be right back.” The door slammed shut. The three kids ran up porch steps, one of the guys now wearing the Santa hat. One of the porch smokers turned and smiled, embracing the girl from his cab. She waved her hand at the cigarette smoke and pulled her arms around her body, shivering. The two guys went inside the front door.

Miguel looked at the meter; twelve dollars and eighty cents. He put the five dollars in his fist into his pocket, and looked back at the party. Red and green strings of lights blinked on and off in clumps—the pattern eluded him. A yield sign was nailed to the post of the porch, collecting beads of liquefying snow and ice. The couple sitting on the porch swing took turns drinking from a bottle wrapped in brown paper. It looked like wine.

Miguel shifted the engine into first, easing his tires this time against the pavement. Two left turns at stop lights, and he picked up into third gear. He sped back down a street, empty student houses lining both sides. Few lights were in windows, none on the street. His brights caught two raccoons on a porch, eating from a bag of chips. They glanced back at him. The headlights moved on before they did.

He slowed to five mph as he topped a hill. The radio dispatch called in a ride needed on John Street; Miguel acknowledged it, said “ten minutes” into his walkie-talkie. The figure he’d seen earlier still lay on the ground. Miguel turned his heat on full, locked his parking brake, and got out of the car.

“Hey, guy, you look like you need a hand.” Miguel got closer, saw large corn-like clumps of ice amassing around the figure’s stocking cap. The bottle in his glove was half-empty and spilling amber on the snow. His face was a fascinating conglomeration of bright red and stark white. “Let me get you to someone, okay?”

“Fuck off.”

Miguel squatted. “My coat’s in the car, okay? And I’m

freezing. Follow me; I drive you home, no charge. Don't worry about it. On the house, okay, buddy?"

A gloved hand pulled the stocking hat lower on his head. "I'm here, I'm sleeping here. I'm not walking, I can't walk, okay? Go home. Go to your family. Fuck off."

Miguel put his hand on the figure's shoulder. It was completely slack. He shook softly—it felt hollow, a coat inflated with some mildly resistant gas. He saw a grey, hairless wrist in the cone of headlight. "My car is running. I'm taking you somewhere, okay? I'll help you up." Kneeling, he slid an arm under the man's chest and stood up with him. The weight surprised Miguel, but it was alleviated as he got the man's legs underneath him. One arm around his shoulders and another against his chest, they walked together to the passenger door. He leaned the man against the hood; he supported himself with both arms. Miguel opened the door and helped him around and into it. He winced at the brown-black snow pulled onto the floor mats of the cab. Closing the door behind him, he circled in front of the car. The bright headlights gleamed viciously, forcing him to squint in the night. He felt his hair and realized it was soaked and beginning to freeze into hard, hay-like streaks.

Hopping in the front seat, he shut the door and rubbed his hands together in front of a heater vent. They felt rubbery to the touch but the air hit them like fire, the feeling of stepping into a hot shower after running through winter. "Freezing cold. You looked bad. You've got a place you're staying around here?" No response. He returned a hand to the man's shoulder; it shrunk away briefly, then lay motionless. Miguel turned on the interior lights under the dimmer switch and faced his passenger. The passenger stared back through blue eyes.

"Where can I take you?" No response.

"Shelter? Food? Anything?" No response.

"I've got people need picked up. Anywhere downtown I can take you?"

Miguel rubbed his hands together once more and turned his own vent towards the passenger seat. A small shiver ran in the man's jaw. His lips pulled in, and he shook his head. He turned his head and looked back at Miguel. No words.

Miguel reached across him and buckled his seat belt. As he stretched across the man, he stopped—he'd never remembered any passengers buckling up, even in the front seat. He pushed the man's thigh up and clicked the metal loop into its socket. He shifted into neutral and started the car down the hill.

"Okay, I'm going to drop you off, right? I can't come in with you or anything, these kids over on John need a cab." A green minivan barreled through the intersection in front of the cab, crashing a red light. Miguel slowed and swerved through the slush, angling

in an arc behind the minivan. His passenger's head fell against the window. "Sorry, guy. We'll be there quick." A police siren erupted; the street to the left was illuminated in reds and blues. Miguel continued straight, following a long and empty street around another curve. He turned right; the bright lights of the hospital emergency room filled the car. Red streams of glittery tinsel hung around the ER doors. Cardboard cutouts of a Christmas tree, two reindeer, and a menorah flanked the sliding doors. He looked inside—the overweight triage nurse was wearing pink scrubs and a Santa hat. Miguel laughed out loud. He glanced toward his passenger in the light—not much skin was visible under the layers of coats and hats. He didn't smell like Miguel would have guessed. His skin was indeed grey above the frost-clumped rim of the glove—it wasn't a trick of the light.

He saw the top of an empty bottle in the man's enormous pocket; somehow it had been grabbed out of the snow. Miguel grasped the uncapped top and lifted it halfway out. Granddad's Whiskey. Nearly empty. He pulled it completely free of the pocket, pulling with it a trail of receipts and money. He laid the bottle in the man's lap and picked up the papers. A five-dollar bill and a dozen or so folded ones were rolled together, surrounded by faded and torn white receipts. Miguel wadded the receipts back together and returned them to the man's pocket. He looked up—the man was looking blankly at him, wordless. "Didn't you talk to me in the snow? Can you talk now?" No response.

Miguel counted out seven dollars. He lay them in his lap and put the remaining wad of money into the man's pocket. "These kids, see...you know. Long night." He reached back into the pocket and removed three more. "Tip," he said with a smile. His passenger looked back dully.

Miguel got out and walked to the passenger door. He waved beckoningly to the triage nurse beyond the door; she glanced up and shouted something. She had ruddy cheeks—he couldn't tell if they were painted on to match her hat or if it was natural. He opened the passenger door and leaned across the man again to unbuckle his seatbelt. He lifted the man again, moved him around the door and leaned him over the hood. Two men in grey scrubs walked out the sliding door with a stretcher. Miguel entered the driver's door and turned the hot vent back towards himself. The EMTs pulled his passenger onto the stretcher and shone a flashlight into his face. He saw them asking him questions; the man shook his head and replied, silent words from outside the car. The EMTs turned to Miguel and waved. Miguel nodded, let off the parking brake, and shifted into reverse.

Lyla bites down on about the twentieth of the hundred or more end-seams of the Best Budget Motel pillows she will do today—then jerks the dingy white cover up over the mottled pillow. Somebody needs to invent a tongue condom to protect the girls' mouths from God knows what's been left behind on these beddings? Johnny's such a jerk about laundering. One of the night maids says he's "tight as a spinster's twat" with his in-house detergent: Lyla doesn't happen to choose to use that kind of language.

But it's true.

Word was going round when Lyla arrived at six a.m. that a famous white pop singer had just spent four-and-a-half hours in this interstate dump with a six-foot-two African Olympic runner and the runner was stumbling around with clear, five-inch spike heels barely clinging to his huge feet, plus, wearing a red sequined bustier with stiff pre-formed D cups hanging forward far enough to expose his kinky-haired chest.

But then, Johnny's life is so stupid, sometimes he makes things up. Anyway—according to him, the "dished-up chic" had done the check-in with a platinum debit card embossed: Dally S. Jonestown. Had a voice just like Denzel Washington. Johnny said he'd "saw'n the nigger on a Sata'd'y sport show 'bout the 'lympics." Said the two freaky guests had roared smack-up to the face of the Best Budget Coke machine in a "slick-ass" frosty silver BMW Z8 with California plates. And when he'd run out in the driving rain to see if any damage had been done to his machine, he'd got a good look at the other guy right after he found a few Mountain Dew cans had popped out onto the blacktop and were spewing their guts straight up under the front bumper of the B'mer. Said the guy looked exactly like Ricky Martin or maybe not Ricky Martin but "ya know, that otha' faggot singer. White dude wit' crummy stubble."

Johnny kills a lot of time looking at movie and car magazines when he takes night duty, once a month (so he can keep himself on the payroll)—whenever he's not making vile hits on blond female guests—which is usually.

Lyla had been on her front porch last night: watching the rain and lovingly cutting out newspaper pictures of Ray Charles to paste into her scrapbook of black role models (she makes the book to keep her grandkids aspiring to something). She was thinking Ray Charles was the one who should have been given the weeklong parades of celebration, glory, and near-constant TV coverage—feeling Ronald Reagan had sure never done much of anything for her brothers and sisters. "The on'y thing he got right was the jelly beans," she'd said to herself. Chuckled. If LaMont had been there, he

would've chuckled with her. Oh how! she wished her love was sitting in the tall straight-back rocker next to her. Someone to say something silly to. Just the thought of Ray Charles had brought a big beautiful bubble up from her heart, then it'd burst into the joy of reminding her *for certain* and *for once* and *for all to see* that she still had a soul—remembering, once more, that she was a humble piece of something great and almighty. Gave her rest that God must have had a reason that her LaMont'd never made it home from Afghanistan. And that her Jomita's tour of duty in Iraq is in His hands now.

As dark had settled in, she'd stirred up a batch of her oldest's favorite treat: black cherry Jell-O with cream and pineapple bits whipped into it, then slurped a finger's worth off the edge of the bowl and poured the deliciously dark lavender mix into eleven tall Dixie cups so she could refrigerate them for tomorrow evening's gathering. She dug out the Ray Charles tape she'd bought from a sandy-haired Negro boy who was going door-to-door, a month or so before, with a big black plastic double-bagged sack of random stuff—a few pieces of very pretty ornate (probably) heirloom jewelry, a mess of unopened tapes and CDs, a bundle of tarnished silver forks, spoons, and knives (neatly tied together with a bow of royal blue satin ribbon), a jazzy-looking chrome radio she thought to be from the fifties, and a pair of brand-new size thirteen Nikes (opened, but still in their box). She'd had a queer feeling those things were stolen. But the frail boy's eyes were so desperate. His face was blotched with yellowish-green lesions and his pitiful neck was so skinny it looked like a turkey's—just like her aunt, Naurice, before she passed. Lyla probably would have given him the fifty cents he wanted for the Ray Charles tape even without buying it but she had never owned a tape by Charles.

So as she brushed her teeth last night, she played Charles singing, *America the Beautiful*. Then rewound it and played it several more times: *Oh beautiful, for heroes proved...she'd never really figured out those first words in the past...in liberating strife*. But after that, she could not drop off to sleep...*who more than self, our country loved, and mercy more than life...* her eyes were stuck wide open—like she'd been spooked by a nest of scorpions under her pillow. She stopped trying to sleep. Could not get the words to stop spinning through her mind...*and mercy more than life*. Returned to her straight back pine chair on the porch with her photos of LaMont and Jomita under her arm: each of them so proud in uniform in front of the American flag.

She'd watched the sky pour down. Liked the rain splashing against her bare ankles but wished someone would fix the dripping overhead gutters and the annoying loose downspout, banging in the downpour. She sang softly to the tall empty chair as it rocked in the storm: *He crowned thy good in brotherhood, from sea to shining sea*. She pressed her photos hard against her belly so it seemed she was watching LaMont and Jomita breathing together: right in sync with her. She

kept it up until it was time to report to work this morning at 6 a.m.—Father’s Day. The fourth with LaMont overseas. And there will never be another.

At last, the Lord Jesus will provide him rest.

It was time to carry his rocker into the kitchen and out of the storm.

As she shakes the third pillow into a another dingy case, Lyla recalls when she’d told her mama, Bess, that all the motels in America should open up their doors to the disenfranchised—back when President Reagan ran all the mentally ill out onto the streets. Of course it was an impossible idea but just look how those two rich jerks have abused this room. Why didn’t they stay at home in their own bedrooms to do their dirty business? Just look how they’ve snagged one of the sheets and hooked it up over the sliding glass doors, and it is sopping wet with beer and Jergen’s baby oil. And this whole carpet is drenched so deep it squishes when she steps on it. And it stinks of urine. The night table is upside down on the head of the bed, with the Gideon’s Bible, pages ripped up, pissed on and re-stacked between the legs, along with three packs of chocolate-covered graham cracker cookies that look like they’ve been sat on, plus the plastic rings from five six-packs of beer strung from leg to leg like you’d string Christmas lights. Plus, the empty Coors cans are flattened, twisted together, and crammed into the toilet like those fools’d tried to flush them. And furthermore, there’s no water in the toilet. And, two double-edged razor blades threaten the plug at the bottom of one of the sinks.

Lyla whips off a few dozen squares of the single-ply toilet paper. It’s check-out time and the guests throughout the motel are showering and flushing so she only gets a piddling flow from the sink faucet to wet the wad of paper to wipe spilled white powder out of the cracks between the peach-colored tiles, then wheels in her Ridgid Shop Vac to suck the same stuff up off the floor. This is not the first time her vacuum has breathed it. Seems these days about half the rooms she cleans are powdered with white here or there. Where do these dopes get the money to waste their noses?

She can barely afford ninety-nine cent games at The Bowling Bonanza for her and the grandkids.

Her oldest son, Tyrone, and middle daughter, TaNinyé, have made reservations at the Bonanza, tonight, for a Father’s Day treat and they’ll be buying for the whole family. Her and all the grandkids. A total of eleven counting Mama Bess. Pizza and bowling for anyone who wants to aim for a crowd-pleasing three hundred game. Tyrone has done it twice. And Mama Bess once: she used to be a real crack shot but her poor old hips have ruled her out for the past five or so years. But she’ll still be a great and rowdy booster to those who play. Tyrone has asked that Lyla bring the Jell-O

cups—they've been a Father's Day tradition since he was a teen.

To tell the truth, she has half a notion to drop out. Fears all she will think about is the absence of LaMont: such a decent man—so unselfish—so devoted to seeing that his children grew up speaking proper English—no neighborhood slum jive—spent every evening urging them on with their homework when he got home from his job at the butane company. She hums as she vacuums... *and mercy more than life...* almost feels dear LaMont is right with her, pushing her weary arms.

Then she daydreams of Ray Charles, lying in state in the Capitol Rotunda. Elegant, sleek, black, horses circling round his casket. The clacking of their gold-shoed hooves, echoing in a cadence precisely matching Charles' soulful spirit. Their long tails swishing, their saucy manes whipping the air, and their heads proudly erect as they sprout magnificent wings. Instantly they become translucent, divine, angels, who swoop rhythmically through his casket, then raise him to the sky, as Stevie Wonder's voice resounds from somewhere unseen,

Amazing grace...

how great Thou art...

She swoons.

Johnny busts into the room. Stomps across the wet-sopped carpet like a threatened bull. Hollers, "Shit! girl. Ya not done yet? Not payin' ya ta sleep. That vac'll suck nigger piss. Les' see some hustle roun' here!" He exits as quickly as he's entered—has not taken time to notice that she is toppled over on the foot of the bed.

She wonders why, after working night shift, he's not asleep in his private quarters (next to his private elevator) on the third floor—maids never allowed to use the elevator to carry their equipment up and down. His quarters looking like a tacky whorehouse (all red-flocked wallpaper from the '60's and everything splashed with gallons of gold paint), plus, a bar lined with dollar-ninety-eight-a-gallon red wines (three labels, apparently so he'll look "ritzy"?). She's cleaned up a few times after the chase—wonders if he's ever cleaned a room and what the heck he does with his money. He sure doesn't spend it on this dump or treating his maids right. But then, she knows he wastes a ton of it hanging around the nickel slots at Cripple Creek so he can hustle the lonely blond women he drags home from there—then shows them the road as soon as he's wasted them. She knows this for sure. She and the other maids have pitched in for more than one bus ticket to help his women get back to Cripple Creek (where they've left their cars, and possibly their husbands).

Maybe she should just quit.

Gas is nearly two bucks a gallon but it might be worth it to drive the twelve hundred miles to east L.A. to re-

trieve Jomita's four kids —living with Auntie Claudie and Uncle Rats—where Jomita dumped them when she suddenly got patriotic, jumped ship, and enlisted. Her sis, Claudie, claims Rats makes pretty steady money doing final detail work on stolen cars and though she's certain Claudie is good with the kids, she knows, deep down where it hurts the worst, it's not a healthy environment for them. And besides, last couple of times Claudie has phoned, she's said that Rats has taken to using heroin and if the kids see what's happening to his arms, they are going to freak out.

Poor dear Claudie has got herself in an awful mess.

Maybe it's time to rescue Claudie too.

Lyla'd seen some TV guy talking about Afghanistan's poppy farmers just last week—how the poppies prop up terrorism with big bucks. She'd been red-hot hopping mad. Wondered if LaMont'd ever seen those poppy fields or actually talked to those dirt-poor poppy farmers who were just trying to make a buck. And then, first thing you know, somehow, you've got heroin or opium or whatever it is that comes from poppies. It's a messed up puzzle. And now she's got Jomita fighting terrorism in Iraq. "I'n't that why ya went there? Well, i'n't it?" she says out loud (like she's talking direct to Jomita). "Terrorism? An' now ya gone off an' dumped yer kids with Auntie Claudie. An' now yer dang Uncle Rats's using heroin." She begins to yank cans out of the toilet. She's mad as hell again. She rips the finger on one of her latex gloves, replaces it, and as she untwists the jammed-in cans, she hopes to find a rubber—wishing, as she always does, that young people would use rubbers—even when they're hopped up. Maybe Jomita wouldn't have had four kids (none of them with a known father) if only she'd just used good sense. Hadn't smoked marijuana all the time. That beautiful child'd never sat still long enough to listen to LaMont.

Will never have another chance to listen to him now.

Awful how bad it hurts.

Funny how it's the first day of summer but how awful it feels.

Lyla kicks the vac out the door with the side of her right foot. Stings her anklebone. She stands under the second floor walkway: it's built of heavy black steel and there's a lot of noisy stomping going on as Saturday night guests haul their bags out of their rooms and down to their cars. Two of them're swearing at Johnny about the lumpy beds. They want a full refund but Johnny's not budging. They say they will *never* stay at The Best Budget Motel again and "furtha' more, we'll tell all are friends in Kansas, and you'd be surprised how many peoples is in are circle, how you treated us!" She doubts that Johnny's heard a word they've said. "Well! " they say, "we going stay tanight, like we paid, but wer' still telling, and you better tell yer stupid nigger maids to send up extry pillas."

The sky is deep dirty-grey out there. Same ugly color

as the dishwasher she constantly stared into nightly when she was working doubles—a second job added to her day job, at The Steer’s Rear. Low clouds drooping stout and weighty like a fat old woman’s breasts. Looks like there will be more rain. Soon. Lightning shooting splinters of white fire from the south, down by the river. She should’ve brought her pink sweater. Even as hard as she’s sweating, this skimpy tan one is not enough to keep her arms warm and she’s put on too much weight to button it up around her neck. She could use LaMont’s old warm brown socks, even though she’s darned them so many times they’ve got lumps in the heels and toes. But Johnny doesn’t like his girls to wear socks with their white uniforms: he wants their legs exposed. What does Johnny know about cold ankles? If she had LaMont’s socks with her, she would put them on—right this minute. She got away with it a few times last winter till that awful bleach-blond Ida Jean’d brought it to Johnny’s attention. Ida Jean ran off with one of those big-mouth steak-breath Texas cowboy guests but she won’t be a problem anymore. That honky nag would never have touched this room—would have sashayed up to Johnny’s quarters and whined like a Bassett hound pup with its tail stepped on, then shacked up with him to get out of it. She was that kind of white girl. Spoiled rotten.

Johnny is rotten.

Those spoiled rich fools who trashed this room were rotten.

Lyla suddenly spots tiny red sequins ground deep into the carpet along the rollers at the base of the closet door. She pushes the bi-fold doors back to find a brilliant red-sequined bustier and a pair of clear, plastic, five-inch, spike heels in a heap along with a gold, heart charm, bracelet, a striking, heavy, gold chain, necklace strung up with eleven glistening, black onyx, balls (exquisitely arranged with a one-inch ball at the center and descending in size to one-half inch on either side), a beige, Playtex, soft-cup bra, three different cuts and colors (tan, black, hot pink) of women’s shiny panties with a hole cut in the crotch of each, a pair of soft-tint, mauve, sunglasses with a stem missing, a wide, man’s belt, black, with a huge silver buckle, and what she believes is dried blood on the tongue of the buckle, plus an entire line of Maybelline cosmetics in a K-Mart plastic bag. The bra and panties are smudged with the liquid make-ups and powders. The metallic, Pink Cadillac, lip-gloss appears to have been used many times before finding its way to this closet. If it were not for the nastiness of these circumstances, she would have held the bustier up to her breasts and enjoyed a glorious, movie-star, private, moment standing in front of the mirror—perhaps done a little swing and sway—maybe sung a little Lena Horne number. She spits on the corner of her apron to polish the dry blood off the tongue of the buckle: she’s seen Johnny rummaging through the trash bins before and does not wish to find him calling the State Patrol—creating a ruckus over a few drops of blood just to get his name in the paper. Besides, those

two kids' sex games're none of Johnny's business! She then tosses the whole heap into her bin—except for the beautiful, black onyx, necklace. She takes a closer second look at the floor of the closet. Wonders if there were matching earrings. There are none. She checks outside the door to see if Johnny might be watching her.

No Johnny.

Rain is slashing the sky into shards at a severe seventy-five degree angle.

Except for Johnny's 1960 pink Caddy Coupe de Ville, all but five of the guest's cars are gone from the parking lot. Guests've either checked out or driven a mile down the frontage road to Denny's for breakfast. A grossly overfed peach-colored poodle with ugly brown tearstains lies whimpering on the dashboard of the car nearest to her—stares longingly at her. The license plates are from Kansas.

She slams and bolts the door from the inside. Drops down to her knees on one of the drier areas of the floor. Stretches her chest upwards. Sings bits of an old gospel song loud enough to hear herself above the driving rain: *I sing because I'm free, for His eye is on the sparrow, an I know He's watching me.* Her voice is rich. She'd learned the song listening to Ethel Waters on the radio when she was a child. Once had hopes of moving her family to Hollywood so she could become a gospel recording artist.

Maybe LaMont would not be dead today if she'd done it.

She lies flat on her back with a newly covered pillow stuffed firmly up beneath her neck. Tries to fall asleep but just as she had been unable to sleep last night, she is unable to sleep now...*God is watching over me. I sing because...it is difficult to sing soul while lying down.*

The stink of urine carries her on a bad trip back to when she and LaMont had rented their first apartment. East of The Projects. Right next to the railroad tracks. She was pregnant with Tyrone. The place stunk of cat piss and nicotine. All the bleach and muscle on earth could not make the stink go away. It was all they could afford. Barely. Back then, that conniving honky bigot who'd worked as a janitor with LaMont, (on his first job) at the high school, had lied to the superintendent—told him he could prove LaMont had been copping cleaning supplies for re-sale. And of course, LaMont lost his job and that white jerk got promoted to supervisor. So she'd started doing motel work, way way back then, while she was carrying dear Tyrone and...*I sing because I'm happy...and...I sing because I'm free,*

for His eye is on the sparrow and...

The sliding glass doors are wide open. The thin cream-colored curtains blow and snap inward. Heavy gusts of rain further douse the carpet.

Johnny towers over her with a wet twenty-dollar bill in his hand.

Lyla is groggy.

His red and black umbrella is collapsed and dripping down on her face. The cold rain rouses her.

“Take this!” he says, as he tosses the bill on her belly. “It’s yer Fath’s Day ov’time. Yer las’ check’ll be in the mail fer Thursd’y, Sata’d’y.” He pretends to be gracious as he stoops over to give her ankle a mean poke with the missing stem of the soft-tint sunglasses.

Three weeks ago Wednesday, her usual day off, Lyla had taken herself out for an evening of bowling.

She hadn’t heard from LaMont in three-and-a-half weeks. Sort of wished she could get e-mail like some of the soldier’s wives who received frequent messages from their husbands. She’d seen about them on TV. Never mind what was really happening, President Bush kept saying everything was going great in Iraq and the United States was going to get Osama bin Laden but LaMont’d cast a shadow on that. Led her to believe Bush was a liar. Tyrone and TaNinyé felt the same. Mama Bess too. But Jomita loved Bush. LaMont had been sounding awfully discouraged lately and she was very worried about the fact he had not sent her the usual weekly letters—plus the hideous news of an American being beheaded over there. Why why why had LaMont not written? Plus she’d been watching the ten o’clock news with the hope she’d see a picture of Jomita but all it did was give her splitting headaches and keep her awake all night, staring at the stacked pyramid of his socks.

Just watching TV, before or after work, had become unbearable.

So she’d allowed herself enough cash for three ninety-nine cent games at The Bowling Bonanza, plus one slice of their special pepperoni and pineapple pizza. She wouldn’t have to rent the ball. She could use LaMont’s (though it was a bit too heavy). She dressed up a little bit: crimped and slicked her hair, pulled on nice stockings, squeezed herself into the same dress she’d worn to both TaNinyé’s and Jomita’s high school graduations (slightly low-cut, dark salmon to beautifully complement her dark black skin), and then poked the seed-pearl earrings LaMont’d given her for their fifth anniversary into her pierced lobes. Well, actually, she’d dressed up a lot—hardly ever had occasion to dress up and venture out alone anymore.

She just needed a break from it all.

Her neighbor, Alfredo Montez, that tiny wisp of a man who lives alone in the tiny green two room house across the street and just a half a block east of her, works the shoe rental counter, always gives her the shoes for free. He makes less money than she does. He’d flattered her that night till she got Goosebumps to the tips of her well-crimped hair. Said the dark salmon dress made her look exactly like Oprah Winfrey when Oprah was at her thinnest and blackest. Of course Lyla knew he

was lying but was not about to waste such a fine compliment. Not after facing rotten Johnny day after day after day. Seemed like Alfredo always went out of his way to ask about LaMont wherever or whenever she saw him, and then always encouraged her to talk her heart about him so she could get the painful private longing off her chest (but it also seemed odd that he never mentioned Jomita).

Nonetheless, she'd often thought Alfredo was a sensitive man—just like LaMont.

He'd told her that night at the bowling alley, "Djou knows LaMon's gonna git home safe ver' soon." Told her he'd heard that all the soldiers were being rotated so they could have a rest from the horrors of war. Then he'd reached across the counter to give her a sweet smooch on her hand. His hand was so much smaller than hers. And he could barely see over the counter.

Jeannie Talbot, a former waitress at the Steer's Rear when Lyla was washing dishes there, joined her for the first three games. They laughed so much about the weight they'd gained, neither of them could do much damage to the pins. Jeannie bought an extra cheese, extra large, pepperoni and pineapple pizza for the two of them and they just sat back, stuffed their bellies and talked old times. There were only about a half dozen or so bowlers at a time who showed up that whole night—most of them just fooling around and drinking beer so Alfredo had plenty of time to flirt with the women. Told Lyla she should let Jeannie read her palms. Jeannie took right to it but she noticed Lyla's palms were "nerve-sweaty" and Lyla said her arms were trembling because she wasn't used to using her biceps for throwing such a heavy ball.

Jeannie's gut-laugh had come to a quick halt. She got a grim furrow in her brow. Alfredo said he'd seen the same look on her once before when she'd told him: "I see four short bones...speckled...running out...they're tangled!" And wouldn't you know it, three weeks later, his calico cat had slipped between his legs, streaked out of the house, then been struck by Boodie Canon showing off on the metallic royal blue Yamaha he'd ripped off from the Sunshine Plaza—and it'd happened right out front of Lyla's house.

It'd seemed like that whole bowling alley had gone dead silent that night as Jeannie studied Lyla's near-white clammy right palm.

"O kiddo, I see a major A in this palm. Something coming from an imminent A." Lyla'd immediately thought of Afghanistan. "Something of significance that will linger with you for the rest of your right days on this earth."

"Oh my Lord," thought Lyla, "LaMont is dead. No, LaMont is comin' home from A." Then, "Oh thank ya', Jesus!" she'd shouted aloud and jerked her hand away.

"This is a significant A, I see, kiddo," repeated Jeannie as she pulled the hand back into her own, "and it will

encounter you very soon.”

Other bowlers circled round her like green flies on fresh dog crap. Harold Queens said he'd bet his gold teeth that the A was for “Asama be Laden,” and he'd kiss old LaMont's ass cause he knew, “LaMont'll hang the slimy S.O.B. by his nuts, an' we' all be bowlin' with that fucker right here ag'in by summer an this whoe' town'll be on Tom Brokawz's.”

“Is it Afghan'stan?” asked Lyla. “Oh dear Lord, is LaMont comin' home?”

“D'jou better knows Jeannie's goot,” Alfredo'd said. “D'jou better lissen a her. She seen my cat git it b'fore he gots it. D'jou reme'mer? Out fron' a yer porch an d'jou was jis' settin' theres?”

Lyla's kitchen was so hot that night. First thing she did was strip off her dress. She'd ripped the sleeve hole seams because they were too tight for bowling—she should have known better than to dress up. She wanted the windows and the front door open, hoping some air might move through, and she left the lights off so she'd be comfortable sitting and thinking in the kitchen and just wearing her slip. It was a bright night anyway. Standing at the sink, she could see out her back window into the bedrooms of the Thomases and Mr. and Mrs. White and they didn't even have a light on.

She wondered if the significant A might be for her and LaMont's thirty-second anniversary—just about to come up. What a memorable event it would be for him to return on their anniversary! That sure would linger with her for the rest of her days on earth. Yes, that was it: A was for anniversary. She'd turned the kitchen faucet on cold: full force, but it didn't feel cold, tried to flood her face and hair to wash away the craziness about the A. Maybe Jeannie made that stuff up because everybody else was so bored. But what about that stuff with Alfredo's cat? She'd *seen* it happen. That stupid Boodie Canon kid—never had his head on straight from the day he was born. A. Could mean *America...* was about to...what?...drop a bomb on Afghanistan? A...*Atom bomb?* Oh dear God. Oh dear LaMont.

A. America America... God shed His grace on thee...

She'd sat down at her kitchen table. Begun to fiddle around with the tape player in the dark. Playing it on low so she would not disturb the neighbors so late at night. Fast-forwarded the Ray Charles tape just a smidgeon at a time, trying to find the song...

A... America...

She suddenly felt a ghostlike presence, then sat up straight and looked out the screen door where she saw Alfredo's old black and white Galaxie parked butt-up against her Vega. Odd. Then realized he was sitting in it: passenger side, windows rolled down, smoking a big fat joint, looking back at her. She'd gone to the door, paused a moment, then with her hands cupped round

her mouth, said in a loud whisper, “Somethin’ the matter?” Then remembered she was wearing nothing but her dark coral-colored slip.

Alfredo had cautiously approached the porch—looking to either side to see if any neighbors were out on their porches. “I seen d’jou rain gotters’s needin’ some nailin’. D’jou wan’ me to worry bout LaMon’ wit d’jou? Hey? D’jou got any beers? Sure is hot!”

“No, can’t say I’ve got any beer. What’re you doin’ out here? I’m not decent. It’s midnight. I got lem’nade, Alfredo. No ice. Freezer’s workin’ overtime an actin’ up. Lem’nade’s just regalar cool. Guess I can give ya lem’nade. I don’t want that pot stink in my house.”

Alfredo opened the door: pretended to usher himself in, pot stink included. The back of his shiny rainbow-colored diamond-patterned polyester shirt was stinking wet.

“I’m frettin’,” she’d said. Then cut two slim slices of lemon and dropped them into two tall quart jars of lemonade while the two of them recounted Jeannie’s palm reading. “I think this whole thing...it’s ‘bout Afghan’stan.”

Alfredo re-lit his joint. Offered it to Lyla. She shook her head an adamant, *No*. Thought she should add some Arrid gel. She was smelling a little gamy. Alfredo looked straight at the moist coral slip hugging her breasts but held her attention as he described what needed to be done to put her downspout back in place so it would stop banging in the wind and loosely described how he’d patch the rust holes in the gutter on the overhang of the porch. And, of course, he wouldn’t charge her a nickel. She blamed herself for him looking at her that way—thought it was high time for her to skedaddle off to the bedroom to slip on a loose cotton dress.

She grabbed the joint from him. Stomped over to the sink where she ground it out and doused it firmly with her slice of lemon. Then, and in the most curious moment of her Wednesday night out, she felt his soft small hands slithering down her back and all the way to her buttocks.

She froze.

Then melted.

So long since she had been touched by a man.

Such delicate hands.

So sensitive.

Standing at her back and barely looking over her shoulders at that remarkable moment, Alfredo had dropped the straps which held her slip in place. Lightly pressed his wispy body against her as he wrapped his thin arms around her arms and circled her nipples with the soft tips of his slim forefingers. She completely forgot she could see into the bedrooms of the Thomases and the Whites out back—or that they might see into her kitchen window.

She forgot whose brown socks were stacked neatly on top of the dresser in the bedroom—or with whom she had last spent a night in that bed—or to whom she had so freely given up her flesh.

Until, up until, Alfredo had said, “D’jou hump jus’ like Jomita.”

A!

With her elbows held high, and an uncommon kind of jitters in her fingers, Lyla struggles to fasten the gold clip of her pretty new black onyx necklace at the front of her neck—then drags the heavy black balls slowly across her flesh and around beneath the soft fold of her chin. But, standing in the kitchen door, where she normally would face herself in the reflection of her bedroom mirror, this afternoon, she can’t face herself at all.

She does take one good long look at how she’s always stacked LaMont’s tidily rolled socks into a perfect pyramid on top of the bedroom dresser. Wonders how many times she’s darned them so she could wear them to work and feel his presence. How many times she’s shoved a light bulb up into the toe or heel and believed his foot was alive in there as she drew her brown cotton thread back and forth through a new hole.

She sighs deep but does not weep.

Maybe it’s time to burn them.

She climbs up onto the tall straight back rocking chair. She has to stretch hard to reach the grimy top of the shelf unit so she can grab the Folger’s coffee can. A half-dozen millers flit out from under it—stupidly bang into her eyes—so she has the foolish urge to step backwards off the rocker to avoid them but quickly catches herself by grabbing the tall back of the chair. It takes what seems the rest of her life to gather her wits as the rocker comes to a halt.

She shoves aside the unwashed Jell-O bowl from last night, then dumps the can onto her linoleum countertop. It’s all money LaMont has sent home over the years: first from a short stint at Fort Bragg, then a long stretch in South Korea, and finally, Afghanistan. His final letter from there (twenty dollars tucked away in it, just one week before their thirty-second anniversary), so recently she thinks she can smell the ink: *My Dearest Darling Lylie, Take this and buy you a big string of dimonds. Keep believing with me and I’ll be home in a wink. Yours Forever and forever & forever, Monty*

All of the can money, specified as gifts for her birthdays and for every anniversary since he’d been gone. One-hundred-and-eighty dollars. She’s never questioned where his extra pin money has come from. She can’t recall where the two dollars and seventy cents in loose change came from. She returns the coins to the can for the grandkids to share. She adds the twenty tossed at

her by Johnny to the pile, though it carries his vibes. Tucks the total two hundred into a soft little maroon leather coin purse Mama Bess used to call her “savin’s bank”—never ever in her own lifetime had managed to stash more than nineteen dollars in it.

Lyla takes a quiet moment to enjoy one of the Jell-O treats.

Pulls on one of the better pair of LaMont’s brown socks.

Then in a Thom McAnn shoebox, she tightly stuffs strips of newspaper around the other ten cups so they won’t move while she’s speeding, or if, God forbid, she needs to slam her brakes. She neatly stretches Saran Wrap over the box: looking from the top, the lavender circles make such a pretty package.

She writes a short sweet note to Tyrone and another to Mama Bess.

Hopes they’ll understand.

It’s twenty-five minutes after five.

The family will gather at six-thirty.

Tyrone is always early for family events—just like LaMont had taught him.

She figures she can make it to The Bowling Bonanza in eighteen minutes—if she doesn’t run into any traffic snarls. She steps out onto the porch to look down the block to make certain that Alfredo’s Galaxie is parked in front of his house, as usual, on Sunday eve—his regular night off.

She’ll stop by the Bonanza to drop the cups and notes with the Sunday girl at the shoe rental counter, then she’ll head out for east L.A.

Enemy of the World

Gerald Zipper

He awoke
muscles sore from his life of lifting
unaware he was the scourge of mankind
inhaling the energy of mornings
fueling up his daily rituals
cereal grains boiled in milk
mud-stained bus careening past fields and huts
weeving through grimy parts of the city
unaware he was the curse of mankind
workers crowd the bus
pressing the breath out of him
like an olive press flattens the pulp
he squeezes to be smaller
hoping to be invisible
unseen is a safe place
potholes slam the bus
elbows and knees stabbing into elbows and knees
unaware he was the affliction of humanity
the bomb was a hot mushroom
eviscerating the busload of travelers
severing torsos
tearing limbs
flinging their liberated heads out of smashed windows
and no one ever knew why.

wordmakers

John Bennett » *A prolific and enduring writer with numerous credits. Formerly editor of the influential Vagabond Press. Most notable now for his hard-driving “shards.” His book “Domestic Violence” is available from Four-Sep Publications (see info on next page). [John’s “Shards” represent a killer short burst of intensity, introspection and keen analysis of the pressures of the world around us.]*

Caleb Brooks » *Among other things, he has lived on oysters in Mexico, worked a jackhammer in San Francisco, run a ski area marketing department in Vermont, opened a bar in Africa, and is currently living and working in Las Vegas. [Caleb reminds us, in this postcard from Europe, that man is always more than willing to inflict the worst upon his fellow man—especially with the excuse of war.]*

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. [Gary is a prolific writer and a gifted storyteller. This poem illustrates an element of the humanity that we so often overlook when contemplating an “issue,” in this case the flow of “illegal” aliens across the southern border of the United States.]*

Michael L. Parker » *Studied writing at the University of North Carolina before attending Miami University for his Masters in creative writing. After five years in Cincinnati, he has returned to North Carolina. [Every last one of us is just a few unfortunate turns from either physical, mental, financial or other ruin. Michael’s story is one answer to that question we ask ourselves upon witnessing fallen humanity: “how the hell do you end up like that?”]*

Thomas Patterson » *Lives in Westport, Massachusetts. [Thomas’ imagery of the “glory” of battle is a beautifully rendered, grim depiction of the inhumane rending of flesh when steel meets meat. Just what is in those boxes of remains that return to their final resting place?...]*

Derek K. Richardson » *A second year medical student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, providing an infusion of Midwestern grit to this issue. [Among the good, bad, and ugly, where does compassion lie? Richardson mingles themes of carelessness, the workaday mindset, that aforementioned compassion, greed, and the bottom line.]*

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. [Character, imagery, character, more imagery and a story of great depth results. Rather than a direct message, spiel’s precise brush strokes demand emotional attachment to his scenes, thoughts and situations and eventually let you, the reader, ponder it out. I spent much time in awe and contemplation after reading “Cups.”]*

Gerald Zipper » *Widely published poet, playwright and producer living in Manhattan. [Zipper has written just a terrific, horrific poem here from a point of view, though oblique, that strikes fear in the soul of the global “haves.”]*

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.

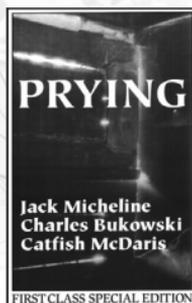
There’s something new in the “wordmakers” section this time: my commentary on why the author’s piece was chosen for First Class. I placed the comments in the brackets with the smaller typeface.

— 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*



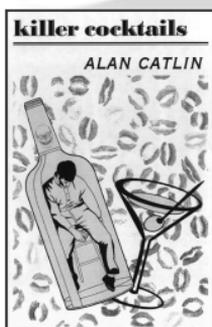
John Bennett

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

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

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.

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.

www.four-sep.com

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

www.four-sep.com

-Christopher M.

need a chap?

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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, 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.

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

Quantity	Pages	Paper	Price	Each
50	32	24# White	\$195.25	\$3.91
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100	24	24# White	246.00	2.46
100	32	24# White	237.10	2.37
200	36	24# White	391.60	1.96

The 24# White paper is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include a cover printed on coated stock, other stocks are available. 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.**