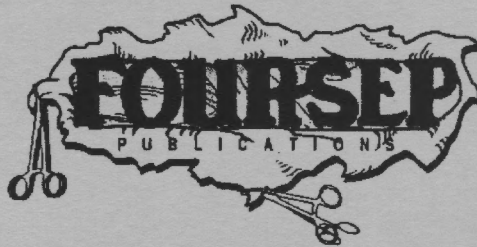


**First
Class**

NUMBER FOUR



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FIRST CLASS CONTENTS

- 1: **PENPALS** by John Bennett
- 2: **USED TO BE IN THE HERE AND NOW** by John Bennett
- 3: **PRETTY PICTURES** by Jim Buchanan
- 4: **INSOMNIA SUCKS** by Jim Buchanan
- 5: **JIM CARROLL AND FRIENDS PERFORMING AT J.B. SCOTT'S** by Alan Catlin
- 6: **BUCKSHOT** by Alan Catlin
- 7: **THE FUNERAL OF CLAUVICE B. HOBBS IN THREE ACTS** by Daniel Crocker
- 11: **JUST OFF THE LIBRARY LOBBY** by Jim Dewitt
- 12: **ONE ROOF LOITERS : ATOP THE BARN** by Jim Dewitt
- 13: **FREEZE FRAME** by Jim Dewitt
- 14: **RIGHT WHILE PRACTICE WAS ENDING** by Jim Dewitt
- 15: **GREETING CARD VERSE ONE** by John Grey
- 16: ***MARCH THIRD** by Richard D. Houff
- 16: **EVOLVED PEOPLE** by Harlan Lyman
- 17: **JAKE** by Albert Huffstickler
- 18: **FLIGHT 473 TO HOUSTON** by Albert Huffstickler
- 21: **GRAVE WATCH** by Albert Huffstickler
- 23: **SHELL GAME** by Philip Hughes
- 25: **DID MORALITY EVOLVE FROM SALT?** by Gerald Locklin
- 26: **I'M AFRAID TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR** by Gerald Locklin
- 26: **THE REAL INSPECTOR HOUND** by Gerald Locklin
- 27: **BEST FRIEND** by Steven "Catfish" McDaris
- 31: **SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER** by Steven "Catfish" McDaris
- 35: **TAR BAR** by B.Z. Niditch
- 36: **THE DICTIONARY OF PROJECTIONS** by B.Z. Niditch
- 38: **ROUGH TIMES AT SCHOOL** by Steven G. Platt
- 39: **SATAN** by Joseph Shields
- 40: **I REMEMBER JAMAICA** by Joseph Shields
- 41: **GIRL ON FIRE** by John Sweet
- 42: **CLEAN** by John Sweet
- PHOTOGRAPHS** by Christopher M.
- DRAWINGS** by Walt Phillips

penpals

Who the fuck can you write to anymore, what with all the walls and shattered mirrors? What dreams can you cling to in shark-infested waters? You try to soar, and someone puts a pipebomb in your luggage.

How far we've come from those days of interlocking when old Greeks tried to fly by pasting feathers to their arms. Do you find them silly? Rather silly than pathetic, like some potbellied top exec riddled thru with prostate cancer and arrogance, his laptop computer perched where a raging cock should be, scrolling thru the specs on some piece-of-trash new product, some plastic toy, molded to the death motif. A cool half million for this think-tank daddy, and he ain't been laid in years.

There's nothing left but what you conjure in your battered brain. As bad as you feel in that secret place, that's just how bad it is. The road to Rome is lined with penpals, tarred and feathered, nailed upside down to crosses, drawn and quartered. Everything is broken, mutters Bob Dylan, slouched on the toilet seat in some colosseum men's room, a needle and syringe dangling from a tied-off vein, the muffled roar of the impatient multitude, restless in their \$40 seats, humming in his cauliflower ear like a sea-shell ocean. He'll write the song down tomorrow over coffee on his beach-front veranda when his head is clear, but now he's got to pull himself together, pull his pants up and tuck his shirt, walk out of the stall to the sink, splash cold water on his face and look hard into his charismatic mirrored eyes before going out there one more time. Desolation Row, sings Bob. Gates of Eden. All Along the Watch Tower.

Out come the zippos and match books, and 60,000 people come to their feet, holding tiny flames overhead, swaying in unison, singing along, bewildered and grabbing at straws.

-John Bennett

-photo by Christopher M.

used to be in the here and now

Focus and hocus-pocus. To the victor go the spoils. A vegetable bin full of rotten fruit. A syphilitic leper spinning on your cock like a child's top. A night in Vegas with surgical tape over your mouth, tied to a straightback chair. A free ride on a hijacked jet. Good stuff. Just step into the ring with Billy-Joe Steroid and throw your best punch. If you deck him, all these things are yours.

Used to be for a dime you could dance with a woman. Used to be for two bits you could eat pie and drink coffee in an all-night diner. Used to be a cigarette after sex on a hot July night was a sacrament. Used to be zoos were magic. Used to be a day was forever. Used to be all the shops closed at five. Used to be suffering had only one name. Used to be red meat was a staple and sperm count was high. Used to be everyone had Jesse James eyes.

Nowadays it's Zen monks in orbit, their saffron robes floating up over their heads. Arabian stallions breaking out of the starter gate with white deserts locked in their eyes. Execs on carphones, speeding thru Harlem. Turkish prisons. A chattering Internet world.

Deep under the polar ice, a great rumbling. An old man wakes with a start, groping in the dark for his jar of pills.

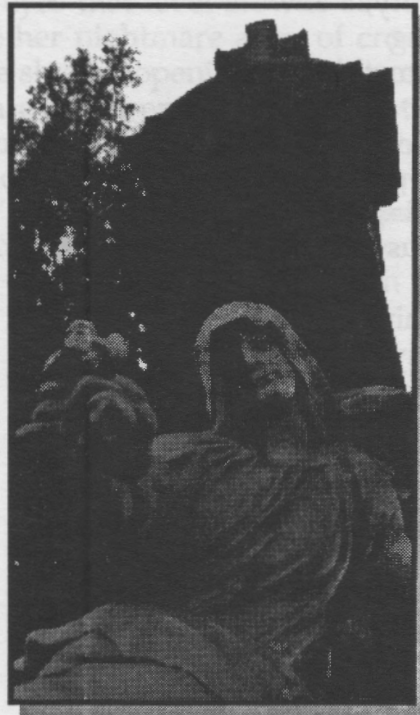
-John Bennett

pretty pictures

The snow is falling lightly
in big flakes,
it's a very pretty picture,
but the air is
biting cold,
and that's like a lot of things
really——

pretty pictures
bite.

-Jim Buchanan



-photo by Christopher M.

insomnia sucks

Night plods on
a clomping beast
hungry
for dreams.

I sit awake
staring into the long teeth
of this screaming bitch.

We are both lonely
& empty,
looking
for something---

just a morsel
of purpose,
anything at all to
keep us going.

Anything to keep
the days moving
& the people & places
worth tolerating
on our way.

The night recedes,
takes with it
another chance,
another day.

Tomorrows keep coming,
bringing promises & lies.

-Jim Buchanan

jim carroll and friends performing at j.b. scott's

Inside, the closed circuit tv is hooked into the sound system, Rolling Stones videos from the drugged far out side of the moon fills the darkness, the oblivious speed freaked bartenders work reaching into coolers for Canadian Beers they pop, forgetting where on the bar they go, how much to charge, as the band steps on stage, warmed up by Doug and the Slugs, Carroll is a vision escaping from the wasteland. Overhead spots highlight the washed out pale life under rock skin, slick tough city street smart blue eyes that level crowds as he sings inside tone deaf music of yet another nightmare alley of crocodiles crawling out of an endless sewage sludge, opening the eyes of all of those people who died, they who are sitting on the bar, feet resting on the high backs of the wooden stools watching the blonde with razor cut hair straddling the shoulders of her high roller, double breasted sugar daddy, reaching for Carroll's white scarf on stage through the dense, clinging cigarette smoke, touching the cold, empty, burnt out night that ends in short circuits, crossed wires that happen inside sockets instead of eyes.

-Alan Catlin

buckshot

What he was saying
came out as such a
Godawful high pitched
whine, I wondered if
there was a weasel in
his nose slowly eating
its way through the outer
lobes of his brain.

He seemed absolutely
certain of everything
that passed through
his lips, not noticing
that anyone forced to
listen at the bar, had
assumed that glazed look
of indifference that comes
just before a complete
sleep. He gleefully
proclaims: "I never drink.
I hope you've got lots
of coke back there.

I might be here for quite awhile."

"That's what you think."

"Excuse me?"

"That's what you drink."

I said, thinking of all
the rack Vodka splashes
I was secretly applying
like buckshot to his brain.

-Alan Catlin

the funeral of claurice b. hobbs in 3 acts

Act I

scene i : drive home from a party

climbing—helplessly into that grinning machine—with the man she didn't like—with wool for hair—waterfalls for breath—bronze for feet—someone should have known—although I was not there.

what could she have seen—in spinning leaf tornadoes—on the old Irondale Road—black and contorted like the river—the trees forked and bone pulling themselves tall—leaning in close at 45 degree angles.

All must have seemed right in a Blur of Breeze and Bending heads—was she pale white—laughing—as she viewed herself in the smug cracked mirror—miraculously drawn like God's camel through the eye of the needle—as she fingered a deck of cards and fixed her hair—a tumbling stained sheet left alone to dry out in a 24 hour a day laundromat.

scene ii: site of the accident

screaming—came monster lightning bugs—called by an anonymous fan—straight from the late night Sci-Fi flick some thirty miles into town—blue and white fury shriek-sailing the winds down this dark path—foreign to these solemn woods.

The audience—parallel to the trees for a better look at broken Claurice—absorbing for later conversational use her circus-clown eyebrows and painted on face—lipstick smeared red through hair—ductile body still slim and perfect—subject of male classmates late night fantasies and beer inspired conversations. The trees—laughing that night—had much to whisper about—and her mother—became as

one with the bitter smell of vodka and rum—strapped to her daughter in a homogeneous recipe—blood—alcohol—and a pinch of tears.

She wallowed around like a greedy hog eating the slop of her Claurice's life end—then they peeled her off as they later peeled off Claurice—the lion maned driver—still hard—managing a feeble growl—moaned—and the mother screamed—"That's not my daughter! It doesn't even look like her! He's the one that's going to die, not her! That's not even her!"

- INTERMISSION-

Act II

scene i : classroom, the day of Clarice's funeral

hushed and sealed—Death does calm things down for a bit—even for the China flag faced kids—antsy in seats—glad for the magic that allowed them a short lived school day.

Mr. Mayers does not lecture on psychology today—he sits arch-backed—fingers tapping arms of a vinyl chair that scarcely dares to breath a squeak—once he asked if anyone would like to talk about it—but we stay head down with thoughts locked to ourselves—thoughts of what to wear and what to say—thoughts of leaving after lunch hour—except Belinda—who taking her cue—shakes herself out of her chair—sleepless and chalky—she takes her exit—leaving tiny liquid drops like Gretal's breadcrumbs—out the door and into the fluorescent path of the witch.

scene ii : the women's restroom

Belinda stares at unfamiliar eyes today—in this hideaway where she has kept up her sex.

Urgently—she scrapes violent fingers—mad through her hair—pieces fall in shades—sticky with the glue of her bloody hands—and then she pukes—she pukes up the shame of the party the night before—pukes up the ripped clothes—mussed hair—and forced thrust of the night before—pukes up the obscene sex act of the night

before—pukes up fertile soil—rich and black.

and looks raging back into the mirror and paints cherry her full parted lips—pressing hard—tendons of her slim fingers bulge—lipstick crumples like smashed metal in fat rings—she races it around her lips—a big red O like a bloody cunt around her wagging tongue—pushes it to her teeth—pressures it to her chin and neck—scribbles it into her white-patchy hair.

Now a collage of red and pale she pulls—torn—her “special” panties down to circle her ankles—Bends and stretches her creamy cotton skirt up around the bone curves of her off-white hips—Rubs red into yellow pubic hair—and in synchronicity with the shriek of the bell she pants into the hall—her last night hate still dripping from her chin—she fingers her clit and screams—“Look at me! Goddamnit will someone look at me?”

Act III

scene i : the gymnasium at the time of Clairice's funeral

Clairice—on stage again—Red velvet curtains parted in folds for opening night—a surreal version of Our Town seen there just three days before—Chairs arranged in two 30 seat per row sections—the remaining seniors—straggle in—a wet herd—dressed flowing in black and white—two at a time taking places carefully—plastic orange seats surrounded by plastic orange faces—a strange preparation—this odd rehearsal for May release.

Still not pulled free—the star’s mother makes her entrance—braced on the right side by her leading man—tall and Oak—she wears her best dress—soft and silver with a blossoming pink eyed coronation placed high above small breast.

20 years ago a stranger walked up this thin isle—wearing the same frail dress—as Homecoming Queen she knelt politely to accept her thorny crown—gazed blankly into her acid bouquet—and almost saw the dim outline of future ghost—and she wept. Again center of attention—she makes her way through the kids—Brice crying for a girl he hardly knew—Jeannie crying for a girl she was jealous of—

past the one empty scar—the seat left vacant by the star's lover who was carried—screaming—out of concrete corridors—earlier that day.

The bleachers—full for the first time since 1960's big game—this crowd watched the mother's waltz noncommentingly with poker faces—they had marched in some time before—early—to get a good seat—modeling new suits and dresses with matching leather shoes—shaking hands and catching up on old times with family members whose faces have grown strange over years.

That night through the fallout streets of Leadwood—single sounds of grief were muffled—muffled by thick padded white walls—muffled by laughter—by the smells of turkey dinners—home made apple pie—and cold midnight sandwiches—and somewhere—as faintly close by as thirty years ago—#3 threw up the game winning shot with 0.01 seconds grinning red dots on the face of the clock—late night phones rang—hearts stopped—palms grew wet with fear—lungs lost breath—a rooster crowed—a bell sounded—wolves were seen—worrying was done—and then through the sighs of relief and thick applause—in the dead of the night you could hear them scream—"It's over, and we've won! We've won!"

-Daniel Crocker

just off the library lobby

First entering the men's room for some necessary moments is a sudden-shock white. Fluorescents overhead are doing their antiseptic best. Always the washbasins' shelf accepts my leatherbrown briefcase full of valuable-to-me papers and books for a rest, while I go across to take a zip-down standup.

I know from past times here this washroom is rarely trafficked. So I can be unconcerned about its being momentarily unseen behind my back. But now the door is soft-shuddering open to let in a presumably male person. Impulse turns me slightly for a peripheral glimpse of him in the wall mirror. Immediately the entry door groans again, and my over-the-shoulder glance expects to see another man/boy type enter. But instead I'm struck with the sight of a very vacant space where my briefcase sat.

In panic I rush out fly-agape to seek the thief who's streaked thru a still-closing door. Luckily I'm able to spot said culprit's sweater slinking back between some far-wall bookstacks. My fast-approach surprise sees that it's a "she" who'd made raid into our starkwhite male sanctum, supposedly to be the non-uni domain sacred to privacy functions.

Testily confronting her, I press to know the gauche motive this purloining lass had. Not shyly her words were "my personal research project at present entails testing a significant cross-section of men's reactions while preoccupied with the mild duress of a zipper-down disadvantage." Whew, such an absurd reason as this smacked of some esoteric doctoral dissertation topic.

"That's it?" my mouth agape refusing to believe.

"Quite right. Except for my usual data gathering follow-up cup of coffee I'm obliged to buy you now. Over which we can further discuss how your moments-ago reaction coalesces with my exploratory projections into other bizarre aspects of male behaviors."

-Jim Dewitt

one roof loiters : atop the barn

My white horse "Cupcake" and I were doing waiting-time for Roxanne, lurking there in the bullrushes one hour, two... Hey, what are friends for? It was eerie how the distant a-go-go chimes hooted thrice like any good honey owl should.

But still no "Angel Ass" in sight. Honest, that's what all but one in the fishing village called her. Meanwhile I'm chewing nervously on my favorite licorice grahams and beseeching my basset setter to stop sneezing so much and concentrate more on gearing up his swimability.

When just then the elusive Go-Go Mistress of Nomad's Land snuck up out of her napping right under our noses (was at least an inch & a half away). So I concluded "you'll do" and blew into her left ear with joviality & celebration chanting "arise arise, it is the east and Juliet is sun of the main migraine."

But too late. The Interstellar Ion Engines had already started to sputter into life, jazzed by Roxanne with initial drops of Galactic Go-Go fuel.

-Jim Dewitt

freeze frame

Interlude in the middle of day-0. The Kikapoo village of Ooolea grips in its firm hands one terminus of the ooze-yellow clay of a logging road far soggier from four day's drizzle.

Each stuck truck has been pulled out by cranes and former tank-retrievers. . all freed to escape. And we detect an even more inexplicable hush in the muck, now that the humid tropical heat of the former rain forest is moving in.

All of us notice a tattered shaman still treating one driver's broken tibia as best he can, incanting spells and applying herbs from the pharmacy of the former forest's few remaining trees.

Some of the strawboss crewmen linger to oversee the final mopping up, now that the clear-cutting project is finished. They seem to relish giving orders to the native laborers. Still others are splashing and shouting naked in the turgid river trying to cool off.

A scattering of butterflies that have dared come back color the banks brilliantly. The rough men who are grasping after them exclaim at their quick swirls upward across a sky Paul-Newman-eyes blue.

This place, this day, these circumstances combining seem to send a message with their pause...before all must race off to other tasks.

-Jim Dewitt

right while practice was ending

Forever & anon I've liked streaking across that soccer field, then heading straight into their locker room. Screams were chorusing "not nice" but eyes widely alight said "I'm liking it, I'm ready." And always there'd be a more daring one who'd grab me just to watch with fascination its stretching.

Like last week, Exene. She had to be a science major studied in the workings of male anatomy. For fun others would crowd close and join in. We'd have a good ol' intellectual discussion about why their female parts couldn't do the same. I'd start role-playing faux doctor, and they reveled in being examined very patiently.

Once when Wanda wanted to swallow me experimentally, I streaked her cheeks with a load. Thought she'd never stop laughing. Till afterward when we showered we naturally became a tangle of slippery-with-soap arms & legs. I sure loved the smell of her run-off.

"What are you guys doing under that water stream for so long?" chided her curvaceous roommate in awe. Tootsweet she became another back for me to rub, a Venus I could orbit around. My tastes always did tend toward the astronomical.

-Jim Dewitt

greeting card verse 1

May your birthday be a ritual
of flame and fear.
May someone interrupt screeching sex
with your last lover
to call you on the telephone,
snarl into the receiver
how they saw your cake out on the train-tracks,
how the locomotive burst your years.
May the gifts putrefy
on the docks of your wishes,
haunt the rooms with that fishy smell
of abandoned thighs.
May you get out of this day
what the body finds when it rolls
down the embankment,
what the bat sees upside down
at break of day.
Have a happy birthday.
I'll see you where
the burnt-out brain-cells go
after the celebration,
the wized-up gutted ones
of those who drink alone.

-John Grey

*march third

(on a theme from Rengetsu, with apologies)

A dog drops an enormous
load on the old couples lawn.
And as the snow recedes,
turd blossoms appear.
Once again, the smell of spring
makes a statement.

*In Japan, paper dolls of lords and ladies are displayed representing love and marriage on March 3rd. This custom is known as the "Doll Festival."

-Richard D. Houff

evolved people

Interaction of reactions to make beliefs
Why have faith in someone else's invention?
Language contradicts itself, it only works when you pick a side
Result of emotion has been predetermined
Soaked sponge is another way to say human
Analyze and realize : WE all are wrong

-Harlan Lyman

jake (with apologies to WCW)

That one-eyed pigeon named Jake was served to us anonymously as a fryer one Sunday morning when he'd flown down into my mother's hair once too often from the chinaberry tree in the back yard where she was trying to feed the chickens. I think it was Jake's way of trying to display affection, him an orphan that I'd raised by hand after his parents, homers whom I let out too soon, had gone home. Yes they'd left Jake there in the nest to do the best he could and I'd brought him through. I don't remember how he lost his eye. I don't remember who had named him Jake, me probably; I don't even remember how he tasted since it was a few years later that my mother, in a fit of guilt or defiance, explained what happened to him—in an effort perhaps to demonstrate to us in our early teens that even a mother's patience can wear thin finally and break, hence Jake anonymous before our eyes on a kitchen breakfast table. I don't think the lesson took and life went on, as it tends to do, in that little North Carolina mill town without Jake and not much really changed. Not much depended upon a one-eyed pigeon named Jake, brown and still beneath the chinaberry tree where my mother's patience ended.

-Albert Huffstickler

4. Return Flight 531

Flight 473 to Houston

1. Airport

It's a diversion,
this check for metal objects.
What really happens
when you pass under the arch
is that you're stripped of
your ego
and won't see it again
until you arrive at your
destination.

Till then, you will mill around
with the other bodies
till time to line up
then pass into the plane
where you will sit facing
forward
as will-less as a peanut
while you hurtle through space
like a dart thrown
by a drunken pub-crawler
till you arrive and rise
to pass once more
into the ranks of humanity,
all your burdens reassumed.
It's a preparation for death and rebirth, you see.
Don't let anyone kid you:
we're surrounded by our
metaphors
constantly.

Harlan Lyman

2. Flight

Someone once told me
not to sit in the back of
the plane.
You have a better chance
of getting killed there
if the plane crashes.
He never told me the
exact odds
but I took his warning
to heart
because he said it with
such conviction.
But I still sit in back—
daredevil that I am. I mean,
after that first lift,
it's my feeling
that the odds are cancelled.
It's pass/fail till,
one way or the other,
you touch ground again.

3. The Flight Continues

Everyone starts eating their peanuts immediately
as though that's what they been waiting for all along.
For my part, there's something irreverent
about munching peanuts 15,000 feet in the air.
I mean, that's asking for it.
I stick mine in my backpack where
at some later date, Flight 473 forgotten,
they'll be unearthed
with the exclamation,
"Oh Boy! Peanuts!"

4. Return Flight-531

Oh boy! She gave me
three bags!

ADDENDUM

Legustrum the poet's
plane collided with
another coming into
the Robert B. Mueller
Airport. He was in
the middle of a
poem, barely had time
to scrawl, "Well, shit—!"
at the bottom of the
page before he fell
from the sky. His
wife, after much
deliberation, decided
not to have his
last words
engraved on his tombstone.

-Albert Huffstickler

grave watch

After he died, he came back. They were lying on the bed naked, laughing. It was an hour after the funeral. Even now, even like this he couldn't stop looking at her. She was still beautiful—tiny perfect features surrounded by long dark hair, the compact little body with its small dark-nippled breasts and broad, almost too broad, hips. And all the remembered textures, fragrances. Yes, she was still beautiful. But from here he could view her soul, twisted and ugly, a thing of darkness.

Her companion merited only a glance—young, sleek, without character, his soul barely defined.

They had just finished making love. She had that damp, tousled look. There was a sheen of sweat on her skin. He could almost smell her.

"What am I doing here?" he wondered even as he found himself moving closer till he was poised just above her body then dropping down between her open legs. Hovering there he stared into her still damp sex, the full pink lips surrounded by the dark, luxurious bush.

"This is what held me," he thought, "just this."

From here, it seemed strange that such a simple thing could wield so much power.

Then even as the thought came transformation occurred and her sex became a dark, swirling vortex that he was drawn into irresistibly. He struggled and fought with all his strength but to no avail. He was drawn helplessly downward into the swirling vortex. Terror engulfed him, then, mercifully, all consciousness vanished.

When awareness returned, he was above them once more. She was sitting up on the bed, head to one side as though listening.

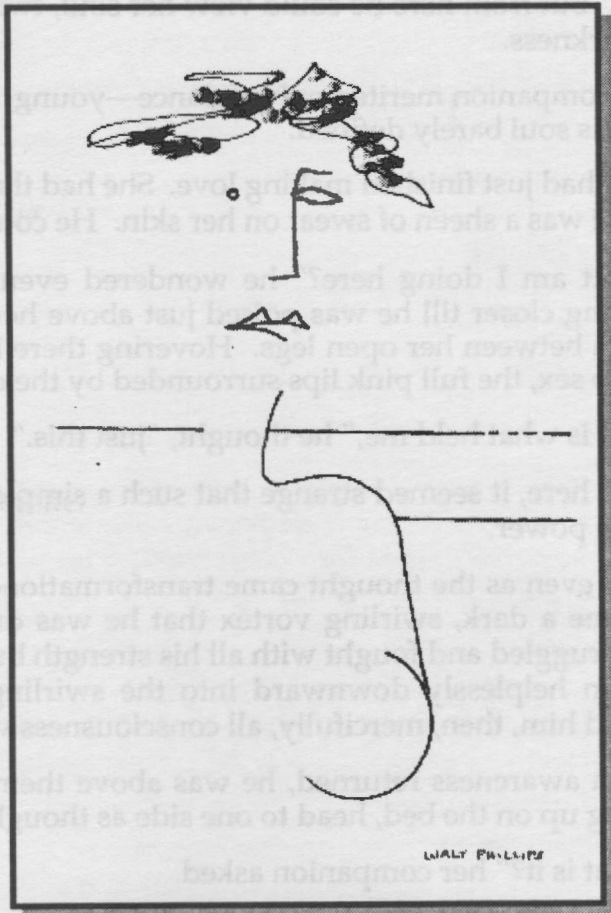
"What is it?" her companion asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I thought I felt something."

"Somebody's walking on your grave," he said, touching her.

"Yes, that's it," she said, bending over him once more, her dark hair drawn around them like a curtain. "Somebody's walking on my grave."

-Albert Huffstickler



shell game

You who huddle close indoors at night,
venture forth for only nine-to-five,
hear this:

I have witnessed moon-stirred romps in public parks,
jeremiads rambling, spirits-stirred
in Greyhound station waiting rooms,
inveighed against the night,
against Greyhound Inc.,
smug smiles,
the State,
and yes, most, nine-to-five.

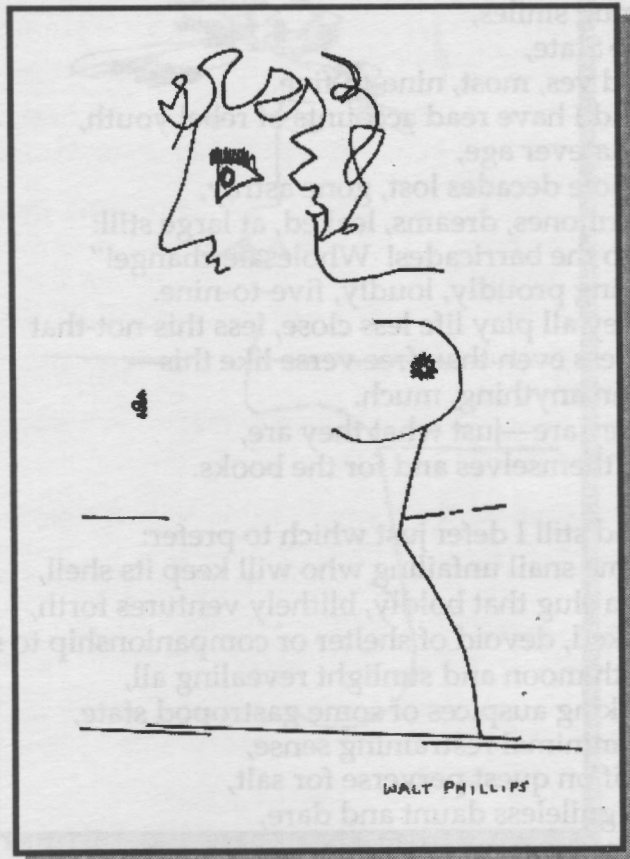
And I have read accounts of rebel youth,
whatever age,
whole decades lost, gone astray,
hormones, dreams, leaked, at large still:
"To the barricades! Wholesale change!"
living proudly, loudly, five-to-nine.
They all play life less close, less this-not-that
—less even than free verse like this—
than anything, much.
They are—just what they are,
by themselves and for the books.

And still I defer just which to prefer:
some snail unfailing who will keep its shell,
or a slug that boldly, blithely ventures forth,
naked, devoid of shelter or companionship to share his lot,
with moon and sunlight revealing all,
lacking auspices of some gastropod state,
or minimal restraining sense,
as if on quest perverse for salt,
all guileless daunt and dare,
to perhaps inevitable end.

Which fate is mine I have not said,
who sometimes sing the slug,
while toiling nine-to-five
for ever larger shell.

Have you said ought, within, without?
Do you sing still of this or that, at all?
Anything, much?

-Philip Hughes



did morality evolve from salt?

there's this place at the northeast end
of death valley called scotty's castle.
it was built by a prospector named scotty
and a rich patron/friend of his from stanford.

the guy from stanford provided the money
and the brains.
scotty provided the name.
not a bad deal for scotty.
anyway, scotty left behind his own
amendments to the ten commandments.
they are inscribed on his gravemarker on a hill.
i don't know how much longer i'll be able
to make it up the hill, and i'm already
forgetting the commandments, but i do remember:

"don't say anything that might hurt
somebody else.
don't complain.
don't explain."

not bad, i'd say.
an american mooses?
maybe preferable in that so much less
is verboten.

yeah, i suspect i could get to like
scotty's rules. but it does make you
wonder whether there's an inevitable
causality between commandments and
dead seas.

-Gerald Locklin

i'm afraid to look in the mirror

lately i've been shocked at the faces
of men and women i've known for years,
now in their fifties,
that already seem pale, pasty, almost powdered,
as if time itself is getting a head start
on the embalming process.

-Gerald Locklin

the real inspector hound

marcia clark is trying to convince the jury
that a barking dog proves that
nicole brown was already dead
in time for o.j. to have killed her,
because she never allowed the pooch
to bark and bother her upscale neighbors.

if nicole brown really possessed the secret
of getting a dog to shut its goddamn trap
i wish she were still around
to teach it to me.

-Gerald Locklin

best friend

First time I saw Joe, he was taking a pounding. A small Mexican was hitting him in the face so fast, his fists were a blur. Under the ferocious barrage, Joe finally went down. The unmistakable click of a switchblade could be heard. That's when I pulled out the old man's hog leg.

"He's had enough," I said. I thumbed the hammer back to emphasize my point. The crowd thinned until it was just me and Joe.

"You alright?" I asked.

"I been better." We both laughed.

We got hired to unload Texas Black Diamond watermelons from semis after school, picking up pocket change. Joe told me about a summer job building grain silos.

The first job site was in Texas. Mama didn't want me to go because I was only fifteen, but the old man talked to her for me. There were three silos and two corrugated sheet metal barns to be built. About a months work, for the size crew we were on.

As I got to know him, I began to notice, Joe had irritating ways about him. It seemed like he always managed to get sideways of somebody.

Over a wager on a nine ball game, I had to save Joe's bacon again. That pistol and me were gaining a reputation. In the back of my mind, I wondered how long it'd be before I'd have to use it. It seemed like a good time to leave town for awhile.

A couple of days before we split, Joe looked at me and said, "Separate you from that gun and you ain't so much."

"You wanna try me on for size?" I could see the wheels turning in his brain. Memories are long in small southwestern towns. My brother, Jimmy was in Viet Nam and Joe was probably remembering his legendary fight with Andy Chavez. Andy was Golden Gloves

Champion of New Mexico three years straight. Jimmy was forced into a corner with only one way out. He didn't stand a chance. The next day Jimmy could hardly get out of bed. He limped to school, one eye swollen shut, his lip so fat he could barely speak. Jimmy caught up with Andy in the library, I was backing him, but he didn't know. The old man had it figured, what Jimmy would do. He waited until Andy faced him, then beat him unconscious with a chair. I had to pull him off. We made it to the parking lot, before two of Andy's cousins caught up with us. I snapped an antenna off a car and horsewhipped both of them, then started burying my boots into them. The next thing I knew the old man had me by the shoulders and was putting me and Jimmy into his pickup. When we got home, he unloaded his shotgun and 30.06. Nobody ever bothered us after that, although my sisters had trouble getting dates.

"Some other time," Joe sneered.

My theory was that's how legends got started in the old West. A small event happens, then in the retelling it snowballs with exaggeration. I heard I'd whipped four guys, got knifed, and shot a cop that day. I never denied it. A reputation could sometimes be a handy thing and it's a hell of a lot better than jail.

The first few days on the job were uneventful. It was hard work, but interesting. The weather was warm and the corn and wheat fields green oceans rippling with the breeze.

Concrete cones were dug and poured before we arrived. Huge bolts stuck up, that we would anchor the silos to. The round cones were about a quarter of a city block in circumference. They came to a point at the bottom, where a crow's nest was set in place. Then I-beams were winched across to it and sheets of metal fastened on with rubber grommet washered screws to make it air tight and waterproof.

The conical shaped roof was built on the concrete ground apron and then raised into the air with special jacks, while each layer of wall was bolted into place. The wall sections were curved slightly to complete a circle. Each piece was ten feet long by five feet high. An average silo was sixty feet tall or the height of a six story building.

After a week everyone knew their job, like putting together a giant erector set. It felt good going home for the weekend with a fat paycheck.

On Monday we reported for work. Tom, our boss called me off to the side.

"The winch operator didn't show up. I've noticed you have a steady hand, you want the job it's yours?"

"Yes sir, much obliged." That meant two bucks more an hour. I drove the winch truck over to the site of the second silo. Tom showed me how to operate the levers. He was impressed with my quickness. The other guys watched, nobody made a comment except Joe.

"Brown nosing the boss already."

I kept my mouth shut. Mid-morning I went for a drink of water. Joe climbed down from where he was working. The metal water jug was too empty to get anything from the spout, so I removed the lid and tilted the jug up to my mouth.

Joe slammed his fist down on the upended jug and said, "How's it going brown nose?" The metal rim banged into my teeth. I spit out a mouthful of blood and ran my tongue along my injured gums. Setting the jug down, I clenched my fists. He was waiting for me, but I disappointed him. I saw Tom coming toward us.

"Any trouble here?" he asked.

"No, sir," I replied and headed back to the winch truck. Fighting was a firing offense. Nothing happened that day. I could hear Joe bragging how he backed me down.

The next day Joe's hammer slipped down the side of the cone, I watched as he made his way toward the metal rungs embedded in the concrete for a ladder down. As he walked by I said, "Here Joe, you can use my hammer." He was about twenty feet away. I threw it tomahawk style, right for his head. His mouth opened like a fish blowing smoke rings. The hammer hit him right behind the ear with sickening thud, knocked him cold. A bunch of guys gathered round

looking at him gasping, as Tom dumped water on him.

"What happened?" Tom asked.

Nobody said anything. Finally a guy looked in my direction and said, "Maybe he fainted."

"Alright the show's over girls."

That night I spread a blanket and stretched out under my bunk, after bundling clothes under the sheet to make it look like my body.

Joe was so predictable, it was boring. About one o'clock, I felt thuds above me. Joe was beating the hell out of my clothes with a tire iron. The light went on and I could hear Joe breathing hard.

Wiggling out, I cocked my best friend and put it in Joe's mouth. "Say your prayers, amigo."

"Don't do it, son," I heard Tom say. "He's not worth it."

"I'm drawing my wages, sir," I said. Bundling my clothes up, I could see his hand trembling as he wrote out my check.

Leaving town, the moon shined down through a wisp of cloud, I noticed a sign. Muleshoe, Texas : Population 1,442.

-Steven "Catfish" McDaris

shall we gather at the river

My old man had been promising to take me fishing for sixteen years. We'd just finished topping out a fireplace chimney, so our pockets were flush. We got in his dilapidated Ford pickup and went and bought a couple of Zebco fishing rods, night crawlers, various tackle, split shot sinkers, and Eagle Claw snelled hooks. Next, we stopped at the bootlegger's and purchased a couple of jugs of 'shine, my old man rarely drank store bought liquor. Then we gassed up at the Texaco and picked up a case of Coors and a handful of Rum Crook cigars.

The Pecos River was about seventy miles west, where it came out of Almagordo Lake. We got started on the beer and tacos Mama had packed for us. The sun was reflecting off yucca blossoms and prickly pear. We spotted a prairie dog town and a roadrunner chasing a rattler.

I looked over at the old man, he was wearing a sweat stained straw cowboy hat singing along with Buck Owens' "I Got A Tiger By The Tail." After the song he turned the radio down and explained, "Son, there's two kinds of music, country and western." I shook my head. I couldn't believe we were going fishing, instead of to some brick job.

We turned off the highway not far from where Billy the Kid was buried. The gravel road turned to dirt, mostly dust. Passing a deserted crumbling adobe church with a cemetery in front, tumble weeds rested against weathered wooden crosses wreathed with faded plastic flowers. Willows and cottonwoods stood green drinking from the river.

We'd been tossing our empties in the back of the truck, where a mortar encrusted wheel barrow and a few old buckets resided when not in use. Stopping to water some mesquite, the old man consulted a hand drawn map. He looked up and said, "We're almost there." Driving a few more miles, he pulled into a shaded spot, where a small bridge crossed the river. A white Lincoln was parked on the other side.

"Looks like we got company, son."

A black man with white hair was sitting in a lawn chair dangling a cane pole with a bobber over the water. He was puffing away on a corn cob pipe. Three young women were with him, their dresses pulled high, their feet in the river. They smiled and waved as we got out of the pickup.

"Howdy," the man said.

"Howdy," my old man replied. "Anything biting?"

"It's mighty slow."

We got our gear out and rigged up our rods. The old man put on a white jig, showing me how to tie the knot and bite a split shot in place for weight. Then he hooked on a night crawler.

"You're on your own, son." That meant he would only show me how to do it once, but it had always been that way. Our unspoken agreement.

I cast into the river near a submerged log, trying to keep my mind on fishing and off the ladies across the river. They were showing some serious leg and flirtatious attention.

The oldest looked about twenty and she was stacked. The two younger ones were obviously twins, about sixteen and prime. They were all three easy on the eyes. I could just make out the tiny blue cornflower pattern on the white panties of one of the twins. She was smiling, batting her eyelashes, and trying to give me a better view. Sweat was beading on my forehead, as I watched the twins whispering and giggling.

I forgot about the fishing rod in my hand and was jerked from my feet. Holding on, I fought my way back to the bank and soon had a ten pound catfish flopping at my feet.

My old man was smiling and sipping from a jug. He said, "Good work son, but I thought for a minute that catfish had caught you."

Laughter erupted from both sides of the river, I think even the catfish

laughed. I got a little red around the ears and grinned sheepishly. That brought on more whooping.

The old man caught catfish as fast as he could bait his hook and I did almost as well. Within a hour we had two stringers full.

"You think it's about time we crossed over and got better acquainted with our neighbors?" the old man winked at me. I grabbed the jugs and beer, he pulled both stringers of fish from the water. There had to be eighty pounds of catfish, at least.

"I never seen the likes," the black man said. "I been fishing for sixty years and that's the damnedest thing I ever seen. They call me Lead Belly, not the guitar player though," he held out his hand to shake.

"I'm Juan and I call him son."

"Are you Mexican?"

"No, I'm a bricklayer," my old man replied. He pointed at me, "His friends call him, Dog."

"Why's that?"

"Because he's such a cunt hound."

They both laughed so hard, tears streamed down their faces.

"That's how I got my name, Lead Belly. A man in a juke joint and I quarreled over some cunt and he put two slugs in my gut. These are my granddaughters, Susie and the twins, Brenda and Linda." The ladies came and took a beer, they looked better up close.

The men were passing the jug and swapping tales of war and women. So the twins and I decided to explore nature. I learned things that day that were never taught in any school. We came back from our adventure. Then the old man left Lead Belly snoozing and disappeared with Susie. The twins took me by the hand for another go around. Then Susie and I got acquainted. Brenda and Linda took the old man for a double your money.

I gave them the fish and the ladies helped me get the old man in the

truck. I helped them load Lead Belly. We said adios.

The stars seemed to sparkle more than usual on the ride home. I heard a coyote singing, I stuck my head out the window and howled my happiness.

Driving into the darkened yard, a light came on.

"Well, how many fish did y'all catch?" asked Mama sleepily.

"We got skunked," I replied.

"I can see your father did," she pointed at the old man snoring like a chain saw. "You certainly smell like fish," she held her nose.

"It must be the minnows, Mama, we tried everything."

"Well, at least your father got some rest."

-Steven "Catfish" McDaris

tar bar

recognizing myself
by a sad voice and initial
on the telephone
I call the only number
that I remember before the buzz,
writing these lines
on a napkin
the last July day
no one leaves a message.

it's two a.m.
the first of August
the guy next to me
is also writing
but won't get up
like the planet cannot rest
until he composes
his seventh sonata
for tuba and piano.

we're both surprised
by the gorgeous Caribbean
dressed in billows
humming Reggae
while I lose my change
in the Punk quarter
everything is long distance.

-B.Z. Niditch

the dictionary of projections

1. Wisdom: on foreign policy: You Don't Want your Pants Down When the Prime Minister is Coming.
2. Sexual Gnosis: on the thigh or slyly keep your upper lip up.
3. Flesh Pots: or Mr. Potz' adventures under King Farouk.
4. Obsessions: with a fly leaf.
5. Mass Debates: See in the cultural revolution.
6. Eccentric physics: Anima in enema.
7. De Sade's triptych: A Song Without Words.
8. Hallucinogenic alchemy - LSD DSL, the Acid test of mind boggling and body bugging.
9. Full of Religion: Defects of Prefects - History: began with original syntax of a royal flush in public speaking.
10. Dong Ding: the song of high strumpets after the throne room calls for more altar calls: religious in nature.
11. Swear Words: See Jesuit Order by way of the Cabala through the psychic states of the Krishna.
12. Tantric Novel: begun by the overactive and the underachieved; see tantrism.
13. Ideology: began in sick id, ended by the ill logicians.
14. Assassination: caused by anal or camel tradition; caused by the war of sexual politics.
15. Worship: began with a dance; followed by romance, ended in a trance; See religions within and Religious Without.
16. The Surreal: only what is the matter of the real or where Karl Marx failed the Marx Brothers succeeded.
17. Neo Capitalist, neo communist: knee jerk fat cats and slow cats without hips, being hip or hipsters; See Orwellian and Aesopian.

18. The Absurd: Began with faith; ended with the faithless and the faithful.
19. Dandyism: the perpetual gaze, the hatred of the straight.
20. Cop (See Op) Art: Led to Concentration Camp of the Theatre of Cruelty.
21. Zits: See the nihilism of adolescence.
22. Soap Opera: See queens of tonsillitis.
23. The Primitive: What everyone secretly craves first of all, but saves for last for themselves.
24. Appetite: the nonartistic way to Faddism. See: the whetting or the Diet of Japan.
25. Nakedness: The sufficient reason for the cretins of religious technology (From Jesuitism, Marxism, Aryanism and Maryanism).
26. Film: Allows people not to read but to allow dubbing to take the place of the aural.
27. Privation: civil rites for the wrongs of society's injustice collecting; See the garbage of the dustbin of revolution, picked up on either Ash Wednesday or Trash Thursday.
28. Liars: Those who endeavor to transform the language through the dialogue of the mutant deaf or the recreant dumb.
29. Dialectics: What is left of history; and to the right of sex to determinism.
30. Whore of Babylon: See the history of the papacy; those who prostrate themselves or have prostrate trouble; See Paps Do Give Them Suck or See succor; or palpable sucker. For further inpho, See: Holy See.
31. Lust: Once cannot process sex with sempaternal time.
32. Syphilis: for Sore Spots only.
33. Mozart: He changes even the faces of those who play him.

-B.Z. Niditch

rough times at school

Bombed Bosnian babes
burst

and in Dubuque
Plaintive principal prods
punks

Screaming seemingly shocked
students

Matchless man mucks
mud

High school mess
clean
it
up.

Disturbed dainty dudes
sigh

Girls golly gee
guy

Wonder why we
want
it
clean.

"Clean it up!"
Bombed Bosnian babes
burst

and in Dubuque
Red reasoned rot
really
fucked

Piss penis prick
drip
drop.

Bored brat buggers
eat
shit

Clean
it
up.

-Steven G. Platt

satan

The devil is not living
in a burning inferno called Hell.

The devil is not a strikingly
good looking man in a black turtleneck.

The devil is not the father
of Rosemary's baby.

The devil is not Charles Manson,
Marilyn Manson, or anybody they know.

The devil is a 63 year old gray-haired grandmother
who works in an office just three doors
down from mine,
chain smokes Pall Malls,
drives a minivan,
says things to people like "It's been a hunk of heaven"
before turning on them and destroying their existence,
spits venom at any and all,
forgets nearly everything
except the fact that she is the devil
and you are her prey.

Pure evil.

-Joseph Shields

-photo by Christopher Shields

i remember jamaica

I can still hear the Jamaican
minibus conductors hustling
passengers onto their buses
jamming them in as tight
as possible collecting the bills
stuffing them into their pockets
then expertly folding the dollars
between their long skinny fingers
dancing hips gyrating to the boombastic
sound system cranking out of the speakers
hawking fat ladies for the price of two fares
because it's all based on space
and the fat ladies meekly saying ok
acknowledging their size
and the fact that they
must pay twice as much as everyone else
or the skinny 'ductor would make
them leave the bus

I can still see the image in my mind
of a big man chasing a young
thief down who just stole two dollars
from his hip pocket
holding a rock over the boy's head
ready to split his skull like a ripe melon
and the conductor grabbing his arm just in time
lecturing "YOU C'YANT LICK A MAN
FEE 2 DOLLAR"
all this while I sat in the bus watching
eating fried plantain and rice out of a box

Out of everything—
every element of urban and rural Jamaica
which I lived for 30 months
I remember the buses
the conductors
and the music the best

-Joseph Shields

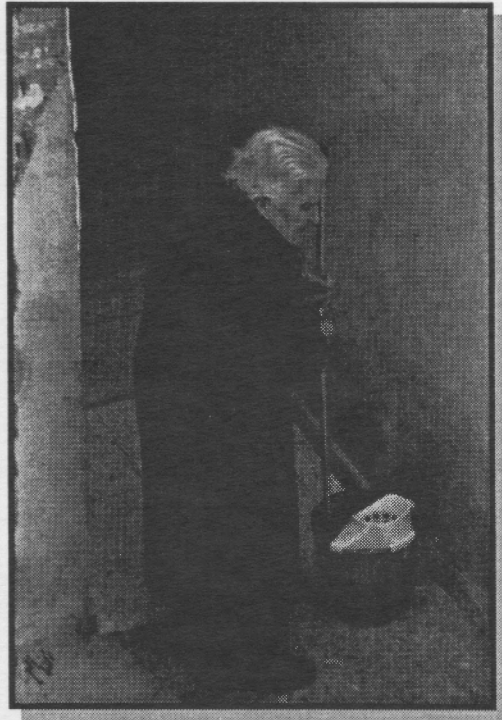
girl on fire

little girl
on fire
in the middle
of the road

says she loves
her mommy
loves
her daddy

doesn't
understand
she's already
as good as
dead

-John Sweet



-photo by Christopher M.

clean

monday afternoon
on beecher street

the factories have been dead
for twenty years

there's nothing left
but broken windows
and graffiti
and bird shit

the vampire rapist
is in jail again
and another young girl
has been found in
another empty field
in pennsylvania
and all day long
i've been hearing about
the chance of rain

and i still remember
placing the pennies
on my father's eyes

removing
the crown of feathers

and i should be in the basement
filing bones into daggers
or turning lead into gold

should be holding my wife
and telling her i love her
or maybe confessing my sins
to a plaster idol

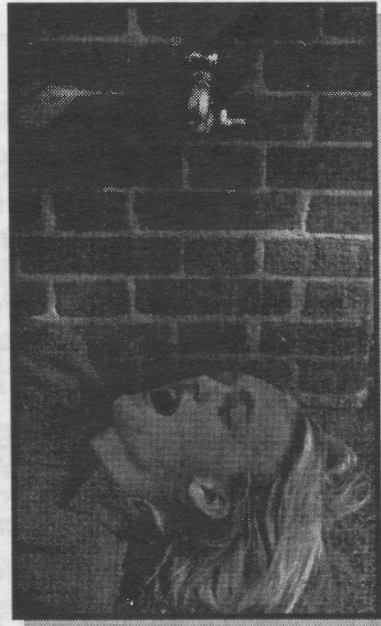
and another young boy
has been found mutilated
in a rest area in new york

and the flowers
planted in his name
have already been stolen

and i sit on the porch with a beer
and watch the factories
slowly turn to dust

and it still doesn't rain
and nothing is ever
washed clean

-John Sweet



-photo by Christopher M.

CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN BENNETT : *First time here. Prolific writer with an immensity of credits. "Bodo" and "The New World Order" available from The Smith, Publishers.*

JIM BUCHANAN : *The editor of "Angelflesh" (recommended!), this is his third time on these pages. Contact him at : pobox 141123, Grand Rapids, MI 49514.*

ALAN CATLIN : *Oft-published and award-winning poet residing in Schenectady, NY. Has several excellent chaps out. First time gracing these pages.*

DANIEL CROCKER : *Published in over 50 mags, nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times, author of numerous chaps; out of Park Hills, MO. Premier appearance in First Class.*

JIM DEWITT : *Second time in First Class. Editor of three publications, author of 34 published books, appearances in over 1200 lit-mags, and nominated for the Pushcart in 1997. Calls Grand Rapids, MI home.*

JOHN GREY : *Second time in First Class. An Australian living in New England earning a living in computers, writing stuff in his spare time.*

RICHARD D. HOUFF : *Editor of "Heeltap" mag. New anthology out on Pariah Press and latest book "Exit(s)" also available. Contact him at : 2054 Montreal Ave., St. Paul, MN 55116. First-timer.*

ALBERT HUFFSTICKLER : *Lives in Austin, Texas. Widely published, this is his first time in these pages.*

CONTRIBUTORS

PHILIP HUGHES : *Teacher from Brookline, MA. published in over 200 small-press mags. First time here.*

GERALD LOCKLIN : *Long time, far-reaching, small-press presence, with an abundance of publishing credits. First time here.*

HARLAN LYMAN : *Out of Cumberland, VA, first timer.*

STEVEN "CATFISH" MCDARIS : *Milwaukee-based postal-working poet, author of several chaps. His new perfectbound collection "Catfish in the Pecos" (80pp) is available through Angelflesh and is recommended.*

CHRISTOPHER M. : *Just some guy who takes photos.*

B.Z. NIDITCH : *The artistic director of "The Original Theatre", with an abundance of publishing credits both nationally and internationally. First time here.*

WALT PHILLIPS : *His drawings and poems appear widely, resides in Riverside, CA. First time here.*

STEVEN G. PLATT : *Member of the Root River Poets Society, Racine, WI, currently teaching at an inner city alternative high school. First Class debut.*

JOSEPH SHIELDS : *Texan with a Wisconsinite heart. Editor of "Nerve Cowboy", and published here, there, and everywhere. Contact : pobox 4973, Austin, TX 78765.*

JOHN SWEET : *Second time in these pages, writing out of Endicott, NY. Has a couple chaps out and is now seven cents ahead with me.*



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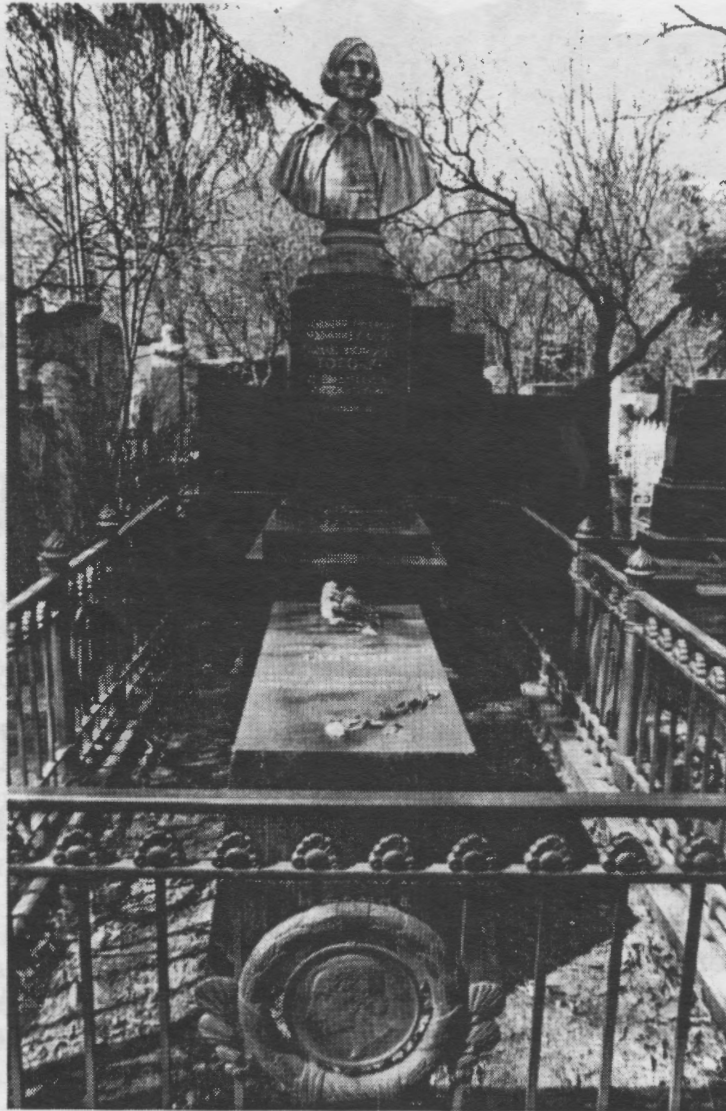
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