

ISSUE THIRTY-TWO
FIRST CLASS I of II.2009
SIX BUCKS

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



BENNETT
BRUCE
EVERY
FINNEGAN
GALING
LENHART
MOGLIA
ROGERS
ROSENBERG
spiel
SWADOS
Uí-neill
WHORRALL



ISSUE THIRTY-TWO
FEBRUARY, 2009



ALL CONTENTS ©2009
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS

Indexed by *The American Humanities Index*

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

First Class » Four-Sep Publications

POBOX 86 » FRIENDSHIP, INDIANA 47021

christopherm@four-sep.com

[www.four-sep.com]

ALL RIGHTS REVERT BACK TO AUTHORS

SUBSCRIPTION INFO:

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

POSTAGE IS INCLUDED.

CASH OR CHECKS PAYABLE TO : CHRISTOPHER M.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.

First Class **contents**

- 1: **A Hard Look In The Mirror**
by John Bennett
- 2: **Sticks And Stones**
by John Bennett
- 4: **Making A List, Checking It Twice**
by John Bennett
- 6: **They Met, Like Hamilton And Burr**
by Michael Talbert Bruce
- 19: **Sasquatch**
by Gary Every
- 20: **Programming Is Everything**
by Bill Finnegan
- 23: **Cell Phone**
by Ed Galing
- 24: **Gridlock**
by Michael Lenhart
- 25: **The Commercial Life**
by Greg Moglia
- 26: **The Pretty Man**
by Justin Rogers
- 27: **Distant Neighbors**
by John Rosenberg
- 29: **trade in meat**
by spiel
- 30: **The Bad Zone**
by Elizabeth Swados
- 31: *** a cosmic clown chased by
monsters and bionic bailouts***
by roibeárd Uíneíll
- 32: *** a cosmic clown takes
his medicine : omega***
by roibeárd Uíneíll

*Cover Art by Christopher M
Internal photos as noted...*

First Class #32 has a clown on the cover, sticking out her tongue, mischief in her eye. No better choice to characterize the content of the current issue. As I pondered and reviewed what I have written in my commentary in the "wordmakers" section, I noticed the theme that permeates much of the content of this issue... human struggle with, for, and against the various technologies that we have created (or that we endure). Technologies can be anything from a cell phone, to a means of serving food, to an economic system, hell, even a child-care robot (as you will see). I write these little analyses so that I can simultaneously legitimize my selections to myself, while also giving the reader a glimpse into my motives for selecting a particular story or poem. Reviewing the notes usually treats me to a recognition of the glue that holds an issue of First Class together. Is it me, grouping these commonly-bonded works, or is it the mass of selections that come my way, collectively pointing my mind in a particular direction? I am at the mercy of the reader and writer. As editor, I merely pull the very best words out of my pobox, make them look pretty, and hope you enjoy.

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

Now, get reading!

- Christopher M.

- christopherm@four-sep.com

A Hard Look In The Mirror

John Bennett

There's a flip side to everything and even a curve ball sometimes goes over home plate. It's a sports fan's world.

Root, root, root for the home team, if they don't win, drop their franchise. Am I the only one who finds it odd that sports stadiums bear the names of corporations? Doesn't this more or less say it all, encapsulate our bad dreams and explain why we must tighten our belts to absorb economic crisis? Or am I barking up the wrong tree, a blood hound off the scent?

Maybe it's not such a bad thing that a country plagued by obesity has to tighten its belt. Maybe we can do that and still more. Maybe we can kick cold turkey.

"What in the world is he talking about?" says Grandma Moses as she slides a fresh batch of cookies out of a rural Kansas oven. "Kick cold turkeys? Is that the same as kicking a dead horse?"

Well, not exactly. It's more like stop baking cookies. It's more like stop buying cars. It's more like stop watching TV and attending sports events until the flashing neons at Safeco Field come crashing down and up goes Babe Ruth. No, not the candy bar, you obese silly with clogged arteries, the baseball giant. Stop buying candy bars while you're at it.

The situation's not hopeless, we are. We could bring the whole nasty machine to its knees in a heartbeat if we'd take a hard look in the mirror before we shave and put on our makeup.

Sticks And Stones

John Bennett

I had a talking stick that appeared in a recurring dream, and at the age of five it materialized at the foot of my bed. An ordinary stick, except it could talk.

“Pick me up,” it said, “and use me to draw a circle around you in the sand of your pain. Then make a line inside the circle. Now sit down in the circle with your legs crossed and close your eyes. This is how I’ll take you through life. There will be those who will enter the circle with war clubs, but no one will cross the line. Do you get my drift?”

Of course I didn’t. I was only five. But it was the first time I’d ever felt recognized, and so I did it.

It was a long time before the stick spoke again. “Are you awake?” it said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” said the stick. “Now open your eyes and step out of the circle. There are stones to turn over.”

I used the stick to turn over the stones, and out would spring coral snakes and scorpions. I’d twirl the coral snakes in the air with the stick until they grew dizzy, and then I’d lay them gently back down and say, “There now.” The scorpions were a different matter. They’d try to dart up my pants leg and I’d have to step on them. It never made me feel good, stepping on the scorpions, but the stick would sing lullabies as we lay under the stars at night, and that helped some. Nevertheless, my eyes grew sad.

And then came the dark holes. I noticed that people who railed against me for turning over stones, when they thought no one was watching, would stick their hands in dark holes. Their eyes would glaze over with pleasure, and they’d moan. After some time it was all I could think about. I wanted to do it too. I took to leaving the stick out of earshot when I slept, and then one day I did it.

There was something warm and fuzzy inside the hole. It sucked my fingers and sent sensual waves through my body. When I finally broke free, I felt something was missing in my life. I stopped turning over stones and had a hard time sleeping.

And then one night as I lay under the stars tossing and turning, the stick appeared and began beating me mercilessly. “Shame!” said the stick. “Shame!”

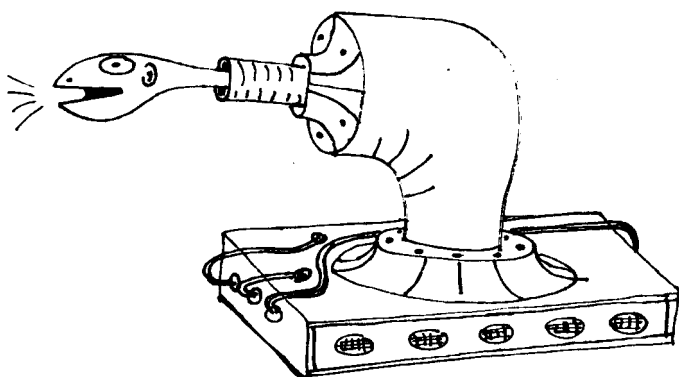
For thirty days the stick held me under its spell without food or drink. During this time I had visions, and it was revealed to me that the warm fuzzy things in the holes were nocturnal. They came out at night and ravaged children. By sunrise they were gone again, waiting in their holes for someone to stick his hand in.

The stick drew a new circle around me. It was much larger, and more a trench than a circle. There was no longer need of a line.

“These are my last words,” said the stick, “and then I must leave you. Listen well:

“Under stones you’ll find labels like kike, nigger and wop. In the black holes are defoliation and ethnic cleansing. One group sounds worse than it is. The other is worse than it sounds. Now go forth.” And with that the stick vanished.

I wrote these strange events down as a children’s story and called it *Sticks and Stones*, but no one would publish it.



DRAWING BY LARRY WHORRALL

Making A List, Checking It Twice

John Bennett

Yesterday I wrote down dreams. The day before I made a shopping list. The day before that a wish list. I took the wish list into a bank and slid it across to the teller. I had a woman's nylon stocking over my head.

The teller smiled the way tellers smile at old people. "Oh, Mr. Whitman," she said, using my real name, much to my alarm. "You silly," she said, sliding the list back at me and craning her neck to look over my shoulder. "Next," she said.

I stood outside the bank in the whale gray light. People brushed by me in the swirling snow. I struggled to get the nylon stocking off my head. Once it was off I folded it neatly and put it in my coat pocket, where I discovered the shopping list from the day before. I transferred the shopping list to the opposite coat pocket where I'd put the wish list after the teller shoved it back at me.

I kept my hands in my coat pockets as I walked. I didn't have gloves. Gloves were on my shopping list. They were on my wish list, too, along with a request for love and understanding and all the money in the till. I didn't want to leave fingerprints, that's why I needed the gloves.

I took my left hand out of the pocket where the nylon stocking was. The nylon's soft warmth was arousing me. People hadn't paid any attention to the nylon when it was over my head, but you can bet I would have raised a few eyebrows if I'd gotten fully aroused. I stuck the hand in my pants pocket. It was a bitter cold day.

My fingers began examining the coins in my pocket. Was there enough for coffee? It wouldn't do to sit at the counter at Ranchero's drinking coffee without enough money to pay. The week before I went through six refills and couldn't pay. The waitress looked at me like waitresses look at men they wouldn't go to bed with to save their lives, even if they were drunk. She whisked the cup, napkin and spoon into the tray under the counter and wiped the counter top in front of me with a damp white towel the way a sexually frustrated mother wipes at a smudge on a small child's face.

I couldn't chance coming up short. I took the coins from my pocket and sat down on a public bench that was bolted into the concrete. I lined the coins up in numerical order on the frayed wool of my trouser leg, quarters up high, pennies down around the knee. There was a hole in the knee, and a nub of shiny white flesh showed through. I had 97 cents.

I looked up from the coins. Across the street a Salvation Army man was ringing a tiny bell over a red bucket hanging from a hook on a pole stuck in a large circular metal base. I stood up abruptly, and the coins fell from my leg, puncturing the snow like bullets and disappearing.

I sat down again and stared at the holes my coins had made in the snow. I took both lists from my coat pocket and smoothed them out. I put the shopping list on my left leg and the wish list on my right. I needed a pen. Or a pencil. Something to write with. Something to circle some items and cross others out. Something with which to make asterisks for cross references. At one time 97 cents would have bought a cup of coffee and a hamburger with change left over.

It began to get dark. The streetlights came on. I pulled my feet up on the bench and hugged my knees, like someone I loved dearly and hadn't seen in a long time.



WANDA JACKSON, QUEEN OF ROCK & ROLL

-SUBMITTED BY DAVID POINTER, FROM HIS FAMILY'S ARCHIVE

They Met, Like Hamilton And Burr

Michael Talbert Bruce

A squirrel scampered along the side of the road. Her bushy tail hovered over the salt that had been dropped during the previous week's ice storm. Her eyes were two gleaming, black crystal balls, high on each side of her head. While they seemed to be looking forward, they could spot just about anything that wasn't directly behind them. A wide range of sight, they called it. *They* being *Man*—a species of fellow mammals that would probably use the extra range of sight as protection from getting punched in the side of the head. Or so the squirrel thought. She had once witnessed a burly fellow getting punched in the side of the head.

Man, however, rarely noticed the squirrel at all. And when he did, he saw it as a creature with very little to worry about. No bills, no taxes, no forty to fifty-hour work weeks. No stress, no sexual inadequacies, no day-to-day hassles. Just trees and nuts and nuts and trees. A life simple enough to pay no mind.

This particular squirrel did not agree, and she would have expressed it too, if *Man's* evolution had brought itself closer to understanding language through a series of chirps and flicks of the tail. But most of the time, *Man* could barely understand *Man*. So the squirrel kept quiet in an otherwise deafening environment.

Here, indolence was too great a risk, and this kept her constantly on the move.

She dodged a pile of broken glass, and after noticing a decaying raccoon flattened on the pavement ahead, she turned around and dodged the glass again.

Her indifference toward these hassles was an alarming revelation. Sure, her emotions had been in disarray, ever since she had let all four in her litter roam free in the world. But this is a world where most squirrels get run over before reaching their first birthday. Any decent mother would feel the things she felt. Only now, she was at the brink of accepting life as merely trivial motion. Suffering had once rattled her thoughts and stabbed at her soul, a singe to the tip of every nerve in her body. But things had changed. Numbness had settled in.

A reckless blue mini-van raced down the street, sending the squirrel zipping up the nearest telephone pole. Dodging a tragic end by no more than a few inches. Good fortune was now her temporary god—a hands-on deity who she figured would eventually find something else to do with its hands. And her tiny body now bathed in the inevitability of doom.

She had noticed the amount of telephone poles and trees dwindling at such a rapid speed that she assumed it must be because *Man* wanted to run over as many squirrels as possible. *They don't get it*, she thought. *I'm not the only one stuck living in the wrong habitat.*

The heedful rodent sat perched on an electric box, watching as the blue mini-van came to a halt at the red-light down the street. She tucked the weight of the world below her gray coat of fur and began a high-wire act across the telephone line.

And life remained...

Inside the vehicle, the driver, a large sloppy fellow, turned his sweaty head toward his wife.

"If I ran over a squirrel," he said, "then I would apologize for running over a squirrel. But I didn't run over a squirrel."

GOOD FORTUNE WAS NOW HER
TEMPORARY GOD — A HANDS-ON
DEITY WHO SHE FIGURED WOULD
EVENTUALLY FIND SOMETHING
ELSE TO DO WITH ITS HANDS.

"You would have if it didn't move."

"Well, then I would have. So what? I wouldn't have lost any sleep over it."

"You know it's Ben's favorite animal," she said. "The earth doesn't revolve around you."

"He's not even paying attention back there."

"You're going to get pulled over anyway if you keep driving like a mad-man. We can't afford another ticket right now."

"We're behind schedule," he said. "And we're not stopping in this piece of shit town, by the way."

"What did I say about swearing around the kids?" she asked, not looking for an answer. The four children, two boys and two girls, poked and prodded at their expensive gadgets in the back of the van.

"I'm just gonna get back on the highway. You guys can wait another twenty minutes."

The petulant woman pointed forward.

"Just stop at that diner. I can't wait twenty minutes to go to the bathroom."

"Can't you just hold it?"

"Just stop at the goddamn diner, Marty," she hissed.

Fuck you, Beth, you worn-out piece of luggage, he thought.

"Fine," he said.

The van pulled into the parking lot. All five of them were out and sprinting toward the door before he could shut off the engine.

"Get us a table!" his wife yelled.

He wiped his palm across his forehead, peeled the seatbelt away from his gut, and stepped onto the pavement to check out his surroundings. The diner was a renovated train car with an additional room built onto

the side of it. There were gas stations to the left and to the right. Across the street was a dilapidated bar and an abandoned building that had kept the appearance of the popular fast-food restaurant chain that had once occupied it. *What a miserable place*, he thought as he waddled around a puddle on his way toward the entrance.

Once inside the crowded restaurant, he seated himself at a table for six in the back and reached into his pocket for a cigarette. He stuck it between his lips and lit it with a neon-green lighter—a tiny, child-proof device that had been forced on him by his wife. It was now broken in a way that made it child-accessible for his own convenience.

Through the stream of smoke, he noticed a young waitress making her rounds with a pot of coffee. Her name—April—was typed on a name tag pinned over her right breast. He would have known the names of each member of her family, too, if they were written along those endless legs. She was exceptionally tall, and her stride embraced it. He envisioned himself fucking her, the two of them standing upright in front of each other. They were the same height, so that particular position made sense to him. No lifting, no bending, no balancing. Just standing and thrusting.

His sausage-link finger motioned for her as he continued to daydream about what a female body felt like before giving birth to four children.

“I’m sorry, sir, but there’s no smoking in here.” April pointed to a sign on the wall of a cigarette getting X-d out in red.

“You sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s too bad. I could really use a smoke.” He put out the cigarette on the paper place mat in front of him and crumpled it into a ball.

“What can I get for you?” she asked.

“Nothing yet. Family’s in the can.”

“I’ll come back in a bit then.”

“Wait a sec...I wanna ask you something.”

“Sure.” She prepared for her two standard responses. *We stopped serving breakfast at eleven and we only carry Pepsi products.*

“How often do you hafta shave your legs to keep them that smooth?” The fat on the back of his neck unrolled and then rolled back up as he ogled her from socks to skirt.

April took a step back and bit down on her bottom lip.

“Does your wife know you say things like that to other women?”

“My wife knows what she needs to know.”

“Which isn’t much, huh?”

“Nope.”

“You know, there are always ways she could find out.”

“Relax,” he said, holding up his two palms in surrender. “I was just being friendly. My wife knows I love her every two weeks when I get my paycheck. But you know, love’s got nothing to do with a pair of spectacular legs.”

“I bet not,” she said. “You must be proud of yourself, though, having figured out what women like to hear over the course of a twelve-hour shift.”

“You know, I could care less what women go for.”

“Well, then-”

“The problem is,” he interrupted, “you women don’t want to be understood. And you all get some sick pleasure out of making us look like idiots whenever you get the chance. But the thing is, a female squirrel would really go for a guy like me. It really would. Did you realize that a male squirrel that wants a little action will chase the female at top speed, jumping from tree to tree like a fucking acrobat? And you know what? It’s the effort that gets her all hot and bothered.”

“So go hit on a squirrel,” she snapped.

“Don’t go making me sound like some sicko. My kid just so happens to like squirrels.”

“And to think I was going to drag your good name through the mud. It’s a good thing we cleared that up.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be back in a few minutes when you’re ready to order.”

“Funny thing is...” he continued, ignoring her comment. “I almost ran one over on my way here. To tell you the truth, I was gunning for it.” A twisted smirk appeared on his face. “Good thing I didn’t though. Woulda caught shit from the wife for the next week.”

For a moment, April seriously considered emptying the pot of coffee onto his lap, but her thoughts were interrupted by the pitter-patter of eight feet from behind. She watched four children leap into four chairs surrounding their father. The wife then trudged by and sat diagonal from her husband.

“Are you still serving breakfast?” she asked April.

“I’m sorry. We stopped serving breakfast at eleven.”

“Well then, we need a few minutes,” she said.

“Take your time.”

As April walked away, she scanned the room from stranger to stranger, from face to face. She felt a bit of her soul get sucked into every steaming cup of coffee, only to come blasting back at her through each customer’s encroaching eyes. She tried picturing her daughter’s smiling face to put things in perspective,

but her chest was quickly flooded with guilt. *How could I have brought her into this despicable world, amongst these despicable people?* She stepped behind the counter and stared up, desperately, at a noncompliant clock.

Just take a deep breath, she told herself. Nice and easy, April. Nice and easy. You paid twenty dollars for that damn yoga class.

My God.

Twenty fucking dollars.

She snatched a full pot of coffee from the counter and carried it to a booth by the window in the front of the car. It was occupied by a man and a woman in their mid-twenties, sitting across from each other. The man's face was long and amused by itself. The woman's was soft and angelic.

"Need refills?" April asked quietly.

"Yes, please," the woman said.

She filled up both cups and looked up to find the man examining her with a perplexed expression.

"Been a long shift?" he asked. "You look kinda pissed off."

"Greg." The woman backhanded his elbow from across the table. "She doesn't need you picking her apart."

"It's okay," April said. "I don't mind."

"See, Steph. Maybe she's been looking for someone to complain to." He faced April. "I'll tell you what I'll do. You vent to us for a few seconds about what's bothering you. Just spew all of your problems into a big pile on our table, let it all out, and you'll see two crisp Washingtons sitting on the table when we leave."

"You mean two dollars?"

"That's a thirty-three percent tip. Our bill only came to six bucks."

"Well..."

"Okay, okay. Three Washingtons it is."

"So that I'll complain to you?"

He nodded.

"Am I missing something?" she asked Stephanie.

"He gets bored easily. I'm just hoping you'll cave before he calls a dollar a Washington one more time."

"Don't distract her, Steph." He looked back at April. "Now, what did the bastard do?"

"Why do you assume it was a man?" Stephanie interrupted.

"I don't," Greg said. "I could have been calling a woman a bastard. I just don't really like any of the standard derogatory words for females. Bitch, cunt, whore... who wants to be called something like that?"

“Okay, just let her talk,” Stephanie said.

“It was a man, and it wasn’t really a big deal, but I suppose I can humor you.” April knelt down to their level. “It was just this guy in the back who made a couple of creepy comments. He asked me how often I shave my legs and then he said something about how he tried to run over a squirrel. He probably would have kept going on if his wife and kids hadn’t come back from the bathroom. But I shouldn’t have let it bother me. We get perverts like that in here all the time.”

“Wait a sec...he was serious when he said he was trying to hit a squirrel?” Greg asked, as entertained as he had hoped to be.

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Wow.” He tried to sound offended while making an effort to look away from her impeccably placed cleavage.

“It comes with the job, I guess,” April said.

“I suppose. But did you at least tell your boss?” Stephanie asked.

“No. I’ve got enough problems here.”

“You know, I’d rough him up for you if I could,” Greg assured her. “But I don’t think I could fight him with his kids here. Steph here could at least kick him in the balls.” He motioned across the table. “She used to play soccer. And she’s feisty.”

Stephanie shrugged her shoulders.

“Just point him out. It’ll put some use to these extremely uncomfortable shoes I decided to wear today. I think the damn things have already ruptured my feet.” She popped a heel-covered foot out from beneath the booth.

“You forgot to paint one of them,” Greg said, grinning. “The little pinky toenail.”

“Now, how the hell did I do that?” She shook her head as she quickly returned her foot to below the table.

The three of them laughed loudly in unison and Stephanie’s face turned beet-red.

“Is my boss looking over here?” April asked, still chuckling.

“Comb-over?” Greg asked.

“Yep.”

“Yeah, he’s glaring.”

“I better get back to work then.” She stood up. “By the way, you two make a cute couple.”

“Thanks,” Greg said.

“Well, just give me a shout if you need anything,” she added before heading off to another table with an invigorated step in her stride.

“Why did you say ‘thanks’?” Stephanie asked. “She’s going to think we’re a couple now.”

“We are a couple...a couple of humans,” he said. “We’re a couple of skeptics. We’re a couple of Stanley Kubrick fans. I mean, I would have corrected her if she said we looked like a couple of passionate lovers. But the girl had to get back to work.”

“Okay, okay. I didn’t need the long version.”

“I guess the thought of being linked to me brings a handful of shame with it, huh?”

“More shame than I can even imagine,” she said with a smile.

“Funny.”

“That was a strange little encounter, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Greg’s face grimaced in pain as he sipped the hot coffee. “She really does have smooth legs though.”

Stephanie shook her head and watched his face contort once again after the second sip.

“Why are you making that face?” she asked.

“It’s a long story.”

“Tell me.”

“I don’t know if I should. Your gender’s reputation for being good listeners is a crock of shit, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Just tell me.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“It’s pretty intense.”

“Just tell me the damn story.”

“Okay,” he finally agreed, lowering his voice into a dramatic prelude. “It went down at noon. The sky was dark. Tumbleweed bounced along the empty road outside.”

“Tumbleweed?” Stephanie rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, the really prickly kind. Anyway...” He kept a straight face. “We met, like Hamilton and Burr, knowing that life would never be the same again. My stomach rumbled in fear. My nemesis bubbled in anger. Two more minutes and I would have been in the clear. Two goddamn minutes. But, I proved to be an unworthy foe, and time, once again, proved to be a bastard. Before I could even react—” Greg slammed his hand down and rattled the table. “Bam! The sharp blade of its mighty sword sliced through. And now...” He took a swig of coffee and winced. “It feels like a fucking blowtorch is being taken to the roof of my mouth every time I take a drink.”

“Luigi’s?” Stephanie asked.

“Nope. *Downtown Pizzeria.*”

“You see...” she said. “The key is to eat the pizza with a knife and a fork until it cools down.”

“I’m a man. What the hell do you expect from me?”

“It’s rather simple.” She demonstrated eating an invisible slice of pizza with an invisible knife and fork.

“I’m aware of the concept.” Greg gently ran his tongue across the roof of his mouth. “It feels like snakeskin up there.”

Stephanie squinted and wrinkled her tiny nose in disgust.

“You don’t think we act like we’re in a relationship, do you?” she asked.

“Nah. We don’t have nearly enough disdain for each other.”

“But what do we look like to some stranger?”

“Probably like we’re in a relationship. But you gotta understand...we’re living in a society that doesn’t believe in platonic relationships. And for good reasons, too. People are weak.”

“I suppose.”

“Hey, at least we don’t look like that.” He tilted his head toward the opposite side of the room.

Stephanie turned her neck slowly to her right, glanced at the three tables across the aisle from them, and then quickly turned back toward Greg with a furrowed brow.

“Like what?”

“That couple over there,” he said.

Her neck stayed put while her irises slid to the side.

“The two teenagers?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“What about them?”

“You don’t see it?”

Stephanie looked once again, trying to appear casual. The teenage girl applied lipstick to her already painted face as the boy sucked soda through a straw.

“What am I supposed to see? I see two teenagers,” she said. “They could be friends just like us for all we know.” She paused for a second. “I wonder if he realizes that his skin would clear up if he wasn’t eating all those fried foods.”

“I bet it keeps him up all night long.” Greg said, pushing his unkempt hair to the side of his forehead. “It’s obvious. You’re just not looking close enough. As we sit here, at this very moment in time, the two of them are falling madly in love.”

“What makes you think they’re falling in love?”

“Well, she’s still fidgeting with her hair every god-forsaken second and he hasn’t shown any signs of getting mad when she steals one of his French fries.”

“It could just be their first date,” she suggested.

“No, they’re making too much eye contact.”

“I didn’t even think you believed in love.”

“I’m using *love* for lack of a better word,” he explained. “I believe in lust and I believe that humans basically need other humans at times, so I guess I’d call it love when the two coincide. I don’t believe it can sustain itself though. It’s just a race against the clock to see if people can make it last until they die. If we had infinite life spans, the word *love* would have a completely different meaning.”

“How sweet,” she said, glancing at her watch.

“I know.” He grinned. “But getting back to the whole topic of squirrels...”

“When were we on the topic of squirrels?”

“Our waitress’s pervert customer wanted to hit a squirrel.”

“That doesn’t mean we were on the topic of squirrels. There was a small squirrel footnote, if anything.”

“Okay, okay. I will now *lead us* into the topic of squirrels.”

“Is this relevant?”

“Well, yeah. I was just going to say that squirrels have done something that we as humans don’t have the guts to do.”

“And what would that be?” she asked.

“They’ve accepted their role as solitary creatures instead of forcing intimacy and having it all blow up in their faces. They’ve just bypassed the entire concept of love.”

“Squirrels are solitary creatures?”

“Think about it. They’re always out, just scampering around by themselves. I mean, they might get together if they’re bored or cold or something, but that’s about it.”

“You don’t know if that’s how they want to live though. The whole species could just be suffering from intimacy problems, each one of them going to sleep at night, yearning to have another squirrel cuddled up next to them.”

“I doubt it.”

“Why do you have background information on squirrels anyway?”

“I have lots of strange shit floating around in my head. Did you know that celery is the only food where you burn more calories than you consume while eating it?”

“I actually did know that.”

She glanced at her watch again.

“You got somewhere to be?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m supposed to get together with my mom tonight.”

“Well, don’t let me hold you back.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

“I really shouldn’t have bribed the waitress with a three dollar tip. I’m going to have like fifty cents now.”

“Cough it up,” she said.

Greg rummaged through his pocket and put the bills on the table. He looked at Stephanie mischievously.

“What do you think the two lovebirds will do if I throw a condom down on their table?” Greg asked.

“I’m not really sure why you’d do that, but I’m going to walk away before you get the chance to do it with me standing right next to you.”

“You better hurry up.”

Greg stood up and approached the teenagers as Stephanie headed quickly toward the exit. He pulled out the condom, securely stored in its beaten and battered wrapper, and tossed it between the salt and pepper shakers on the center of their table.

“Stay safe, pal,” he said without stopping for a response.

He caught up with Stephanie at the door and she shoved his arm as they left the diner.

The two teenagers stared silently at the object that had just been placed in front of them, until, after a few long seconds, the boy finally reached to pick it up.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m getting it off of the table. Someone’s going to see it.”

“I wouldn’t touch it.”

“Don’t you think the waitress is going to notice it sitting here when she comes back?”

“Here...” She handed him a napkin. “Don’t touch it with your hand.”

“It’s not like it’s been opened yet,” he said, still picking it up with the napkin and then shoving it behind the metal dispenser.

“You’re just leaving it here?” she asked.

“What do you want me to do with it?”

“Throw it away.”

“Someone will see.”

“You probably just want to take it with you,” she said.

“Why the hell would I do that?” he asked. “I already have one in my wallet.”

“I thought you used that one?”

“What are you talking about?”

“At Bender’s party, you told me that you tried seeing how much longer it would take you to jerk off with a condom on.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“JUST STOP THE CAR,”

SHE INSISTED.

“IT’S NOT A BIG DEAL.

THE THING HAS A BRAIN THE

SIZE OF A WALNUT.”

“You were drunk,” she said. “You just don’t remember.”

“You were drunk too. You probably just made the whole thing up. I mean, you were drunker than I was.”

“You don’t have to get defensive about it. I don’t care.”

“I don’t care either. It’s just not true, that’s all.”

“Let’s just drop it then.”

“Fine.” He took another sip of soda. “You realize that if you hold out much longer, the condom I have isn’t going to be any good, right? They expire, you know.”

“Didn’t I tell you yesterday that I was on my period?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You think that lasts one day?”

“I still don’t get why it’s a big deal,” he said.

“Because it’s gross. And you’re gross for even bringing it up.”

“There was time before you started.”

“And I wasn’t ready yet. I don’t really know if I’m ready now, to tell you the truth.”

“But you said-”

“It doesn’t matter what I said.” She paused, running her fingers through her hair. “I’ll tell you what...if you shut up about all of this right now, and you stop trying to figure out how to get in my pants, then we can go to your house so I can get into yours. But if you want to keep talking about sex, fine. I’ll just order some dessert and you can keep talking. But I’ll let you know right now that it’s not going to lead anywhere, and then it’ll be too late to go to your house.”

“Alright then, let’s get outta here.”

He stood up, grabbed her by the waist, and the two of them hurried out of the diner without paying. She jumped into the car through the driver’s side door and nestled herself against his arm while he started the car.

The time flashed on the face of the CD player and her expression immediately soured.

“Shit,” she muttered.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I have to be home in like ten minutes.”

He sighed.

“Are you serious?”

“It’s fine. Just start driving.” She leaned over and unbuttoned his jeans. He swerved out of the parking lot as the glorious sound of a downward zipper filled the air.

He steered the car onto a dark side-street. His eyes darted up and down from the road in front of him to the pile of curly black hair on his lap. He politely formulated sounds in the back of his throat while screaming *Oh, what a wonderful life this is!* inside his head. Every so often, a spasm of ecstasy would shoot down his right leg and send the car speeding forward. She lifted her head each time, pulled back her hair, and then continued. It was not until the thump that she sat up for good.

“What was that?” she asked.

He felt a twinge of embarrassment as the only one exposed.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“Did you run something over?”

“I don’t know.” He looked into the rear-view mirror. “I think it was a squirrel.”

“Stop the car.”

“Why?”

“I want to see if it’s alive.”

“I’m not stopping the car. It’s just a squirrel,” he said.

“Just stop the car,” she insisted.

“It’s not a big deal. The thing has a brain the size of a walnut.”

“Don’t tell me when something is not a big deal.”

“It...was...a...squirrel. Get over it.”

“Take me home then. They’re expecting me in a few minutes anyway.”

“So you’re just gonna stop because of some stupid-ass squirrel?”

“I think I made that clear when I asked you to take me home.”

He slammed his hand into the steering wheel and zipped up his pants.

“Watch the road,” she snapped.

“I’m watching the fucking road.”

“I can’t believe you killed a squirrel.”

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered, screaming *Oh, what a tragic life this is!* inside his head. “I didn’t kill the squirrel,” he added. “It ran in front of the car. It wanted to get hit.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

As the car left the scene, a little creature stepped out from the shadows. He crept up to the curb and caught sight of the bloodshed. Two glazed crystal balls were still visible on the body. Those eyes—those dead eyes—he knew them from somewhere. He scampered to the middle of the road and fell by her side. The blood surrounding her stained his fur. Anger seized him and brought his own blood to a boil, ready to burst inside his tiny frame.

But his anger soon turned to fear as a steadily approaching vehicle brought him within a tail’s length of his own death. He was back on the curb as the headlights faded and disappeared. Torn up inside, he stared out at the mangled carcass that had just been hit for the second time. She looked so alone to him. They were both so alone.

Who was she? He repeated the question again and again.

Time, however, sent him on his way, without an answer, without even a chance to piece his emotions back together. Time was known for that sort of thing—and he was hunger’s puppet. The lone-squirrel formed a solitary funeral procession as he approached a yard without trees, where he set aside his unexplained memories to climb into an open trash can. He eventually pulled out a half-eaten cupcake to nibble on. It tasted sweet and felt wrong.

Maybe I didn’t know her after all, he finally convinced himself. It was easier that way.

Sasquatch

Gary Every

The forest ranger took notes, scribbling down
everything the frightened eyewitnesses said.
They saw the giant hairy ape on the edge of the forest
and for some reason the bigfoot became angry
and chased them to the bathrooms
where the frightened campers locked themselves inside.
They said the sasquatch screamed and bellowed,
throwing rocks and garbage cans
at the forest outhouse
while the occupants huddled inside, terrified.
The ranger tried not to chuckle
wondering if they had encountered
a burly, long haired, drunken Navajo,
or a barbaric furry hippy protecting his marijuana fields,
or maybe even an energetic anarchistic punk rocker
who really wouldn't need a reason for such antisocial behavior.
The forest service ranger was certain beyond the
shadow of a doubt
that there was no such thing as a sasquatch,
a tribe of aboriginal apes hiding in the rugged mountains
escaping detection from scientists, anthropologists,
and amateur enthusiasts for centuries.
He had hiked these mountains extensively
and knew for certain there were no sasquatch dens.
He paused for a moment to ponder the possibility
that these people really had encountered bigfoot
and how it might have gotten there,
had a veil temporarily lifted between dimensions,
were parallel universes colliding,
were the sasquatch disembarking from
extraterrestrial spaceships,
or were they commuting from the suburbs?
He listened to the tourists go on and on
loud and certain of their ignorance
demanding that the government
do something and do something now
(and specifically a seasonal part time employee)
do something and do something now
and the forest ranger supposed
that if he had encountered these people on a
peaceful summer evening
he might have bellowed, barked, thrown stones
and chased
them into an outhouse too.

Programming Is Everything

Bill Finnegan

Within the darkened opera house Act II of *Madam Butterfly* was drawing to a close. Cho-Cho-San and her little boy knelt inside her small hilltop house looking down at the harbor where Lieutenant Pinkerton's ship was moored. He had been gone for three years, and Cho-Cho San had almost given up hope he would return and see the son she had borne him. A DramaScent system surrounded the audience with the aroma of the sea and of the celebratory flowers adorning the little bamboo house. From the ceiling and four corners of the opera house, courtesy of its innovative Acoustiwrap design, came the unprocessed sound of a chorus of sopranos and tenors humming a tender melody that gave no hint of the tragedy that was to follow.

As he sat in the audience Charles was aware something was bothering him, but could not put his finger on it. The opera tickets had been expensive so being distracted by a vague uneasiness was extremely irritating. He quickly went over the events of the day hoping to pinpoint the source of his concern.

At breakfast he and his wife noticed that their nanny-droid, Monique, had developed a stutter. Fearing this foreshadowed a systems crash, Charles took Monique to the maintenance department of the dealership where he purchased her.

"She's going to be baby-sitting for our three-year old twin boys tonight so I need to be sure she's okay," he told the technician behind the counter.

"I've started stuttering," Monique added helpfully, "and we wa-want to be su-sure my CPU won't lock up."

"I'm afraid we can't look at her today, but you can leave her and we'll let you have Bob, a loaner, who'd be a perfect babysitter," the technician said. "Used to take care of the puppies and kittens waiting for adoption at the Hinesville animal shelter before it closed. A local nursery school has used him dozens of times, and they say he really loves small kids. Very gentle and protective, and he charms them with cute stories about the animals he cared for. He's only five years old, has a 72-hour battery, and an impressive 140 AIQ, so he's a lot smarter than Monique. Was a jack-of-all-trades at the shelter, they say. And if after trying him you like him enough to buy him, we'd let you have him for twenty percent below blue book."

Charles knew manufacturers were notorious for inflating artificial intelligence quotas and dealerships routinely hinted their droids possessed that holy grail of AI research, empathy. This, of course, was potentially dangerous because it gave buyers a false sense of security. As it was, the latest household droids had such pleasant voices and attractive virtual personalities it was easy to forget they had no compassion and morality

to fall back on in situations not anticipated by software designers. However, they all were programmed to reject commands that used so-called “words of harm” and this had proved to be extremely effective. So Charles’ only concern was that Bob, who was designed to work with animals, knew enough about caring for children, and he painstakingly questioned the droid about this for half an hour, giving special attention to how he would react in various

FOR EXAMPLE, HE ASKED “WHAT WOULD YOU DO, BOB, IF ONE OF THE BOYS GOT FOOD STUCK IN HIS WINDPIPE?”

emergency scenarios. For example, he asked “What would you do, Bob, if one of the boys got food stuck in his windpipe?”

“I have been programmed to deal with that, Sir. At the shelter I would watch the children for signs of distress when they ate the candy I gave them. If the child can make sounds and cough loudly I know the airway blockage is mild and can let him or her cough up the food. Otherwise I need to act quickly and perform the Heimlich maneuver on children over one-year of age or administer back slaps and two-finger chest thrusts to infants. Of course, the amount of force I use has to be commensurate with the child’s size. ”

Though the interview left him satisfied with Bob’s qualifications, Charles found his appearance to be very off-putting. Like Monique, he was a chrome-plated semi-android. But while Monique’s limbs and movements were human-like, Bob had very long arms, moved about like a giant chimpanzee, and had his sensory nodes and speaker grill configured to give him a grinning chimp-like affair for a face. The motif had presumably been chosen to charm children visiting the animal shelter, although a primatologist would consider it odd because chimpanzees in the wild were a violent species in which males commonly killed infants so the mothers would mate. But Charles knew that his boys, who were very fond of stories about Curious George the monkey, would love Bob at first sight, and really that was all that mattered.

On stage the touching vigil of mother and child continued. Subtle changes in lighting and music signaled the passage of time. The moon was now up, and Cho-Cho-San’s little boy suddenly slumped against her as he fell asleep. At that moment Charles recalled the conversation between his wife and Bob just before they left for the opera.

“The boys are a challenge at bed time. They’ll want you to play games and read them one book after another, and that’s okay, but I want you to put them to sleep by 8:00 no matter what.”

“Put them to sleep?” Bob asked sounding bewildered.

“That’s right. Haven’t you done that before?”

“Yes, but with children it has just been naps.”

“They napped this afternoon. Tonight you put them to sleep.”

Bob thought about this for a few seconds. “Any particular way?”

His wife laughed. “Anyway that works.”

Charles moaned and bolted from his seat just as the curtain began to descend on Act II. The rest of the audience remained in place to applaud, so there was no one to obstruct his dash up the center aisle. He burst through the double doors into the brightly lit lobby, pulled out his Omnicom, and shouted “home.” Bob’s grinning face appeared on the screen.

“Oh good, it is you Sir. I am sorry to say there was a complication here but I think I handled it properly. The boys and I began a game of hide-and-seek at 7:49. Your house is very large and, unfortunately, it took me until 8:04 to find them. This made it impossible to carry out your wife’s exact instructions which were to put them to sleep by 8:00. So I was faced with the issue of whether she would still want me to do it. After carefully weighing the ...”

“For God’s sake what did you do?” Charles interjected savagely.

“Why I let them take naps, Sir.”

Cell Phone

Ed Galing

i called my son
on monday
on my cell phone

no answer
leave a message

tuesday i called again
wanted to talk a bit

no answer
leave a message

no call back

i tried again the
next day
and got cut off

i figured, what the
hell, he must be busy,

end of the week i
went to the park,

sat there on the bench,
threw a pigeon a peanut,
the pigeon walked away
nodding his head,

the sun was shining
and my eighty year old
body felt the warmth,

suddenly i felt at peace,
sitting there alone,
and thought,
no news is good news,
and then my cell
phone began to ring
and ring, and ring, in
my pocket...

i smiled, and shut the
damn thing off

and took a nap.

A produce truck has overturned.
Oranges spilled from boxes
went bouncing down the San Berdoo
as Subarus and Mazdas mashed
a half-a-dozen fruit rats.

Now long lines of motorists maddened by time
sit and pound their steering-wheels,
and worldly suburbanites
shriek like primates.

This is how the world will end:
not in fire but in forced inertia,
in humans neutered by their own inventions.

Now its zero mph
for the next 5 million miles,
and time is running away like a thief
with what's left of our lives in a brown sack.

It pains me to see all these lives being wasted,
to observe the spectre of so many kinsmen
helpless to affect their fates.

Then I see to my right
an intense female passenger
with her tongue in the mouth
of her charioteer;
and I open my car door
and pick up an orange.

Now I can relax, relieved:

yankee ingenuity
has not failed us yet.

On the TV someone's Mom on the phone in tears –
her son calling long distance.
The voiceover says 'Reach out and touch someone'
and I call my mother in Tupelo.
Mother ought to hear from me, but when my
phone bill forces me to cancel a family trip
I know something's wrong.

Gets worse... I'm watching the ballgame...
laughing at the beer commercial
Next day I'm off to buy the watery brew and I think...
I'm paying for my laughs
My feelings cost me. Guilt... life insurance.
Anxiety... a pill for every upset.
A giggle... and I'm into a bag of chips.
No emotions of my own.

All attached to something to buy.
My friend says *Wow, I feel the same way.*
He calls others. We decide to secretly meet
in the woods and ask
*What do you have left... any feelings that are yours,
only yours?* Ed says *When my girl left I had a good cry*
Tom says *When a salesman cons me...*

Tony says *My new girl said no sex until I trust you
100%. I say OK, let's pool it?*
*Add our feelings and we can get a whole emotion...
just ours.*
Then, go home, turn everything off. We did and the
economy slowed. The ad guys appear,
confess to stealing emotions for so long, it hurts,
ask to join us.

And the great companies minus their spots realize
We can't sell our crap any more.
And soon the CEOs begin to show up in the woods
Can we join? Of course we say

But bring your Doritos... the make great kindling.

The Pretty Man

Justin Rogers

the pretty man shat potato chips
pap drooled from his mouth
adulation plugged his ears
hope sprang from his loins
change jangled in his pockets

the crowd went wild
free potato chips!
they cried
free potato chips, for everyone!

Distant Neighbors

John Rosenberg

Here's a picture of the cute little bunny you helped pay for. It is a full grown white Alsatian with tufted paws, ruby eyes and a cotton ball tail. Your charitable contribution to the Bunny Fund has gone a long way toward enhancing the quality of life for the inhabitants of this unfortunate island in the West Indies. Until now, they have had to survive solely on mangoes, rice, fish and the occasional coconut.

On the facing page is a photo of one of the native children, Zup Phordynnor, roasting the bunny on a spit. Through your charitable contribution, Zup and his family will benefit from the daily consumption of high protein mammalian flesh. While some people have informed us that the photo looks more like

WE CAN ASSURE YOU THAT OUR INSPECTORS CAREFULLY MONITOR THESE PEOPLE, AND IT IS, IN FACT, WHAT A BUNNY LOOKS LIKE ONCE ITS FUR HAS BEEN SINGED OFF...

a small child or fetus with a rod running through it, we can assure you that our inspectors carefully monitor these people and it is, in fact, what a bunny looks like once its fur has been singed off and it has been roasted over an open fire.

Since some of the bunnies we supplied arrived pregnant, and we do not support terminating pregnancy for any reason, we allowed the bunnies to come to term and produce more bunnies. In turn, those bunnies mated with their siblings and produced an excess of inbred bunnies which the native people were able to eat and, due to a surplus, sell for a profit.

This amortized your contribution so, in a sense, your eighty dollars didn't pay for just one bunny but for three thousand sixty-eight.

Since the bunnies have no natural predators on this island they've now proliferated to the extent that they can feed every man, woman and child for, our experts predict, the next 200 years. Or until the bunnys' food supplies run out and the island is ravaged.

In this regard we are pleased to announce the inauguration of a new program, the Coyote Fund which will bring nature's most inexpensive canine companion to the unfortunate people of Binibili, none of whom have ever had a dog as a pet.

The coyote is a durable animal that has persisted through the ages as other breeds have died out. Our pilot program raises them to serve as loyal pets. Your additional donation of \$150 will provide a Coyote Dog for every Binibilinese family.

Here is a picture of several prominent television personalities standing beside their adopted Coyote Dogs. They have proudly added their endorsement to this worthwhile cause. They realize that even though TV plays a significant role in our lives and the lives of people around the world (except in places like Binibili) it's not enough. They want to make an enduring difference, one that goes beyond syndication and re-runs. By joining the Coyote Fund they are able to show that they aren't just superficial tools of a marketing culture that appeals to the basest, most simplistic thoughts and desires, but substantial human beings who should be taken seriously and respected for more than having a good agent and a hit TV series.

Thank you for your tax-deductible donation. Our ultimate goal is to provide the same Mercedes-Benz cars that we drive for every family on this island, within the next twenty years. To this end we are working with developer contractors to maximize the under utilized resources of this sad little atoll and build paved roads and turnpikes. In order to provide places for the Mercedes-Benz cars to visit, we will develop condominiums, hotels, strip malls and shopping centers with mixed retail.

And to think, it all started with your little bunny. Blessings.

melody walker thinks
she's such a patriotic goddess
when she makes her p.t.a. announcement:

“in *this* great country a mommy can buy
u.s.d.a.-inspected plastic-vacuum-sealed,
hormone-free all natural whole beef tenderloin
by the case at the reasonable \$23.52 per pound”

but lettie parmer's been sneaking behind
closed government doors
where she can snag bulk-butchered pieces
of uncounted iraqi women and children
for a buck-a-bushel

no need to piss and moan about
pecking bits of shattered bone buried
in the tougher dark meat
when it's so yummy for her kiddies
once she's boiled it up for stew

The Bad Zone

Elizabeth Swados

My heart
in its barricaded zone
is under siege
car bombs lift
innocents like dead leaves
through my breath
and the smoke of my breath
is fetid.

Smells of burnt skin. Smells
of singed oil, smells of
small plastic toys as they
melt in my lungs. My streets,
my veins are blocked with
broken windowpanes

A beast, mercury building up
in my cells.

The tiny artery
cratered by tossed car doors
leads to a small hunched
house where in a small room,
(in the back)
Is the black thing
that replaces my shadow.

Dead bodies
inside my body
and tiny bodies
inside them.

* a cosmic clown chased by monsters & bionic bailouts *

roibeárd Uí-neill

"The status of rich and poor was authored in the first epoch, that of powerful and weak in the second, and that of master and slave in the third, which is the final degree of inequality and the limit toward which all the others lead in the end."

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Here be pigs at the trough, swill
dripping from their teflon smiles.
Here be pearl onions harpooned
at the bottom of celebratory martinis.
Here be 7 deadly mega-sins:
avariciousness, kleptomania, embezzlement,
2 hands in the cookie jar better than 1,
pathological book-cooking,
offshore tax havens,
impunity.

Robin Hood has been dust
these many centuries,
& Wall Street
has given Freddy Krueger the night sweats,
backed him into a bubble at needle's point.
Yet, our labor has been fleeced & un-fledged,
your children's futures slashed in broad daylight,
bleeding out on the floor of a panicky marketplace.
But, austerity measures promised our collective scream
to the bear, under the bull's bloody, dispassionate eye.

Solvency:

The false profit hosting the séance
waves away pitchforks & torches,
channels Mr. Lincoln's sonorous words,
*"God must have loved the middle class taxpayer,
He made so many of them"*

What i foresee is me without a candle to read by,
haunting a tent city where my fellow citizens
fortify themselves on bathtub gin, & hope a skillet
of Depression Era fried green tomatoes is enough
to dissuade the corporate militia from another shakedown.

Liquidity:

After socialism was kicked around
like the dirtiest yellow dog on the streets,
after Dutch hitched Christianity to capitalism,
as soon as King George lost at halo-crown-train wreck,
the oligarchs re-invented us in Lee Majors' image,
\$1.5 trillion men & women perpetuating the lie,
able to accommodate any amount of debt
up the toxic asset, all so the shiny house
on the hill is spared foreclosure.

Bankruptcy:

Its storm cellar
stockpiled with the rotting carcasses of
whistleblowers & bomb-throwing radicals...

* a cosmic clown takes his medicine: omega*

roibeárd Uí-neíll

"...I've got to own up to a pretty severe breakdown."

- Abraham Gibson

I

The land of the entitled
& the hum of the distracted.
The gravity-defying middle finger &
an epidemic of blubbery, diabetic children
strapped with mandatory automobile insurance.
Food & pharmaceutical safety compromised,
& nothing more important than the paternity
of some billionaire-boffing bimbo's bastard.
Dinosaur, tiger, soldier, civilian, because no
internal combustion engine runs on good intentions.
Joey Ramone huffs airplane glue in paradise, hurrah!
While uranium tailings continue to poison the Navajo.

Boo!

A dropkicked clown
shuffles his acre of shabby shoes.
Although he's failed as Thoreau's
"...counter-friction to the machine,"
he can still muster a sneer
at the conservative co-worker
who can't break orbit with
a strict Catholicism & **Star Wars** iconography,
the yippie/yahoo drone
brainwashed into giving head to the American Dream.

II

No l. g. d. here - the clown's depression
is of the highest quality, his brainwaves
reconfigured beyond the lock-picking abilities
of the Holy Trinity & The Fantastic Four.

He's castrated himself & spit-shined his asshole.
He's shaking branches & hooting hairy homicide.

He remembers mescaline filling his head
with umber, rain-shocked kookaburras
croaking in pidgin Gaelic, how turquoise microdot
grafted wings, fins, flagellum to his neurons -
the caustic mugwump cast & recast fetus-like,
a changeling ecstatically atomized,
propelled through a myriad membranes behind which
he could find no fundamentalists in spacesuits,
no war-mongering empires, no dissembling,
no transubstantiation tagged by bloody thorns,
no hapless, hopeless ashes swept into the Ganges,
no pipedreams booting-up brick walls,
no crayons un-nibbled by lorikeets,
no speculums or speciousness,
no contradictions without forewarning couched
in the false bonhomie of television meteorologists.
no green fairy willing to talk him down

& back among creatures made of
mud, monosyllables, mendacity,
rotting the roots of the world tree.

wordmakers

John Bennett » *A prolific voice from the great northwest. Ran 'Vagabond Press' back in the day, and now runs non-stop 'shards' to his massive email list of readers.* [I selected these three Shards as they represent the best of Bennett's word play, fantastic imaginings and gut-wrenching, realistic despair.]

Michael Talbert Bruce » *Lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.* [This one is a wild ride through a mixed cast of characters bound by the ubiquitous scavenging rodent we've all seen squished on the side of the road, or, better yet, dancing around our tires, cheating fate... much like the richly-described antagonizing protagonists in this fine tale.]

Gary Every » *His exceptional 'Cat Canyon Secrets,' 46pp of especially descriptive and fantastic stories from the southwest, is available for \$6 from the author (First Class will forward).* [Loved the plot driven by a thinly disguised loathing of the loud-mouthed intruder on otherwise sacred land (and I mean sacred to those who know it, not in a religious sense...). Fantasies, legend and fear exist for a reason.]

Bill Finnegan » *Lives in Hamilton, New Jersey. Recently had a fantasy story published in 'Nocturnal Lyric.'* [This post-post-modern tale exposes the folly in putting too much trust in technology. Great twist at the end as the father is faced with the fear of all fears, until "logic" prevails.]

Ed Galing » *The famed Poet Laureate of Hatboro, Pennsylvania has appeared all over the independent press and numerous chaps, including 'Tales of South Philly' from Four-Sep Publications.* [A nice short piece as Galing farts in the wind of technology in his inimitable style.]

Michael Lenhart » *Lives in Sierra Madre, California.* [A story of humans chained to the machinery of literal machines as well as the machinations of our clustered and claustrophobic culture – yet humanity endures amidst the pall of rush hour doom...]

Greg Moglia » *Lives in Huntington, New York, with numerous publishing credits and awards.* [Nice, quick fantasy built around the escape from consumer culture and the drumming influence of advertising on our collective psyche.]

Justin Rogers » *Lives in Bloomington, Illinois.* [A terrific, succinct blasting of the public's desire to swallow whatever shit spews from the messenger's/master's asshole.]

John Rosenberg » *Lives in Malibu, California. Recently won the award for Most Outstanding Fiction at the Southern California Writers' Conference, and finished his novel 'McBurney's Point.'* [Is it a humor piece, or a tragedy? You decide. This blunt parody of the missionary's mission statement simultaneously entertains and disgusts.]

spiel » *He has appeared on these pages numerous times, with a collection from Four-Sep Publications (see next page) as well as several others. Two new books are forthcoming.* [This quick stick-in-the-eye to those with misguided priorities is over-the-top in the literal sense, but is an apt metaphor as our national beast digests the muscle and bones of an unfortunate victim.]

Elizabeth Swados » *A Tony-nominated, Obie award-winning theater artist, with numerous theatrical and publishing credits. She lives in New York, New York.* [A cluster of gripping imagery embodying a glut of chaos: urban, worldly, warly, and otherwise.]

roibeárd Uí-neíll » *From Corydon, Indiana. His chap "A Cosmic Clown's Handbasket Blues" is now available from the author.* [Two pieces of timely social commentary. The ripping rhythm of these pieces romps over and through the cultural landscape, intelligently focusing a laser beam of loathing without sounding like a whiny bitcher.]

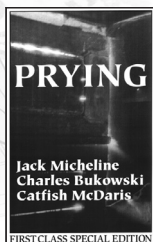
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— Christopher M.

killer reads

Four-Sep Publications Chapbooks

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



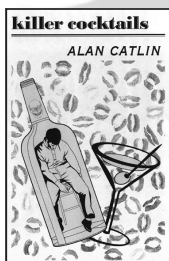
John Bennett

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

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

Alan Catlin

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



Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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

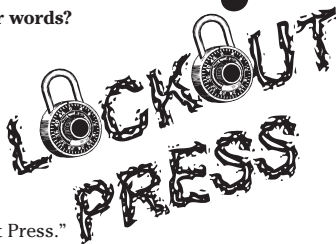
-Christopher M.

need a chap?

Looking for better production of your words?

For less than the copyshop?
Locked out of the publishing loop?

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



Four-Sep Publications *also* produces chaps-for-hire under the imprint "Lockout Press."

There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design, 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	28	24# White	\$229.46	\$4.59
100	24	24# White	329.65	3.30
100	32	24# White	365.70	3.66
200	28	24# White	584.10	2.92

The 24# White paper is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include a cover printed on quality stock, full color is 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.**