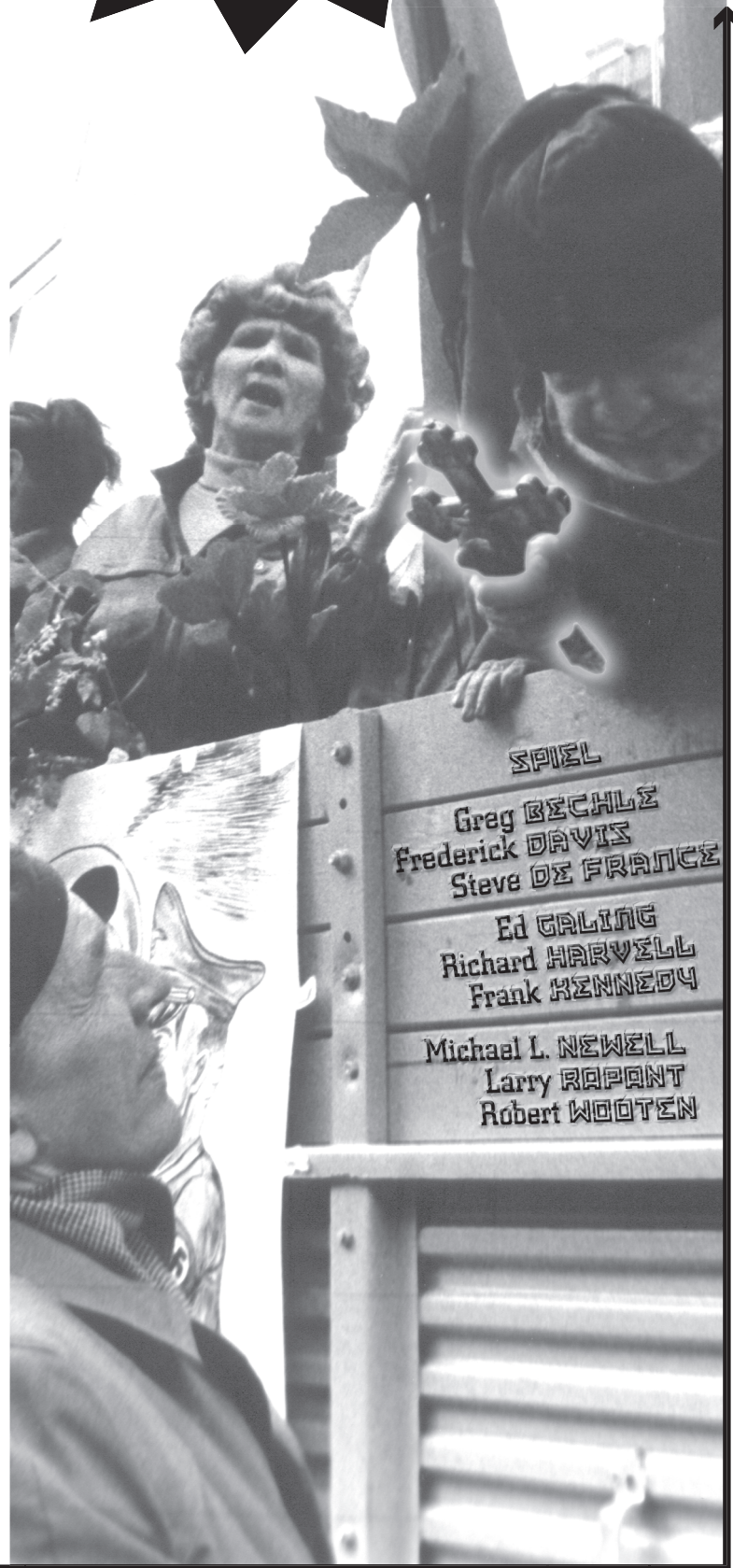


ISSUE TWENTY-SIX  
FIRST CLASS I of II.2006  
*(now published Feb./Aug.)*  
SIX BUCKS

# First Class



*...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...*







**ISSUE TWENTY-SIX**  
**FEBRUARY, 2006**

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**THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.**

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*Cover Art and Photograph, as well as  
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*First Class #26 brings together a few favorite writers who have appeared on these pages in the past, and several new names. I guess that's no real departure from every issue along the way: "new" names usually make up more than half of each issue. Yes, there are talented and established "regulars" that often provide irresistible material. However, you can expect to always find the very, very best words that pry their way into my pobox: new names, big names, fake names..... hell, it doesn't matter as long as it stirs the mind to thought and pulls open my mind, like a forcep, and pours in new ideas.*

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

*- Christopher M.*

*- christopherm@four-sep.com*

# Normal America

Greg Bechle

Sure, my sister's family lives a normal life in Westfield, Mass.

A nice house, two boys, a dog, a cat, a microwave and a swimming pool.

Also normal is the A-10 counterinsurgency jets flying low and practicing for the occupation of Iraq.

Over her house.

These days it is normal.

The invasion of Iraq caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties.

I wonder if an A-10 were to bomb a subdivision if it would be normal too.

After all, its only death.



JAIL INK - MOSCOW '95 by christopher m.

Any certainty you'll not be fooled assures  
 you're fooled. As with the Indian Rope Trick, consisting  
 of a coil of rope uncoiling straight up, an Indian boy  
 who climbs the rope, disappears. Preposterous,  
 a fine skullduggery—yet  
 when many claim to have seen it, a  
 group of Indian scholars shrug their shoulders, say  
 “Why not?” we have doubts. They are,  
 of course, in the pay of unscrupulous politicians  
 who lure tourists to Calcutta, disturb  
 fundamental Christian tenets, enjoy pushing  
 fiction as fact. Indians are known for that. Some  
 particles of truth exist: ropes,  
 fakirs who provide ropes,  
 made of indigenous hemp, woven by indigent women  
 not far from death on the streets; climbing  
 up a rope's a regularity for small boys of any  
 continental stripe. At college we learned  
 of gravity, the strong force, at-a-distance  
 simultaneity, have more than  
 a bit of smug about catchall explanations for crackpot  
 convictions, as with energy for the New Age,  
 quark and antiquarks and stringy strings  
 for physical nuclearists and their ilk, mewing  
 and slooping out the self-awareness of the universe,  
 immediacy of time and the lack thereof. Less  
 an explanation than possibility, any flashy version  
 of a soiled and tattered proposition brings a wink, an  
 antiquark where no quark would ever deign to dine,  
 dust behind hermetically sealed minds. Think of  
 that story of Jacob's Ladder—not unlike the IRT:  
 angels perched each rung, topping where the virtuous  
 are for eternity, smoothing knuckles  
 God must use to knock on unbelieving doors,  
 subject to remorse, lack of lively tunes, inclined  
 to petulance by noon. The ladder's no hoax, a way  
 to get you into synagogue or church, find that  
 eleemosynary impulse lurking in your stingy craw,



the end result of no result at all. Rope tricks  
have a sweet appeal, participating, as they do,  
  
strong and devilish,  
in apposing that strong  
  
force with creampuff ease of superstition, need  
to know what can't be known. Had Jacob  
  
and Mother Teresa got it on, imagine the challenge  
to poverty and abysmal death, she known to  
  
have an abundance of Christian tenets, he  
secretly proud of the way he left Aron a  
  
zero of inheritance: skullduggery at its finest degree.  
The perpetrator of the hoax, an impish journalist,  
  
or perhaps a malicious one, wrote a disclaimer;  
got little notice. Just as true riches are never  
transitory,  
  
an exceptional secret within a secret, guarded  
by the dagger of mysterious death, our faith's an  
  
integer divided not even by one, pushes aside  
fact-fiction as an old scholastic act, a  
  
number divided by itself and still no *one*. By one  
or no one, either way you can't be fooled—all  
  
of the world knows you a fool. The Indian boy  
surely had a mother, likely indigent, wove a  
  
quantum of hemp, indigenous; up he did not climb;  
for to think so, we of modern mind, would provide  
  
units of a mental institution with a reason to be.  
They would be clean, not like the streets  
  
of Calcutta. There'd be a lot of fakirs;  
we'd compare ourselves with God, his knuckles,  
  
spin more tales of wonderment for all the world  
to hear. Straight up, yes, yes!—nothing more to fear.

# Accidental Destiny

Steve De France

I judiciously select salad stuff,  
vegetables, potatoes.  
Passing frozen treats,  
I fail.  
I snatch a pint of vanilla ice  
cream, rolled in crunchy Heath bar  
parts. I contemplate the ice cream,  
ruminating on my soon-to-be-  
plugged-up arteries.  
My heart, my blood pressure.  
Death by dessert.  
Behind me, someone starts  
using their cart as battering ram,  
trying to shove it up my ass.  
Behind the offending cart,  
an ancient lady smiles under blue hair.  
Lots of costume jewelry & lipstick:  
blood red & lopsided. Comic, really.  
What the hell, it's the season.  
"Happy Kwannza," I say.  
"Merry Christmas," she says.  
Her teeth slip as she smiles.

We wait like lambs for the line to  
move, I stare absently through her caged  
basket. There in the middle of the  
white tile floor---cart wheels  
rolling by---barely missing him,  
sits a fat orange spider with  
long delicate looking legs.  
Waiting. Forlorn.  
Tentative. Vulnerable

Shoes scrape past.  
Motionless it waits.

A close grinding of wheels  
---he makes a run for it.  
Straight for the *Hi-Ho Crackers*.  
*God*, let him make it.  
The lady with loose teeth  
staggers backward & squashes  
him under foot, but regains *her* balance.

*He leaves a small red smear.*

Across webbed-streets I drive  
thinking of spiders & other parallel life forms  
who have all tried to share this planet with us.

I hear-feel a universal sound.  
It reverberates through my bones in the darkness.  
Sounds of celestial wheels grinding,  
coming apart, in a higher parallel universe.  
The sky jerks-bringing a sudden faltering in the stars;  
an indifferent step from a blue-haired God  
stumbles toward us and our accidental destiny.

i been in day care now  
for two weeks. my wife  
works durin the day  
and can't watch me all  
the time. she says she  
loves me, but since i  
can't work anymore,  
and she works in a bank  
the day care  
people will take care  
of me til she comes to  
pick me up. wife is 70  
years old, same as me.

today we all  
were put in a circle, and  
the woman in charge, name  
is michelle, began to read  
some stuff about the old  
days, and asked us all  
kinds of questions to see  
is we knew the answers.  
nobody knew anything, and  
most of them were half  
asleep, or fallin outa their  
wheelchair. this is no place  
to be. i tried to answer some  
of the questions, but found i  
couldn't remember anything.

they give us cookies and milk  
here at lunch time. the lunch  
aint much to brag about. all  
of the people here can't even lift  
a spoon to eat, or a fork either.  
most of them are in wheelchairs,  
walk around on canes, and are  
out of it, especially some of  
the women. most of them are  
older than me. in eighties and  
nineties, ready to kick the  
bucket any minute.

i hate this place.  
my wife  
says it's the best place for  
me when she is workin so she  
don't have to worry about me,  
but she is wrong. nobody wants  
to be here. nobody. the women  
here are all old people, bent  
over, eyes shut most of the time,  
and have to be spoon fed.

today one of the old women  
fell over, and they called an  
ambulance to take her away.

i don't know if she will live  
or not. it happens all the  
time. the rest of us were  
a bit silent after this,  
wondering if we were next.  
my wife says it's good that  
they take care of me, and  
watch me, so i don't walk away.  
the other day i felt like  
runnin away from here and  
disappearin for good. it don't  
pay to get old. you would  
think a day care is for young  
kids, not old people.

they had someone come in to  
entertain us today. some young  
high school kids, laughin,  
dancing, all that kind of stuff.  
great how they are able to move their  
arms and legs so good. i can hardly  
get around without pain. someone  
said once you get alzheimers you  
don't have long to live.  
i don't have alzheimers.

this day care room is a big  
one, with one window. and there  
is a crazy song that is played  
all day long, enough to drive  
me nuts. it's called "yankee doodle."  
it plays over and  
over again every hour. i almost  
got out of this place  
today. i was dyin for a walk.  
outside the sun was shinin, and  
i headed for the door when no one  
was lookin. i made it almost outside  
and was walkin down the path, lookin  
for the holy grail, when michelle, the  
young blonde who works here, came  
after me and grabbed me by the shoulder  
and told me to come back, before i  
got lost. she said it would be hard  
to find me if i disappeared, and i  
might even get hit by a car or somethin.  
she said i have to remember i am not  
well. she is wrong. i don't have alzheimers.  
but i went back with her against my will.

they treat you almost like a prisoner  
in this damn place. my wife says i  
should be glad i have someone to watch  
me while she works in the bank. she is  
tired when she comes home, she says, and  
she still has to take care of me at home,  
make my food, wash me, and change my clothes,  
besides payin all the bills and doing  
things i can't do anymore. she says i should  
be glad she is doin this for me. she says

we never have sex anymore at home,  
she is wrong about this.  
i don't have alzheimers.

i feel like this about day care.  
day care is for kids, young kids, who  
need to be babied while the young  
parents work. then it might make  
some sense for someone to watch over  
the kids. even then sometimes those  
young kids get in trouble when the  
parents are away, if you know what  
i mean. there is always  
someone who will abuse kids sexually.  
its always in the papers about this  
stuff. grown up old people like us  
don't need a day care. we need a place  
where you can get outside and move around.

today i tried to remember a couple  
of things, like where i lived, what  
my house number was, who the president  
was, things like that. they gave us  
a test at the day care center, one at  
a time. the woman in charge questioned  
us one at a time. when it came to my  
turn i answered all the questions, but  
the woman said i didn't answer one thing  
right, and that i should take my time,  
and try to remember things. she said  
that it was important for me to know  
things in case of an emergency. my  
wife came in to get me, and the woman  
and her talked together, whispering  
about me, and i could see them lookin  
at me, wondering what to do with me.  
hell, any one can forget things, that  
ain't hard to do, and i bet if you ask  
me things i can give you a good answer.  
i ain't dumb. and i don't have alzheimers.

the days are long in this damn day care  
place. we are out in the country, and  
there are lots of trees and stuff all  
around. inside all we do is play stupid  
games like bingo, and bocce ball, and  
pokeno, and checkers, and some of the men  
walk around like damn zombies. one guy  
walks around wipin the tables all day  
long, when there ain't a damn thing  
wrong with them. some of the women  
sleep most of the time they are here.  
later a bus comes in to take them away  
back to where they live. but with me,  
my wife comes to get me. we have an old  
ford station wagon, and my wife says  
we need a new car, and complains that if  
only i had a good job and was able to  
work, maybe we could get some place. i understand  
when she says its gettin hard for her to

take care of me, and she might be lookin  
around for another man. but i know she loves  
me, and just wants to make me scared. i hate  
this damn day care. and i don't have alzheimers.

today we played a funny riddle game.  
the woman in charge read a question,  
like we had to finish up the final  
words... for instance, she would ask  
us, as we sat around the circle,  
"sly as a ..." and we would answer  
"FOX"... or she would say, let's see  
if you can finish this one, you are  
as brave as a ... what? ... the answer is  
lion... everyone knew that one.  
it went on for some time, til i raised  
my hand and i said i am horny, like a toad...  
everyone laughed, except the one reading  
the riddles... and her face turned red,  
like she was never horny herself, the  
bitch. and i was only kiddin... even if  
i was as horny as a toad, i wouldn't  
ever have sex with her. it was just a  
way of makin some fun, but i don't think  
they liked it. and i  
don't have alzheimers.

what they should do with old people  
like us, is simply get rid of us  
like they used to do in japan, so they say,  
when they get too old. put them outta  
their misery. i don't know if this is  
true. but in japan they live a long time  
anyway. most of the old people here  
shuffle around during the day, and try  
to make the best of things, but in the long  
run, every one of us is gonna die, sooner  
or later. these people have all kinds of  
things wrong with them. sometimes a doctor  
comes in to take our blood pressure and  
stuff. mine is not too bad. the doctor  
said i am on the border line for a heart  
attack. what the hell does he know? i don't  
have alzheimers.

today my wife came to get me, and take  
me home. she was real serious. she said  
she was still a young woman and had lots  
of years left, and does not have the strength  
for me. she said she loves me, but lack of  
sex, and me not being able to do anything  
is gettin the best of her, and she might have  
to do somethin about it, like a nursin home.  
i know she is only kiddin. i am not a piece  
of garbage to be thrown away. i still know  
right from wrong. later on she cried a lot  
and hugged me.

today they turned on the tv set  
in the day care place, and showed

us old time movies about  
the real old days. we saw jackie gleason,  
and sid ceasar, and people like that. all  
of them dead and gone... it was real  
interestin, and it reminded all of us  
how time passes on... there was a time  
when i was young myself, and did a lot  
of things i can't do now. this old  
time stuff was a real tear jerker.  
i am making plans to escape this day care  
pretty soon, and disappear. i will  
walk away, hop a bus somewhere, and head  
west. i will become a cowboy or somethin.  
i will become a human being all over again.  
they will never find me when i go, not  
even my wife. i know she has someone  
else, and is cheatin on me. so be it.  
i know what i know. and i will take  
care of everything, and one thing  
i know for sure. i don't have alzheimers.



CURIOSITY by *christopher m.*

they closed the town  
down  
this day;  
when they brought  
johnny kelp back from  
Iraq;  
he was such a nice young  
twenty year old, who  
was a damn good fireman  
too, but wanted to go  
over to do his part in  
Iraq;  
got blown up first week  
he was there, his humvee  
went over a mine, the other  
four guys were killed too;  
but johnny belonged to us,  
in this town of mine,  
and now the town was closed  
down, with hundreds of fire  
engines and police escorts,  
it was a warm day, when these  
long lines of black funeral  
cortege went slowly down the  
street, passing a Sunoco  
Gas Station,  
    where the gas had just  
gone up from two bucks ten  
to two bucks fifty a gallon...



# Resurrection

*Ed Galing*

...they brought steve daniels  
home the other day,  
from Iraq,

steve was one of those guys  
who volunteered to go over  
there and do a job for our  
country, even though he was  
a fireman, and did a lot for  
the town,

he wasn't over there more than  
a few months before a bomb  
got him, as he passed over a  
rut in the road, and the humvee  
he was drivin, together with  
four other soldiers, all blew up  
and died together

the town went all out when steve  
came home,  
they put flags on the main street,  
over the fire house,  
they closed the town down and cops  
were everywhere,  
and fire engines lined up from all  
over different places, in his honor...  
it was a warm day, as the procession  
of funeral cars made their way  
slowly down the street, in solemn  
order,

as they passed the nearby gas station,  
where the price of gas had just gone  
up to almost three dollars a gallon,

and another oil well was blown up  
in Iraq.

1.

Sally Grove, Pete's sister-in-law, called Pete at three in the morning to tell him that Dan had been beheaded. Pete was surprised.

"I never thought it would be like this," Sally told him, "I'm sorry that I ever voted for HARKill."

Pete was not sorry, because he had not voted for HARKill. But he thought he was sad, like in the movies.

HARKill meant "Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killings." It had been passed three years earlier.

Pete got in his '17 Ford and drove across town to Sally's and Dan's. Sally was having a drink in the living room watching "Who Knew It?"

"Who Knew It?" was a quiz and popularity show where the loser had to move to the moon.

Sally had expensive breasts. She also had long black hair.

Pete asked if she had called Decap.

Decap was what everyone called Post-Decapitation Services. Everyone called Pre-Decapitation Services "Precap."

"No, I wanted to wait for you. Do you want a drink?"

"No."

"OK." Sally turned back to the TV.

"Sally, where is the permit?" Pete asked.

"On the counter."

The permit was on the counter. Sally had put the gin bottle on a corner to keep it from blowing away. Pete looked at it.

#### HARKILL PERMIT

Name: Dan Grove

Permit Holder: Jackson Stringe

Reason: 334-B

Date of Issue: 12-12-26

Valid 24 Hours

Reason 334-B was "Neglect of applicant's father in the workplace." "Neglect of applicant's sister in the workplace" was Reason 334-A. "Neglect of applicant's brother in the workplace" was not a Reason.

"Where is he?" Pete asked.

"On the bed," Sally said.

"Who Knew It?" was near the end. It was now the part when the home audience was voting for who should move to the moon. Sally was voting for a short woman even though the short woman had answered all the questions right.

Short women were rare.

Pete went upstairs to look for Dan. He was on the bed

with a spear through his chest. He had been beheaded and his head was not there. There was lots of blood on the sheets and the carpet. It was disturbing.

Pete was sad. He was sure of it now. He went closer to Dan and touched his foot. He had not touched his brother's foot for many years and now it was cold.

Sadness felt like a cold foot.

Pete called Decap. Two nice Disposal Assistants came and took Dan away in a shiny white bag. They asked Sally the necessary questions before asking her to sign the Decapa-tract.

Decapa-tract was the funny name for Post-Decapitation Contract.

“Did the Decapitation Initiator cause any damage to your person or property that you might, in good conscience, judge to be unrelated to said Decapitation?”

“No,” said Sally.

“Did the Decapitation Initiator use any racial or sexist slurs, religious rhetoric, or any other verbal abuse inconsistent to the rules of said Decapitation?”

“No,” said Sally.

“Mrs. Grove, at this time do you have any reason to suspect that said Decapitation was carried out for any of the following reasons: financial gain; racist, religious, or cultural hatred; or personal advancement?”

“Not that I know of,” said Sally.

“And lastly, Mrs. Grove, in full knowledge that whatever you say now could be used against you in a court of law, were you in any way involved in your husband's Decapitation?”

“No,” Sally said. She signed the Decapa-tract.

“Great,” the Disposal Assistant with the RitePad said.

“Super,” said the other Disposal Assistant.

Sally asked when the first Loss Reduction Payment would come.

“Tomorrow,” said the Disposal Assistant with the RitePad and nodded.

---

---

“MRS. GROVE, AT THIS TIME DO YOU HAVE ANY REASON TO SUSPECT THAT SAID DECAPITATION WAS CARRIED OUT FOR ANY OF THE FOLLOWING REASONS: FINANCIAL GAIN; RACIST, RELIGIOUS, OR CULTURAL HATRED; OR PERSONAL ADVANCEMENT?”

---

---

“Tomorrow,” said the other Disposal Assistant and smiled. They left.

“Do you want me to stay?” Pete asked Sally.

“No.” Sally said.

Pete left.

At home, Pete ordered two Stress Girls.

Stress Girls used to be called Stress Relieving Girls, but they changed the name to make it easier to say.

2.

Pete found the head at Peevey’s Sports. Peevey had a nice Easter display in the window—spears and knives and ropes and three heads. One of the heads was Dan’s. Dan had red eyes now. Everything else was the same.

Pete went in and asked for Peevey.

Peevey was very strong because he had gotten Gene Therapy before they found out it made you impotent.

Peevey was impotent.

“Can I buy the head in the middle?” Pete asked.

“Don’t sell heads.”

“But I can pay you.”

“Head belongs to my cousin. Head is not for sale. Period. End of Talk.”

People only said End of Talk when they started to feel mad. It stopped quarrels.

Pete felt warm. He thought maybe he was mad too.

“That head was my brother’s.”

“End of Talk.”

You shouldn’t have to say End of Talk twice. Luckily for Pete, Peevey was a very calm man.

3.

They sent Pete a video about revenge.

Revenge is very important, the woman in the video said, because even if you don’t want to revenge you will revenge. There are Good Kinds of Revenge and Bad Kinds of Revenge. First there was a list of Bad Kinds of Revenge: hitting your wife or your pet, burning things, going to church and asking God to make your enemy impotent, breaking someone’s possessions, hating yourself, hating society.

Then there was a list of good kinds of revenge: exercising, hitting soft things, going to church and asking God to forgive your enemy, buying things, Beheading your Enemy. Beheading your Enemy was written in red.

The woman said that of all the things on the Good Kinds of Revenge List, Beheading Your Enemy was the

least best and that was why it was written in red. But Society, she said, puts that one in for people who can't be happy with the other ones, because Beheading Your Enemy is still better than all the Bad Kinds of Revenge or we would never have Democratically Voted for it.

Then the woman asked Pete to ask himself a question: Can you be happy with all the Good Kinds of Revenge without needing to Behead Your Enemy?

Pete asked himself exactly this question.

Yes, he answered. Yes, I think I can.

He gave it a try.

4.

Two weeks later, Sally called him and asked if he had beheaded the man who killed her husband yet.

"No," Pete said.

"Could you please do it before Easter?" she said. "I want to have a Fertility Party. It would be much better if I felt Avenged."

Sally had gotten a video about "Being Avenged." It was a sexist society.

A Fertility Party was a party where non-barren women and non-impotent men got together and talked and played games about how great it was to be Fertile.

Most people were barren or impotent.

To tell the truth, Pete had tried most of the Good Kinds of Revenge and still he didn't feel happy. In fact, he had discovered, Not Revenging felt like having a tennis ball stuck in your throat.

Pete was not impotent.

5.

Pete enrolled in a HARKill weekend course. There were six other students: three fat men who giggled whenever you looked at them, a tall thin woman who was probably a librarian, a taxi driver named Antonio, and a shy chubby woman who told them she was Just Divorced.

The teacher was named Hank. Hank used to be a dental technician until he Beheaded his first Enemy. He was so good at it that he decided to teach other people. Anyway, he said, he was a bad dental technician. So it all worked out for the best. Hank told them that so far he had Beheaded three Enemies. He pushed a button on the wall and the mirror turned transparent. There were two heads hanging in a display case.

Hank said that the third one had started to rot and so he had to bring it back to the Embalmer. It would be back on Thursday and if they came then he would show it to them.

“He brutalized my sister,” Hank said and pointed at the first head. “That’s Reason S-2, an easy one to get.” He pointed at the second one. “He evicted my parents from their home of 34 years. At first they didn’t want to give me Reason M-22—that’s undue abuse of parents you know—but you see, I just let them know that if I didn’t get that permit I’d go berserk. Works every time.

“And the one with the rot, he’s the bastard who painted the swastika on the library last year. That one was real easy to get, I didn’t even have to be Jewish.”

Hank turned the glass back to mirror and told them to stand in front of it. He told them he had a Multimedia Show for them. Two of the fat men clapped and the third giggled. The lights went down and music began to thump in the background.

The words “Brought to you by the Association for the Preservation of Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killings” appeared where the mirror had been.

“The head,” said a voice that Pete recognized from TV. A man’s head and shoulders appeared on the screen. “Before God, before Government, before Art, there was the Head. Worshiped for its power, its reason, its passion.

“For millennia, it was the symbol of the head that held society together. The ultimate threat was the Honor Ritualistic Killing by Beheading.” Suddenly, on the screen the man’s head was severed. A world map appeared, and different regions were illuminated. “For millennia, in Greece, Rome, South America, South East Asia, Medieval Europe, Russia and across Africa it was the Honor Ritualistic Killing that held societies, families and communities together. The Honor Ritualistic Killing was the power of every man to be God, and thus there was not one God but many.”

The screen turned red and it began to sound like rain. Lightning struck. “And then came Modern Society. A new world was made where The State Would Be King. Laws and Courts replaced the rules of Honor and Ritual and told us that we were now Free. But in this new world was man his own King?”

A man, dressed in a suit and tie, stumbled across the red screen, his face haggard, his eyes dark. “No. And worse was to come.”

Then the sounds of angry shouting filled the room. Pete flinched. He heard thumps of flesh against flesh, then gunshots. The voice-over now had to shout to be heard. “The chaos of the twentieth century was the first glimpse that the modern system of justice was inadequate. Routinely, wars and racial conflicts began with quarrels between individuals and, helped by the rigid legal system, spread across the population. Race riots, genocide, world war, civil war, and gang violence could only be stopped in such places, such as the United States of America or Saudi Arabia, where the state had managed to retain a police hold on the population. As the 21st century began, as warfare

technology spread to all corners of the globe, as the internet allowed for unprecedented organized violence, such control soon proved impossible.”

The sounds of fighting heightened; there were screams of distress and pain.

“But then,” said the voice with increased enthusiasm, “a few enlightened minds, searching the past for answers to the problems of the present day, rediscovered the extraordinary solution: Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killings.

“When Law separates individuals, conflicts quickly spread across society.” On the screen two stick figures appeared. A short wall separated them. Soon more figures appeared behind and to the sides of the two initial figures. Then the stick-figure armies swarmed over the wall and began to battle. The battle continued until only one man was left and the screen was full of slaughtered stick figures.

“When law encourages individuals to think of their own, individual honor (or that of less fortunate dependents), conflicts do not spread beyond those few directly involved.” The same screen of stick figures appeared without the wall between the two initial ones. The two figures attacked each other and the figure on the right was quickly killed. The rest of the figures soon mingled harmlessly. “Where conflicts from earlier modern times often spread to thousands or even millions of people, today a single conflict rarely claims more than four or five lives before the initial insult is swallowed by the safety lever of personal choice. Eventually someone doesn’t take it personally and the insult vanishes. Furthermore, in our new enlightened world one must take full responsibility for one’s own actions.”

A city street, full of graffiti and scattered with trash appeared. Two men, one black and one white, were walking toward each other. They collided.

“You motherfucker!” said the black man.

“You lousy nigger!” said the white man, “You and your race are not worth the dirt it takes to feed you!” Groups of white and black men gathered on the streets, shouting insults.

The screen faded. “These two men are separated from each other by the State—they will go to jail if they actually fight. Hence, they both insult each other and develop feelings that will one day express themselves in civil war.”

“Now consider a similar scene from today, where both have to consider the personal costs of taking this conflict further.”

The same two men now walked a street without graffiti or trash. They collided and looked angrily at each other. Again groups of white and black men appeared. Both of the men considered and then smiled.

“No harm bro,” said the black man.

“Hey, no problem,” said the white man, “have a nice day.”

“You see,” said the voice over, “these men know that if they choose to take this conflict further—move to racial slurs or physical violence—they will then be entering the area of personal honor and the threat of Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killing. The mere threat is enough to dissuade them.”

“That is how, out of the darkness of modern society,” again the rainstorm and violent sounds filled the room, “Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killings have brought us to the dawn of the future.” The rain and red light turned to a soft glow and the sounds of violence turned to sounds of cheer and laughter. Credits scrolled across the screen.

They clapped.

7.

On Saturday morning they got *Psyched Up*. On Saturday afternoon they reviewed the ABCs of about *How Not to Go to Jail Beheading your Enemy*:

**Ask for a Permit first.**

**Be nice to everyone who is not your Enemy.**

**Cut of your Enemy’s head only after he or she is dead.**

Follow these three rules, Hank said, and you’ll live a long and rewarding life *Beheading Your Enemies*.

8.

On Sunday morning they took turns *Spearing my Enemy*. Hank had two foam dummies with the word “Enemy” on the front.

Then they practiced *Beheading Watermelons*. Hank said that of course *Beheading your Enemy* was different, but really, after the paperwork and after *Spearing your Enemy*, *Beheading your Enemy* is a *Piece of Cake*.

They got Sunday afternoon off.

9.

On Monday morning Pete went to get his Permit. He had Reason A-2: *Revenge of Honor Ritualistic Killing by Next-of-Kin*.

Reason A-1 was *Revenge of Non-Legal Killing by Next-of-Kin*. The Agent who gave it to him was very pleasant.

The permit cost 228 dollars.

A gallon of milk cost 139 dollars.

The Agent said, “Mr. Grove, your permit is valid for twenty-four hours. An additional permit will not be issued.”



“That makes it more safe,” the Agent said.

“That makes it more fun,” the Agent added.

10.

Pete went to see Jackson Stringe immediately. He brought the spear that Hank had given him as a graduation gift. It was a cheap folding spear from Wala.

Wala was the name for the single company that used to be two companies called Wal-mart and Coca-Cola.

On his way there he called Sally and told her he was going to Avenge his Brother’s Honor Allowed Ritualistic Killing. He almost said “my brother’s Murder” but he realized that was not true.

“Oh thank you dear,” Sally said. “You’re a good brother. Please come by after for drinks.”

11.

But Jackson Stringe was not at home.

“He’s playing baseball,” his mother said, “at the park.”

12.

Pete followed Mrs. Stringe’s directions to the park. There was a baseball game going on. Pete saw that it was the bottom of the ninth and that the home team was down by one run. And there was a man on first base. That was exciting.

Pete liked baseball. He thought it was the best way to Let Off Steam even though it was not an effective Good Kind of Revenge.

Pete took out a picture of his brother. Hank had said that was one of the best ways to Get Psyched Up.

He was not Psyched Up.

He tried jumping up and down. That was another way to Get Psyched Up.

Still nothing.

He didn’t feel sad. He was sure. He didn’t feel mad. He was sure of that too.

He asked an old lady clutching a white poodle who Jackson Stringe was.

“He is the one with the bat,” she said. “He’s my nephew.”

“He beheaded my brother.”

“That’s too bad,” the woman said. She petted her poodle. The poodle looked at Pete and showed his teeth.

Jackson swung and missed. Pete heard him say “smit.”

You said “smit” when you were unhappy and didn’t want to be rude.

“That’s too bad,” the woman said. “Jackson is not very

good at baseball.” She petted her poodle. Her poodle closed his eyes.

Pete decided he would give Jackson a chance. If he struck out, he would let him live.

Jackson swung and missed. That was strike two.

The pitcher wound up and threw the ball. Jackson swung and missed again. “Smit, smit,” he said. That was strike three.

Jackson spit and stepped back to the plate.

There were four strikes in baseball. It was more fun that way.

The pitcher threw the ball and Jackson hit it. He hit it very hard. So hard that it went over the wall. Jackson hit a homerun.

He ran to first base.

Pete took out his spear and began screwing it together. He started to feel Psyched Up. Maybe it was the homerun, or maybe it was the Anticipation.

Jackson ran to second base, waving at his team.

Pete realized that he felt real good. Kind of like he felt with Stress Girls only his penis wasn't hard.

A few spectators noticed that he had a spear and began pointing. Then they told each other to shush because they didn't want to spoil it.

Jackson got to third base.

Pete walked to home plate with the spear behind his back. Jackson didn't see it because he was waving at his aunt and her poodle.

But then, when he was just a few feet from home plate, Jackson looked at Pete.

Pete looked at Jackson.

This was exciting.

Pete speared Jackson through the chest. Jackson fell down. He screamed and then he stopped screaming because blood came out of his mouth and he could not scream anymore. He gurgled.

Then he stopped and was dead.

Some people cheered. Some people sighed. Jackson's aunt leaned over the body and cried and looked for money in his pockets. The poodle sniffed his wound. Some people took the opportunity of the break to use the Evac-You-Hoses.

Evac-You-Hoses were nifty new portable toilets that didn't even need doors.

Pete cut off Jackson's head with the kitchen knife he brought along. Hank had said that was the best way, but it was not so easy as Hank had said. Pete didn't like blood. But he finally got the head off. It felt good to be done with All That.

But there was a problem. Jackson had not reached home plate and now the two teams were arguing with the umpire. He was looking in the rule book.

The rule book did not say what happened if someone was Beheaded in the middle of a homerun.

Jackson's aunt butted in. She held her poodle in her arms because he wanted to chew at Jackson's open neck.

She had an idea. Since Pete had killed Jackson, it was only fair that he should replace him. Pete could run from third base to home plate and Jackson's team would get the run. That would mean they would win.

At first the visiting team said they did not like that idea because they would lose. But then they changed their mind because Jackson's aunt convinced them that it would be So Poetic. Jackson's aunt was One Sharp Lady.

Pete felt happy because this meant that Jackson's aunt was not mad at him. She didn't Take It Personally. That meant maybe he wouldn't have to worry about Revenge.

Pete went to third base. The crowd cheered for him. Jackson's team waited for him at home plate. Pete got ready to run.

The umpire stopped him. He had an idea.

The umpire told Pete to carry Jackson's head. Then it will be Really So Poetic.

They brought the head to him. It was still dripping blood. It was gross.

Pete held the head in front of him, careful not to drip any blood on his pants. He trotted toward home plate. Boy did he feel excited. This was the best moment of his life.

With a final leap he landed on home plate. The players cheered and lifted him up on their shoulders. He put Jackson's head on his shoulder, forgetting about the Gross Blood.

He had won the ballgame. Pete had never been a hero before.

He would never forget this day.

He never did.

# Rorschach's Feather

Frank Kennedy

"I see a big squashed bug over here."

"No you don't."

"Angel, that's what I see. Don't tell me I don't see it."

"I'm telling you, Joey, that's not what you see. What you see is a beautiful butterfly. What else do you see?"

"I see a little bird with a broken wing. It's trying to fly so hard, but it's just flopping on the ground."

"No, no! Joey, listen to me. What you see—what you're going to say you see—is a bird that was a little messed up, but it got cured, and now it's going to fly way over these walls."

"Why can't I just say what I really see, Angel? Why can't I just be a real person?"

"You get nowhere being real, Joey. You get everywhere being smart."

That's how it was at first with Joey. I had to explain it to him over and over again. Unless he did good on the Raw Shock test—that's what the docs here called the ink blots—no way was he ever going to get discharged, no way was his bird ever going to fly. They'd just say, "Hey, this guy's crazy as ever. No way he's fit for civilization." That's why I had to help him get ready for his big day with the shrinks.

I knew all about this test. They gave it to me twice already—once when I was admitted, and once about two weeks ago, when I was having a little trouble with self-control. And I'm scheduled to take it again, after what happened last night.

For our practice sessions, Joey and me, we'd mash up some black pepper and coffee grinds and crud from the commissary and squeeze it all into folded pieces of scrap paper. We made our own ink blots, just like the old guy who invented the test—some shrink from Transylvania, some foreign place like that. We needed some color, too, so I copped a green crayon from one of the nurse's desks, and Joey nicked himself on a saw in Occupational Therapy to give us a little blood.

I started training Joey by giving him some pointers on how to behave with the doc. "When you go in there, Joey, you're going to be Mr. Enthusiasm. You're eager to cooperate. You can't wait to take this terrific test. You're going to get real friendly with the doc, make sure he don't write bad stuff in your file—and I seen these files—words like 'evasive' or 'paranoid.' When they shove you in that test room and take the jacket off you, you're going to say, 'How are you today, doc?' Say it for practice."

"How are you today, doctor?"

“No, no. Don’t call him doctor. He’ll write down you’re an ass kisser. Be genuine.”

“But Angel, I am kissing his ass.”

“I know that, Joey, but you don’t want it to show. You want to sound casual, you know, like if you were meeting him for a brewskie. Next thing, you say, ‘I’m certainly looking forward to taking this here test, doc. I got nothing to hide. You’ll see I’m rehabilitated.’ That’s the word you gotta keep saying, over and over. Say it.”

“I’m rehabilitated, doctor.”

“Doc.”

“I’m rehabilitated, doc.”

“Then you put a big grin on your face, and you lean forward. You can’t wait to grab them Raw Shock cards and ‘free sociate.’ That’s what they calls it. And look him square in the eyes. Don’t be looking at the bars on the window or the trees out in the yard or the pukey sweat on the walls. You want him to think, ‘Hey, Joey isn’t “guarded.” He’s a real friendly guy.”’

“I’m getting scared. Angel. You’re making me real uptight with all what I got to say.”

“Joey, this is for your own good. You want to get out of this here hospital, don’t you? Get home to the wife? Let’s get to the real important stuff—what you’re going to say you see. Now, once you got ‘rapport’—that’s what they calls it when you both pretend you’re blood brothers, real tight pals—the doc’s going to show you the ink blots, and ask what you see there. He’ll say ‘Don’t censor anything.’ That means he wants you to spill your guts, and naturally that’s the *last* thing you want to do. You want to keep the crazy stuff to yourself. You want to keep it upbeat, you know, positive. You say, ‘No problem, doc. I got nothing to hide.’ And then you bullshit him.”

I told Joey what they’d make out of him seeing a squashed bug or a bird with a broken wing—he’d be the squashed bug that would rot in here forever. He had to keep the loony tunes to himself. You can just imagine the shrinks clucking away and saying to each other, “Vell, it is obvious, is it not, gentlemen, zat dis patient sees *himself* as ze bird mit ze broken ving!”

Joey was sitting on my cot, and I moved closer to him, kind of intimate-like.

“Joey, now we’re going to have to talk man-to-man about sex. Let’s face it, you might see some sex stuff in the blots—I know I did—and here you want to be *very* careful in what you say.”

Joey groaned, but I proceeded with my lesson.

“Suppose you see a big pair of tits, like I did. Now, you don’t want the doc to think you’re some kind of sex maniac or nothing, so say what I did: ‘Some guys might see breasts over here, doc. But I don’t. They just look like melons. They remind me of my garden at home,

and my wife, and how much I want to be with her.' (My wife actually divorced me three years ago, but no matter.) Then the doc'll say to himself, 'Hey, Joey has no sex hang-ups, and he seems to be family-oriented too.'"

By this time, Joey was getting more and more upset with me. "For God's sake, Angel," he said, "give me a break. I can't remember what all you're telling me to say. I just want to let it all hang out. And what business is it of yours anyway what I say to the doc?"

Well, I had to remind him that we're here on this planet to help each other, and that I cared about him as much as I cared about anybody, and that my name, after all, was Angel.

"Joey, when I was a kid, my mother told me why she named me Angel. She said, 'I want you to be a good son to me, to stay out of trouble, and to do good to other folks.' Well, I sure didn't stay out of trouble, and I sure haven't been an angel in my life, but I sure can try to do right in here, being a good Samaritan. I want to be your angel, Joey."

He reached out and patted my head, and everything was OK with us again.

Over the next few weeks, I continued to sharpen up Joey's bullshit skills. "The most important thing of all, Joey, is not to see any stuff that'll make them think you can't *control* yourself. That's what they really worry about with guys like us. Keep that stuff to yourself. Like, on one card, I saw pieces of a puzzle exploding all over the place, but that's not what I told the doc. I said, 'I see jigsaw pieces coming together to make a beautiful picture. It's just like how I feel about my own therapy here in the hospital, doc.' He probably said to himself, 'Hey, Angel really appreciates the help I've given him!'"

"Up in the corner of another card," I told Joey, "I saw a mace, like the gladiators used to bash each other's brains in, all covered with gunk—and I figured I better think fast here, because I knew what the doc would make out of that. So I told him I saw an apple with cinnamon pieces stuck on it, like a Christmas ornament I hoped would some day hang in my own house, for my kids to enjoy. Now, my kids won't give me the right time of day, but I bet the doc said to himself, 'Hey, Angel is real sensitive, and seems to be a real caring dad, too.'"

Joey was looking even more wild-eyed now. He said, "Gee, Angel, you got to think fast when you take the Raw Shock test. I don't think I could be as fast on my feet like you are."

I said, "That's why they gave it that name, Joey. Each ink blot's like a raw shock on you. You don't have a lot of time to pull yourself together and put on a 'facade.' That's what they call it when you try to bullshit them."

Joey's psych appointment was coming up in four days, and I decided to let up on the instruction because he

was getting more and more frazzled. I didn't want him to freak out in front of the doc, so we relaxed and tried to get to know each other better. We'd only been cell mates for about two months at that point, and we thought we'd just fool around with our blots, have some fun, and not worry about Joey's big day with the shrinks.

Sometimes, we'd pass the time trying to sound really, really nuts. We'd make up the wildest stuff, playing the game we invented called Shock the Doc. I'd be the doc, and I'd say,

"Vell, Mr. Joey, vat do you see in dis here card?" And Joey'd come up with such funny stuff, like "On the left half is my poor brain before I got treatment. On the right half is my poor brain afterwards."

I'd play too: "In the middle is the Guardian Angel of all Mankind. He's in heaven, sitting on his mother's lap. *She's* sitting on God's lap and God says to her, 'What a good boy you got there. What a little angel!' God pats him on the head, and then God starts to sing Danny Boy." We'd all have a good laugh afterwards, two loony birds trying hard to sound even crazier.

Last Saturday, Joey said he was sick of all the games and the bullshit training course. He told me he wanted us to get more serious, to be more personal. That's the word he used—personal. He wanted us to look at our blots and tell each other what we *really* saw, tell each other how we *really* felt. I didn't want to have anything to do with gushy, sissy stuff, but he said, "Angel, be an angel," so how could I refuse?

"Angel, over here I see two tiny people holding hands. They kind of look like my little Sarah and Emily. Oh, how I wish I could hold them now and love them."

Would you believe it? He actually *kissed* the card before he put it down. Then he bored me with stories about his two kids, and how they'd like to play make-believe with him many years ago, before he got sick. Then he actually started to cry, for God's sake. He made me real uncomfortable with this stuff.

Night after night, before lights out, he'd pester me with the blots, and want to tell me more. He'd cuddle up to his pillow, and then he'd get all emotional and

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“THAT’S WHY THEY GAVE IT THAT NAME, JOEY. EACH INK BLOT’S LIKE A RAW SHOCK ON YOU. YOU DON’T HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER AND PUT ON A ‘FACADE.’ THAT’S WHAT THEY CALL IT WHEN YOU TRY TO BULLSHIT THEM.”

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teary-eyed. You really had to hand it to the guy; it was amazing what all he could see in the blots. When I looked at them, I really couldn't see much of anything, to tell you the truth. But Joey, he saw animals and people and plants and flowers and so many things that he said reminded him of his past, like his ma and pa and his priest, and his wife Sadie and the mistakes he'd made and his hopes for a future. I couldn't stop him. When I tried, he said, "This is what's in my heart, Angel. This is what's real for me. What's in your heart, Angel? What's real for you?" I didn't answer him, but he kept pushing me.

"Angel, I see a big umbrella over here, but it's shredding and coming apart, just when it starts to rain. Sometimes I feel like a big tornado's building all around me, Angel, and it's going to sweep me away. Do you ever feel like that?"

Even though I did sometimes feel a storm was coming, I just kept that to myself. But being quiet didn't sit too well with Joey.

"Angel," he said, "sometimes I think you got so good at raw shock bullshit you can't play it straight with me if you wanted to. Be a real person for me, Angel; I need you." I told him I was doing my best. And I was.

Night before last, Joey was sitting on his bunk, fooling around with the ink blots. He was playing with his beat up pillow, all stained, and seams popping open. "Angel, did you ever have a favorite pillow when you were a kid?" He told me this story about how much a ratty little pillow comforted him when he'd hear his dad beating on his mother.

Well, his story must have hit some nerve. Before you knew it, tears rolled down my cheeks. I told Joey what his story had done to me.

"Now I remember. I did have a smelly old pillow just like yours when I was a kid. It was like a twin brother for me. I even named him Angelino, would you believe it? I remember I was so scared all the time, and I used to hug Angelino real tight when I felt that way. One night, my mother walked in on me talking to him, saying 'There, there, Angelino. Everything's going to be all right.' She threw him out in the garbage." After I told Joey this story, I felt like he'd seen me without any clothes on.

Later that night, Joey fell asleep and the corridor outside our room was still as death. In the dark, I wondered what all was happening to me. I felt real scared. It was like Joey was pulling me somewhere I didn't want to go, a place full of shadows and spooky memories and funny feelings and it was as cold as the grave.

Maybe Joey was right. Maybe I was nothing but bullshit. I had to be more real, like he wanted me to be. I had to do something to make him really appreciate me. I had to be his angel.



Last night, Joey and me was playing with our ink blots again, and in one card, Joey said he saw black clouds closing in on some animals. He saw them struggling and squirming to get away. “These are nice animals, Angel—bunnies and deer and antelopes. But they’re in so much pain. They feel so lost, Angel, and they just want to escape. They want to be free.”

I’d never seen him so upset. He started to cry and I couldn’t stand seeing him suffering so.

Then I had this flash in my head. I knew our ink blot games had brought Joey and me together in a final, really beautiful way. Joey was telling me he needed my help, that he had no breath left for playing with ink blots or for anything else. He was in pain. He wanted to be free. He needed me to be his angel.

It wasn’t done in anger but in love. Why would I be angry with a man like Joey?

The pillow kind of gasped as I held it down, like it was also letting go of life. Then a little feather popped into the air.

I watched that feather reach upward. It fluttered and twisted in the glare of the swinging light bulb, and then it fell back. It looked like a little bird with a broken wing, trying to fly so hard, but just flopping on the ground.

# I Ain't Gonna Study War No More

Michael L. Newell

*(for Christopher M.)*

roll my fists back up inside my shirt sleeves  
bury the knife deep inside  
a sock drawer place gun and club on a blazing boat  
sailing onto lake river or sea  
and find an old farmhouse start a garden

plant books children and vegetables  
sit in a rocker and wait for what sprouts  
to decide my next task  
rain washes away the dust and debris of years  
opens earth's womb waters crop child and word

plurals thrive in every direction the bounty  
of earth sky and time patient healing time  
the fertility of peace abounds  
do not open a paper or turn a t.v. on  
drape forest stream and mountain across your vision

## Some Words Without Meaning Or Irony

*Michael L. Newell*

ragged words rage the page no one knows why only that the writer lacks coherence or a clear point and why not these be modern times a zone where meaning neither coheres nor inheres in much of anything that anyone can find or point to look at corpses piling everywhere one looks glance at a corrupted sky earth seeded with poison shake that glass close to the ear even the former joys of alcohol induced oblivion lack charm or reason now there's a word for you when was the last time you could sing reason sweet reason and sound like you meant it when did any decisions taken by the decision makers last convey rationality prudence sober judgement children raped in refugee camps deep in the heart of texas religion used as an excuse for the casual dealing of death nature used as an excuse for ignoring the poor blame the victims geography no barrier to the insanity which passes for society culture religion shall we gather at the river has a whole new meaning and night brings not blessed sleep but the cries of the helpless the maimed the dying the writer is told celebrate what is positive no one needs to be reminded of the negative what a choice of words as if horror is a lexical choice death by bullet starvation bomb hurricane is a matter of personal volition all who suffer fall in one of two categories don't you know they either don't matter due to financial or geographical location or they are being punished for their sins men's bullets and bombs equal executioners with forces of nature in carrying out the work of an angry god whose god which god what god who decided these people did not do not deserve the same chance at a meal a job a bed a family an education a glass of water a well-lighted room with an unlocked door and friends singing and playing instruments in the yard outside the opened window where do they go to lodge an appeal who will speak on their behalf who who who who who who

# A Matter of Faith

*Larry Rapant*

it came to me in a dream  
that there is a robin somewhere  
one mother of a robin somewhere  
who is responsible for everything everywhere

instead of laying little blue eggs  
she lays stars and planets  
she's disguised as just another robin

and mixed in with all the rest  
but if you see her or  
if any part of her song gets in your ear  
or even if she shits on your shoe  
it's instant enlightenment

I'm the only one in my town  
who has been blessed with this insight  
and to increase my chances of coming  
into contact with the one true robin

I operate a worm farm  
and I use the bodies  
of all the local fishermen I kill  
for fertilizer

May's bare heel lands on a sliver of glass no thicker than a housefly's wing. She winces—then drops her jaw as if to let out a thin screech—but does not make a sound.

Delia leaps to the top of the refrigerator.

Those darn fool crazy kids have been doing their band practice in the garage right next to May's kitchen window since ten o'clock last night. She can barely hear today's sad TV news about President Reagan. She's afraid to turn it any louder for fear the electric company will charge her more for excess consumption. Her Old Age Pension check is already stretched as tight as the skin on her belly had been sixty-two years ago when she was pregnant with Lara and Lana. How could she forget that?

Reagan sure greased up his hair with a slimy gob of Bryl Creem in all those flashback pictures the *Today* show is playing. She thinks she would never sleep with a man with greasy hair. Recalls Reagan advertising cigarettes in the old days. Back when he'd smiled that exact same big All American smile he used again in '81 to get iffy Democrats to jump ship and vote for him. "Wha' brand a smokes waz zat?" she asks Delia. "Chesserfeels. Mayb'." She'd smoked Chesterfields until she got so dead-sick carrying Roger. Never smoked since. No more than a chance of dumb granite instantly turning to diamonds that she could afford even one single cigarette these days but it sure might be nice to sit back and light up again. All three of her kids ended up smoking.

And why have those stinkers abandoned her? And are they still smoking?

She cranks her grey ankle up onto the red-topped, chrome-legged, kitchen table. No blood on her heel but she spots a sparkle: then remembers dropping the pint jelly jar where she'd stored the thumbtacks she always used to poke pictures of her kids up on the door jamb into the toilet. Especially snapshots of her favorite—Roger's little kid, her granddaughter, Courtney. Down at the Safeway bakery counter, a childhood friend of Courtney's had told her that the dear child'd signed up for Army duty right after those nasty towel-head Arabs blew up New York City.

Oh yeah, and maybe a new picture of cranky Foster'd be nice, if that old geezer just had the decency to show up one of these days and give her another shot at him. Besides, she's needed him to fix her kitchen sink since, oh, say, maybe the last time she bought a new dress. And that old new dress is in tatters now. She's sick of using the bathroom sink to scrub her dishes and cotton hose. And besides that, the only picture she's ever had of that old dog goes way back to when he came dragging his constipated tail home from Japan, *and* he

looks like such a sour puss in it! And guess what? The picture's turned so yellow, he looks like a Jap goon. He sure didn't look that way when she married him! In fact, he'd looked kind of like Ronald Reagan the very first time she ever saw the dashing movie star acting in that movie about the football player, and he was so young—and just looking backwards, so was she—right before the Big War. Mercy, how the decades fly.

A sharp flick of her fingernail and the glass splinter pops out but she can't see where it lands. Darn it! What if poor Delia gets it in her bib, then licks it out grooming herself? Oh heck, it'll eventually show up in one of those nasty hairballs.

Come to think of, she hasn't got any new pictures from anybody for quite a spell. "That dawggone good-fer-nothin' boy a mine don' know wha' I've went through. Don' call. Don' do nothin'. Go through wives like p'tata chips," she thinks, almost aloud. "Two wimmin in Chicaga. Two more 'n Vegas." She believes Delia can hear her thoughts. "An' them twins a my'z is ingrates! Run-off hussies from the git-go."

Roger's little Courtney was such a sweetie-pie when she came to spend the summer with Grandma—how the child put with up with those prickly-pear braces when she was so tiny. Good heavens, she could've been blown up by now in that darn fool Bush's war and who knows if Roger'd even bother to phone her about it. Or who knows how many *great* grandkids he's got now that he's never told her about. A bunch?

Anyway, surely Courtney would've sent her a new picture if she was OK.

Maybe it's time to start sending Christmas cards again. See if anybody responds. Be darned if postage hasn't gone over the rainbow.

"Boosh ain' Reag'n," she mutters towards Delia as she digs at the hard cracked calluses on her heel. "An' he ain' FDR. Now ther' was a prez'den.'" Then quickly looks behind her shoulder, thinking someone is there.

She wonders if they've had to duct-tape Reagan's body to the inside of his casket to keep it from rolling around as they've hauled his poor mindless soul all over the place. "Bout a mi'yon miles. Fer crim'ny sakes, why cain't they jiss leave 'im dead? Mus' cos' 'nough ta feed them starv' kids a Aferca fer all tha bomb-sniffin' s'curity whur evers they plant him." For all anybody knows, they might've stuck the body of a homeless drunk in that fancy box and kept Reagan's corpse in cold storage in California—just in case of a terrorist bomb at the Capitol. You could sniff his casket to see if it stunk of Bryl Creem. Thousands and thousands of darn fool worshippers practically fainting dead in that awful steamy heat of Washington.

Some folks just love dead.

She figures Florence and Loretta Zinanti and that whole club of old Italian hags, two blocks south, are flinging their bodies over their TVs right now, wailing

through their black scarves and carrying on—just like they do every time any darn fool dies. Then they spend the next five days sitting in a yappy circle around the living room of the dead, stuffing their big bellies with the heaps of food that come in: Jell-O salad with marshmallows and salami on Wonder bread, enough deep-frosted chocolate cake on paper plates to make them so sick they finally give it up. Then they move on to the next unlucky dead guy who can't stand up to shut their mouths. "Ther' crazy," she says to Delia. Delia's asleep on top of the refrigerator. "Let them dead be dead."

Nancy Reagan looks so empty.

Her waist used to look so tiny in red.

The band next door stops playing.

The kitchen feels so empty.

The sink stinks like rotten cabbage.

May wishes she could look as pretty as Nancy.

May used to be pretty.

Before she had kids.

Before Foster.

She dumps a packet of instant oatmeal into a dark green thermal mug she got at The 99¢ Store, then pours it back into the packet. She doesn't feel like eating. Laying out real cash for two boxes of the instant stuff a week before the millennium was foolish. Down right crazy. She burns a couple pieces of toast—then tosses them into the wastebasket on the back porch. Her stomach hasn't been right lately. She pours hot water over yesterday's tea bag and crushes three soda crackers and an aspirin into the mug. Slowly spoon-feeds herself but nearly gags it back up. Then digs a few three-day-old uncovered green beans from behind two chunks of moldy cheese on the bottom shelf of her fridge and feeds them to Delia out on the concrete back step next to Foster's useless old boots as she heads into her garden.

Delia refuses the beans with a flick of her foot.

May considers bringing the white geranium from her kitchen window out to transplant it in one of the gawldarn high top boots but gives them a mean hefty kick down into the cellar step-well instead.

Her chive blossoms have turned a dull ugly beige. They'd been such a pretty lavender just a week ago. If she lets them go any longer, they'll scatter seed to Kingdom Come. Take over the whole darn fool yard. She rips their heads off and shoves them into her worn-out, striped, blue and white cotton ticking, apron pocket. The garden has become too much for her. Her perennials are all in bloom at the same time and they look ratty. She has an angry urge to run the mower over the whole dawggone yard. It's all out of whack. Everything is out of whack. She'd swear the Jonathan apple tree used to be in the north corner

next to the alley and now it's in the south. And the alley never had a privet hedge. Never! Where did that hedge come from and when did they move the alley so close to her house? That garage next door—it used to be at the back of their property—not right slam-bang next to her kitchen window. And this pathway to the shed was bricks, not pink concrete blocks. And who the heck put that stupid dinky tin shed at the end of the pathway in the first place?

“Ever'thin's wen' crazy!” she mumbles, beneath her breath. Looks to see if Delia is listening.

Suddenly, her head feels like it's filling up with that stuff that makes balloons float—like the one from the State Fair she'd found hooked to her hollyhocks last August—and her head is filling up with that stuff and she thinks she's going to float. She immediately reaches for the big elm tree in front of the bathroom window: the tree where Roger'd built his tree house when he was eight, fell out of it and broke his arm, turned into a cranky kid from that day on. That huge tree. The first tree she and Foster had planted (too close to the back wall) when they'd built this little house. But the tree is not there. And the three-inch, upright, steel pipe which is the south end of her clothesline barely breaks her fall instead—scrapes her knuckles but leaves only white scratches—no blood.

She spits on her knuckles to make the scratches disappear. Hopes no one has seen it happen. They might send her to the *crazy house*.

She needs a man around the place again to keep things right.

Maybe she should just give it all up and move into one of those bone yards for hard-up old folks—like Fanny Crooks. They have a cafeteria and a grounds keeper and a nice clean Mexican man who'll fix your sink. She doesn't know if she could stand a bunch of know-it-all, slicked-up, combed-hair, young volunteers coming in every Wednesday to make them play dumb games: batting balloons over a tennis net, hanging around a clanky piano and everybody trying to sing, *She'll be comin' roun' the mountain*. And what would happen to Delia? A pint of milk at Safeway is eighty-nine cents these days. Delia needs her warm milk each morning. Dawggone it...this is her home.

Eighty-nine cents should buy a whole gallon of real whipping cream!

Nancy Reagan probably has a whole crew of those California Mexican wetbacks to deadhead her chives! Pays them a cup of rice. And even after Ronnie went goofy on her, at least she could still bend over to sniff his hair. Those rich Senators in Washington shouldn't make her stand on her feet so much for all this casket folderol at the Capitol. She could get a blood clot like Edna Meyers got when she tried working as a shopping cart hostess at Wal-Mart just to pay her rent. Poor old lady!

May picks up Delia by the scruff of her neck. Asks, “Why don' somebod' put Nancy on a wheel cart er



somethin? They's plenny a big strong so'jers hangin' roun' 'at can make one a them chair things wi'h thur arms un carry 'er, cain't they?"

The kids from the band pour out of the garage door. One of them, tall as the door and not much thicker than a pole, hauls a turquoise TV under his right arm. Sits on it like a stool, with his head down between his spread knees. He fires up a bone pipe. All seven of them are drinking beers. Every exposed part of their bodies has been has been pierced and pierced and pierced again—a tubby one has huge gold rings stretching out huge flesh loops in his earlobes.

May can't even recognize Freddie anymore. Must be five years since he's come over to shovel her sidewalks. Never charged her a cent. Just did it cause she was an old lady and his neighbor. He was such a round little dickens when she first met him. So timid. She'd taught him how to string a cat's cradle between the two of them when his fingers looked like nothing more than sprouts on small round new potatoes. His folks were always (and still are) working long hours at their restaurant. She suspects Freddie is the tubby one with two chins and the weird rings in his earlobes. Wonders if the rings are painful. She thinks she recognizes the color of his startling black hair, then comes to her senses and realizes the kids've all dyed their hair black. Still, the dyed black looks like coal dust and the hair of the kid with the rings shines.

Now, she's caught off guard by a bright-breasted robin as he darts in front of her face—swoops down at her feet and grabs the very last one of her strawberries. She's hardly picked a cup off the whole patch this year. Seems the same happened last year. Probably the same bird. What's the use of feeding them scraps if she can't get one measly cup of strawberries? Oh well, at least the birds don't mess with her rhubarb. The leaves are big as a rain barrel these days. Stems are filling out real nice. She should be able to get a couple dozen pints of sauce and a pie or two off her plant. Per crop. One now and one before snow. Truth is, she still has sauce using up her good pint jars from three years ago. Doesn't have much of a stomach for tart anymore. Old Foster used to like it with whipped cream and angel food cake. Maybe she could take some sauce down to Fanny and those poor old folks at the bone yard. She worries they might not remember to return her canning jars. Like the jar she broke. Which reminds her: the cut on her heel stings, a bit of the glass might still be in there, or else it's those awful deep cracks in her calluses that're stinging.

The freaky kids line up along her chain link fence—droop over it like half-loaded garbage bags. Their faces look like a K-Mart ad for a Halloween makeup kit. The canines of the tall pole kid have been filed down to snags. The whole bunch gawks at her like they're watching TV. Could care less that they are crushing her Virginia creeper vine.

She holds her distance.

The tubby kid with the stretched earlobe and natural black hair leans forward. Says, “Whoa, yo! The Ray-Gun bit the sludge, man. Like ditched his horse. You ever know ‘im? Dude ‘uz old ‘uz you, man.” Barely expending a breath, the band of freaks echoes a dry, “Yo.” The tall pole kid says: “Aight. Zonin’. Reecealy faaahhhcked.” They continue to stare with flat dead eyes. A petite hard-faced female, with double rows of dull silver rings pierced in where her eyebrows once grew, holds out the bone pipe, (as if to pass it to May). Says in a growling voice, “Ill-ass dude croaked. We got TV. You got TV, man? Rock on.”

“Hey! You still know me?” the stretched earlobe kid says.

May winces. Hopes she’s only dreaming the frightening sight of these kids. Coming from her TV, she hears, *Mine eyes have seen the glory...Gawl-darn it!...of the coming of the lord.* She should have turned it off! It’s wasting electricity. Pennies are so precious—in fact, wasn’t the scarcity of pennies the reason she’d made the fateful decision to have her phone disconnected a few years back? She can’t remember. But it must be close to three years now. And this is no time to let her mind wander!

She stoops way over and grabs one of Foster’s boots from the cellar steps. Just in case. You never know when you’ll need a weapon these days.

The boot has steel toes.

“Rad, man,” the earlobe kid says. He vaults the fence just like he did when he was a child. Then grabs her by the shoulders. Gives her a whomping bear hug. His hair stinks of used pizza.

He is too up-close for May to whack him in the head with Foster’s boot. Her right ankle twists and she breaks the heel off one of her low red canvas pumps as she tries to push him away. Cold shivers prick the fine hairs on her arms. Her jaw turns to stone. Her pinned-up hair comes undone and the beige chive blossoms tumble out of her apron pocket.

Suddenly, the hideous grind of a chain saw screams from inside Foster’s tin shed at the back of her yard.

Freddie pulls his face back from hers—sticks out his pierced tongue and grins. “Wacker, cat’s cradle!” he says.

The kids on the fenceline think it’s a TV reality show. Stupidly pass the bone pipe. The stink of the stuff is stronger than the powerful sweet odor of May’s honeysuckle. A glossy black-throated hummingbird zips by, just an inch from her ear. Adds its zzzoom to the insistent scream of the chain saw. Her eardrum is hot as fire.

Freddie is oblivious to the hummer or the mean rip of the chain saw.

May hugs the boot as if it were the sturdy steel clothesline post. Attempts to regain her ground. She fills her

lungs and chucks the worthless boot back down the cellar steps: can't remember why on earth she had it in her hand, tucks her hair behind her ears and under her collar, begins to pick up the chive blossoms as if there were not another soul on earth, can't imagine why the blossoms are in a heap next to her back door instead of next to the spent red tulips where her chives have always grown. Delia pounces on the boot. Crawls half-way inside of it with her tail flicking, "Come yank me."

"We got blazed, man," Freddie says. "Scarfin' down bad-ass-pizza from my ole man's place. Like turned green. Ya got any kind a bakin' soda, girl?"

Suddenly Freddie's presence seems real to May.

And in a blink, she sees the fence from another time—the Virginia creeper has been hacked back to the ground. Foster has just replaced the shabby wood picket fence with a shiny new chain-link one. He's left an awful mess all over the south side of her garden with the stack of rotten pickets and posts but promises he'll get around to burning them when fall comes. Though he's torn up the soil, her old row of violets and miniature iris has sprouted up at the base of the fence. And the red tulips. Her favorite color. Amazing, isn't it, that Foster didn't wreck them like he wrecks everything?

And there stands round timid little Freddie—poking his nose through the chain links. First time he's been able to see into May's yard. He has a tummy ache and he's all alone. He's eaten little hard green apples, dropped over the fence from her Jonathan apple tree. His big sisters are at the restaurant, washing dishes and sweeping. She lifts him up and over the fence. Carries him into her kitchen and gives him a teaspoon of baking soda in warm water. He is surprisingly cooperative. So happy she's touching him. He ends up spilling the white soda all over himself. She playfully picks him up by his ankles. Holds him upside down and pretends to shake the powder off of him. He's so cute when he giggles. Not timid at all. (Her Roger used to love it when she held him upside down. It was so much easier to do back in those days when she was spry. Then Roger's Courtney came along—Courtney loved it too.) May's breasts press tight against her yellow and blue gingham dress with the red plastic belt. She can see it all so clear. She squeezes round little Freddie between her breasts and presses her chin against his black black hair. He spends the rest of the afternoon with her.

She teaches him the cat's cradle.

Now—in a somewhat reluctant voice, and facing the heel of her broken shoe, May says, "Le'ss say I...mayb' I...what'f I share a who'e box a sodey crackahs...wit' you...an' an'...yer pals?"

It's so hard to look at him.

Then she adds, "Fre-fre-freddie?" It's so hard to say the name to this freaky kid. She'd like to scrub his face with a Brillo pad. Like to somehow fix his ears back to right. His hug had hurt her. Her bones had snapped.

Her red canvas pumps are completely ruined.

“Aight! Rock on!” Freddie says.

Lucky that Safeway had soda crackers on sale. *Buy one, get one free.* One box can last her a month.

The band cranks up again.

On one short shoe, as she limps through the back porch, she gives no attention to Foster.

He is hunkered down under the shadow of her canning jar shelves.

Delia slips past May’s legs: sidles up to Foster’s crust-ed bare feet, purrs deep down in her throat—like the rattle of death.

His overalls, glasses, and greased-down hair are plastered with the fresh, wet, sawdust that has blasted back at him as he’d sawed the trunk of the old Jonathan apple tree into eighteen-inch blocks.

He is gumming away at the first of the two hard slices of this morning’s burnt toast: like a junkyard dog, he guards the second piece tightly between his knees.

He’s been darn lucky to retrieve them from the waste-basket.

He is silent as a board.

May kicks aside the little, oval, front entrance rug she’d long ago braided from the pretty, cotton, high school skirts she made for the twins shortly before they ran away from home. Her shoulders ache as she stoops to gather this morning’s mail from below the slot in her front door—then stashes it in the third of three beat-up galvanized garden buckets—along with all the unopened mail she’s hoarded since September 11th of 2001.

She lays out a half dozen saltines on an antique Woolworth’s saucer with a decal picture of goldfinches and cherry blossoms.

Wishes she could turn up her TV: Freddie’s band is so darn loud.

She leans back with her heels in a dishpan of warm water laced with a meager tablespoon of baking soda.

Stares—hypnotized by the sight of the eight handsome soldiers struggling to set down Ronald Reagan’s four-hundred-pound casket in the center of the nation’s Capitol Rotunda.

Wishes Nancy would cry.

# Dead Dog Over Pizza

Robert Wooten

At the restaurant we  
saw a lot of people.  
The seats were red and  
the music was loud.  
Each of us was quietly  
reading and nothing disturbed  
our meal until the child with  
the silent parents  
spilled a cup of ice onto the  
floor. The parents just looked  
at her and for a moment I thought  
the child would apologize and  
get down out of her kiddy chair  
and clean up her mess but this  
didn't happen. The mother just  
stared.  
The food was good, though, and  
so was the paper.  
The service was excellent.  
But what was she staring at?  
It must have been something like  
sunset at the lake....  
I remember it well.  
Yes, the streaks of violet  
and blue mixed with the  
clouds to form a rather  
purplish hue.  
The water seemed electric,  
a computer image  
yielding all dreams to  
all viewers.  
Just to watch the sun sink  
was a time-consuming joy  
unique to the time and place.  
So, the mother was like me  
when I was looking at the lake,  
except that she wasn't at the lake.  
She was imagining something like it  
there at the restaurant. She was looking at  
something that pleased her, then,  
unlike her daughter with the spilled drink.  
So, what she imagined  
was so powerfully an image of relief from  
the spilled drink in the restaurant,  
and her responsibility for it,  
that she forgot her responsibility  
and she forgot that she is a mother.  
So, we, that mother and I,  
weren't that different, then. She  
should be taking care of the child, even as I  
should have been looking at my own plate,  
not at hers, and minding my own business,  
not hers—even my own imagination  
bothers to tell me so.  
For, in my mind's eye, I  
am given a disturbing sight,  
what is not this lunch at this restaurant,

what is not minding others' businesses,  
what is not like what she saw?—  
it is the answer to the question  
of what is not like  
but like unto what is seen—

the hanging dog. What is the hanging dog—  
God knows, it may mean the same thing—  
doing hanging from your tree  
hanging blowing swinging swaying  
in the wind no expression only  
oily stuff gooey green pearls hanging from its eye  
which is open to the world and its tongue is  
hanging out  
all swollen someone carved a swastika  
onto its back it  
has a flag tied to its tail shouting stars and  
stripes forever  
to the city his paws are stiff and the ground  
is nasty the flies  
are nibbling  
at every available square inch  
and all of the pedestrians have gathered en masse  
and collectively cringe at the stench?  
It is something that we cannot  
afford in any case or place.  
For there is a woman—  
I never have seen.

# wordmakers

**Greg Bechle** » *From West Plains, Missouri.* [This poem reminds me of personal accounts I've gotten regarding the Israeli Air Force's low altitude sonic booms over Palestinian hospitals which result in heart attacks, etc.... Who are the terrorists? Why is our killing A-OK?]

**Frederick Davis** » *From Seattle, Washington.* [Smoke and mirrors have always intrigued me, and this poem captures the complexity of institutionalized fraud through a well-crafted contemplation of a cultural trapping; merging the archaic, scientific and religious.]

**Steve De France** » *A widely published poet both in America and in Great Britain.* [Are you a big-shot? Are you a small fry? Does it really matter when a random heel can take you out like a great god bearing down on an insect?]

**Ed Galing** » *The famed Poet Laureate of Hatboro, Pennsylvania has appeared all over the small press with a dozen chaps under his belt, including 'Tales of South Philly' from Four-Sep Publications.* [A few poems from Galing that in their elegant simplicity speak volumes concerning the value of human life.]

**Richard Harvell** » *An American living in Basel, Switzerland, he has worked as a journalist in the U.S., Germany and Switzerland.* [This story is one of the best social commentaries I've come across in a long, long time; a future (semi-sci-fi) world that is creatively clever without being trite and hokey. An exploration of human relations with a nod to the past and a futuristic 'what if?']

**Frank Kennedy** » *A retired psychologist, living in Baltimore, Maryland.* [This story stuck in my craw due to the utter helplessness that accompanies honesty and self-realization. When "playing the game" has lost all purpose, where do we turn?]

**Michael L. Newell** » *Since returning to the States after twelve years abroad to discover he is a total stranger to his country, he once again is teaching in foreign lands; this time in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Do check out his Four-Sep chaps and his new book "A Long Time Traveling."* [Newell first captures a withdrawal from the chaos, then throttles a rant that expresses the twisted, yet crystal clear, futility that one feels when the world is shredding.]

**Larry Rapant** » *A college writing and literature instructor for thirty years, published in more than sixty literary journals.* [This poem defines "perspective" for me, and is twisted, to boot.]

**spiel** » *A self-described 'reclusive duck.' A writer and illustrator with appearances in the best mags of the independent press. His book, 'Insufferable Zipper,' is available from Four-Sep Publications.* [This short story/character study tells a thousand tales in the span of 15 minutes in a life (yet captures so much of that life). spiel manages to draw on our knowledge of the world, and the people we observe, and the things that we "know" to flesh out deep, rich characters and our inter-human bonds to experience.]

**Robert Wooten** » *Lives in Raleigh, North Carolina. He's been published in numerous periodicals and has published a chapbook called "Raymond Poems."* [The mind wanders, thinks, probes. This poem explores the meaning of responsibility and our inability to understand much of what happens around us.]

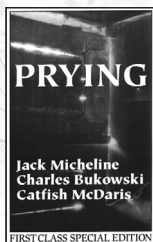
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— 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*



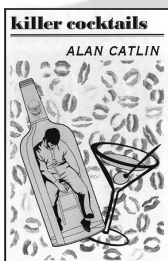
### John Bennett

**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 Kharmis. 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



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