

ISSUE TWENTY-SEVEN
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**First
Class**

MAKES YOU FEEL DOWNRIGHT UNCOMFORTABLE
27
UNCOMFORTABLE



Robert AQUIRRE
Alan CATLIN
Rebecca EPSTEIN
Gary EVERY
Ed GALING
Donald ILLICH
B.Z. MIDITCH
spiel
raibeard UI-NEILL
Alessio ZANELLI



ISSUE TWENTY-SEVEN
AUGUST, 2006

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First Class **contents**

- 1: **Lo Mein**
by Robert Aguirre
- 8: **How They Live On The Moon**
by Alan Catlin
- 10: **Dutch Courage**
by Alan Catlin
- 14: **The Tourists**
by Rebecca Epstein
- 17: **Navajo Moon**
by Gary Every
- 18: **Vortex Sweet Tooth**
by Gary Every
- 19: **The Buddha's Palm**
by Gary Every
- 20: **A Guided Tour**
by Ed Galing
- 21: **Headphones**
by Donald Illich
- 22: **Notification**
by Donald Illich
- 23: **I'm Nine**
by B.Z. Niditch
- 24: **How they make your new fridge
about: they have a refrigerator**
by spiel
- 26: **for what you learn to love
they teach**
by spiel
- 27: **a cosmic clown throws down
on the patriarchy**
by roibeárd Uí-neíll
- 31: **Final Relapse**
by Alessio Zanelli
- 32: **The Sex of Angels**
by Alessio Zanelli

*Cover Art and Photograph, as well as
internal photography by Christopher M*

First Class #27 brings back a few favorite names: Catlin, Every, Galing, Niditch, spiel; and tosses in a few new for a fine blend. Once again, I've given my reasons for selecting each piece in the "wordmakers" section in the back (in case you wonder...).

As for the cover art this time... I have a strange affection for the wasp, which is shared by nobody else I know, so I have no allies when it comes to wasp habitat preservation. In fact, the very dwelling pictured here was protected by me (it was hanging in front of my garage door after all) until a visiting relative trounced it upon noticing it while loading his bags to leave. Gut instinct, I suppose. During the wasp family's photo shoot, the whole brood gradually appeared... What began as one busy paper chewer suddenly became five. So take a look, you see two, but know that there—somewhere—are three others lurking in that small space. Little did I know. There are a few other wasp-condos hanging around the place in odd spots, which I consider my guests. One particularly dangerous spot is where one may naturally place one's fingers when pulling open a cruddy gate. I've never forgotten it was there, and I'm the only one opening the gate. I never use the gate after imbibing. Maybe I really like the wasp since they tend to make people feel uncomfortable, creeped-out, and sometimes violent. There's plenty else going on in this country to make me feel that way.... wasps are a pleasant diversion...

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

- Christopher M.

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And there was still the meal. She hadn't forgotten about that. Bowling, then dinner, then ice cream. In that order. She didn't know how much more of it she could take. It pained her to watch him place the single dollar bills on the counter side by side, counting each one aloud. She wanted to look away but she couldn't. She felt that her eyes were protecting him, holding him, that if she turned away he would fall and that the floor would swallow him up. It was like watching a sleepwalker on the ledge of a building, his eyes wide, talking in a clear and coherent voice. Should she wake him or just hope for the best? She needed air.

The steel door of the bowling alley slammed behind her. She stood with her back to the building. Across the street, a bus idled. A passenger sat with his head against the glass, his eyes closed, his mouth open. So peaceful, she thought. If only it were her. There were quarters in her hand. The fumes and the hum of the engine caused her to step off of the curb. She wondered what he'd think when he came outside and found her gone, if he'd ever ask a girl out again. She stood at the edge of the sidewalk, where the oil scum and cigarette butts had gathered, watching the dozing heads inside of the bus. Then she heard the steel door behind her. She looked at his face, at the trauma that lingered in the eyes from his recent ordeal. She couldn't figure it out. All they'd done was bowl two games at some seedy lane. They shared a Coke. Something kids did all the time, it was no big deal. But for him it was a life and death struggle, a fight in a foreign court of law. She wondered why she'd said yes to the date. But then, how could she have known?

He was so insignificant, so neutral, just another fixture in the synagogue basement at the Thursday night teen social, something she'd mindlessly scanned countless times, like the coat rack, the picture of the Wailing Wall, the bumper pool table, the monotony of his face passing under the radar of her dream, until that Thursday night, when the rabbi spoke of marriage, her virtue buttressed in the wires and snaps of her mother's brassiere, having dismissed her adolescent impulse while patiently following the itinerary of her life, so that when he wagered a meal on a game of bumper pool, and lost, she honored the bet and agreed to go out with him.

He warned her about a predatory world while they strolled past the gated storefronts on their way to the Chinese restaurant. And while he spoke, she listened, her hands clasped behind her back, her mouth fixed, her neck extended, her head moving in dignified little nods as she watched their reflection on the storefront glass, with the steel grate, and she thought of a cage the two of them shared in the night, and the old couples she'd seen at synagogue service, the stately matrons with their shrunken men whose salvos they bore pa-

tiently in the soft tissue of their bosom, that marriage was transference, a steady process of absorption.

The Chinese restaurant was above a furniture store. *CHOP SUEY* flickered in red neon along the side of the building. A dim light filled the windows on the second floor. They stepped into a dark vestibule, where a filthy staircase ascended between brown walls scrawled in graffiti, up to a landing with an orange paper lantern, above a picture of a mountain, and a river with a junk.

“Ready?” he asked her.

She thought he was kidding. But when she looked at him, she saw that he wasn’t smiling.

They entered the restaurant and stood silently near the glass counter with the candied almonds, the cigarettes, the chopsticks and calendars. It was a stifling room of red walls and a stained burgundy pile, Chinese glyphs on curled yellowed paper, gold foil dragons and cupids hanging from strings below a water stained drop ceiling, vacant tables cluttered with settings on paper mats, reminding her of a cheap testimonial where nobody showed up, except the two of them, ten years too late, and she thought they’d just leave, call it a night, share a slice near the bus stop maybe, standing, or eating it on the bus.

“Good thing we made reservations,” he said.

She breathed a sigh of relief when he said that, thinking it was a joke, thinking the boy revealed a sardonic side, could wink at a flop, and she wanted to laugh, to celebrate her edgy man with the clever mind. But before she could hug him, they were both following the Chinese woman with the two large menus, vinyl red covers with the dragon and the green tassel at the spine, which she placed at the center table, underneath where the ceiling sagged. They sat without speaking, and she looked at him, wondering, wanting so much to ask him, “Did you really think they stayed open this evening just because we were coming? Did you really think that?”

But she didn’t ask, because she was afraid of the answer. So she sat straight in her chair and watched while he pulled away the paper tabs that had been affixed over the old prices on the plastic insert.

“See? See what I mean?” he said to her. “This is what I’m telling you. They saw my suit, the cufflinks, the shiny shoes, then they quickly went and changed all of the prices.”

He looked at her with wide, incredulous eyes.

“I mean, is this legal? They can’t do this. Can they?”

And his voice broke just a little while he removed all of the tabs and tore them into tiny pieces, then scattering the fragments throughout his pockets.

“OK,” he whispered. “If she asks, just tell her; ‘This was the menu you gave us. I have a witness.’ Then point to me. I’ll support your story. If we back each other up,

there's nothing she can do. It's a contract. The menu's a contract."

After he'd removed all of the little tabs of paper that covered the old prices, "The *correct* prices!" he said. "No. I'm sorry, no! You just can't go and change the rules in the middle of the game. You don't go and make up a new score just because you're losing. I'm sorry, no, it doesn't work that way."

Unsure whether or not he'd been talking directly to her or to the unseen wolves that lurked within every smile and price tag, she remembered what her mother told her about listening. So she placed her menu down and, with her back straight, her knees pressed together, her eyes wide, after a glance down to make certain the cameo clasp to her crepe blouse was closed, she gave him her attention. And while she stared, her eyes wandered across the surface of the table, past the maze and crossword puzzle of the paper placemat, until she noticed the cockroach working its way across the bowl of crispy noodles that the woman had just placed in front of them, along with the teapot and the two little dishes with the soy and duck sauce. Neither of them moved, neither said a word. The chestnut brown of its shell caught the overhead light while it cleaned its feelers, the girl fixated, unsure whether he'd seen it or not, until she caught the terrified look in his eyes.

"Look," she said gently, "It wasn't your fault. How could you know?"

But it wasn't the cockroach that had scared him. It was the fear that she'd been flirting with the idea of ordering from the seafood column.

"Well no, it's not—um. . . you just have to be careful with the fish, that's all. They pull that bait-and-switch scam. You're thinking the ocean's coming out, next thing you know, you're looking down at a couple of scraps buried in sauce, and you're like, 'Hey, what gives?' And it's too late because, I mean, unless you can find something in the fine print, you're stuck with this big bill and—I'm not saying don't get it. If it's what you think you'd—I mean, if that's what you believe in, look, I—I can manage it, it's not that. Don't think it's that. Really. It's just that, well, like with the lo mein, for example. At least with that you know what you're getting, no surprises, no smoke and mirrors, false bottoms, hidden doors, you know? It's... it's...hey, it's lo mein, right? I mean, that's just me, OK? But, no, you order...order...whatever. It's just—" all the time his eyes darting to the menu she held, grabbing her eyes with his as though he were trying to steer them to the left, to the left, to the plastic insert where the specials were listed.

She ordered the lo mein, the soup and an egg roll. Alan squirmed.

"Um...it's 'or', not 'and'," he told her.

She looked at him. Alan pointed to the words on the insert.

“I’m... I’m just saying, you ordered both. The menu says ‘choice of soup *or* egg roll. You thought it said ‘and’.”

“Did I?” she said. “Oh, I didn’t—I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t reading it carefully. OK, hmm.”

She pressed her lips together, looked carefully at the menu, then nodded her head.

“The egg roll,” she said to the woman.

“Really?” Alan asked.

“I love egg rolls,” she said.

“No, so do I—it’s just—I mean, that’s two foods.”

“What?”

“A food and a food. Two solids. The lo mein and egg roll. You might think about a liquid. For balance.”

“But the soup...it has dumplings, doesn’t it? They’re solid.”

“Well, yes, this is true, right, but...but they’re soaked through, like...like a soup. . . It is a soup. You can drink it. I don’t mean the dumplings, no, those—you’re right, no, those you’d eat, so...no, if that’s what you want, I mean, if you’re sure you’ll eat them, because...”

He had that harried look in his eyes again.

...because once that order goes in...

The woman left with the order. They sat silently, both staring at the bowl of crispy noodles.

“And you know,” Alan said, suddenly grabbing a handful of them and shoving them in his mouth, “it’s...it’s really funny. Everyone thinks they’re so filthy—”

“No, it’s OK, really, forget it—”

“—but my father, he says—believe it or not, they’re really considered one of the cleanest insects...really. I mean, you can see it, the way they’re always running their feelers through their mouth.”

She got up to wash her hands. She told herself in the bathroom that it was nothing, just a harmless little insect, hey, there were places where people actually ate those things, as delicacies. Certainly she could manage to work down some noodles.

She returned and sat quietly. Then a steaming mound was placed in front of her, glazed brown, with two dumplings floating in a bowl like something in a toilet. He raised his fork over the food while searching for a place to stab, leaning over his plate, grimacing, the choking sounds when he chewed and swallowed. She looked at the bald pattern of his thinning scalp, the space between his neck and collar, how his head reached toward the thick knot of lo mein on his fork, the small opening of his mouth, how he ate with animal abandon, reminding her of the old men she saw eating on the Friday night Shabbat dinners which she helped serve in the synagogue basement, the old men wearing

the same kind of suit this boy was wearing, showing up with wives that looked like her, and how she doled the food onto their plates, knowing that it was really a soup kitchen, just charity camouflaged as worship. “Yes,” she thought watching the boy eat, “this is exactly how they look. Old men with their sense in remission, the perimeter of pleasure shrinking like a puddle in the sun, reduced to a soft little orifice, the last port-hole to bliss, the tongue writhing in the bridgework, the crowns and plates, like a slug in ecstasy.” He ate without looking up, except to check the bowl for a refill of the crispy noodles, which he consumed obsessively, crushing handfuls over his soup and slurping them up while the Chinese woman topped off water glasses that hadn’t been touched.

She twirled a forkful of lo mein and brought it to her mouth. But the slime of the gravy extended like a long brown hair, and she gagged, her eyes blurring with tear. She placed the fork down, brought the napkin to her mouth, composed herself, knowing she was done; the meal, the night, everything, finished.

She watched Alan direct the woman in wrapping up the meal, not just the lo mein but the wontons, the crispy noodles, the egg roll and duck sauce, the ice cream with the almond cookie, all of it scraped into a bag, while he downed cups of the tea until he emptied the pot. Then he probed the check, the woman standing behind his chair, her smile fading while he challenged each number on the bill.

“Yes, yes, I realize that,” he said when she pointed to an additional charge. “But, to the best of my recollection—and correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe you stated clearly in your menu—can I—can I see the menu again?”

The woman returned with two menus. Alan looked at the plastic insert. He noticed that there were tabs covering the prices.

“But no—no wait, this—this was not the menu you gave us. No, I need to see—excuse me, may I kindly see the original menu, if you don’t mind.”

He sat stock still and drummed his fingers on the table. He looked at the girl, his mouth open in disbelief, his face and head gesturing to her for help. The girl was drained. She wanted to reach her hand out and tell him that it was all OK, that she’d had a wonderful time, that they had not been mugged or poisoned. But she was afraid that as soon as she opened her mouth her heart would break and send all of her childhood dreams of romance gushing from her face. She watched him with a kind of dry, tired despair, this facsimile of a boy, dehydrated, sterilized, shrink wrapped and placed in her open arms. She held the image for as long as she could until a warm line ran down the side of her face, and she knew that something had broken, the tears were real. She squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could, took a deep breath, felt the quake in her chest, and it was in that single moment, when the tears pressed out like pus

from a sore, that she calmed, where everything cleared so that she could now assess this male and female objectively, in their parents' clothes, with nowhere to go except home, to hang the clothes on their wooden hangers and return them to the camphor, then to wait in their dark rooms, to lay in bed and stare at the ceiling

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and hear the rabbi's words flowing through their minds like wind, their hands neatly clasped together and resting on their chests, their eyes wide, with just their breathing, waiting to be told the next decision they'd have to make.

She got up to go to the bathroom. She stood in the small room, over the small sink with

the broken faucet and its steady leak of cold water, with the toilet paper rolls and boxes, and she looked at her face in the mirror, under the flickering white light, her image spectral, intermittent, like a dying bulb. And she stood over the sink and remembered the lesson from temple about the Sinai wandering, and how they'd all died in the wilderness because they had complained, because they hadn't been satisfied by what God had showed them, the food and all, yes the food, and her with the uneaten lo mein, the egg roll that she'd wanted so badly, the one he'd paid extra for, the one she was afraid to eat because of an insect, a little harmless insect.

And the boy, wasn't he like the pillar of fire that had guided them through the night? Hadn't he told her that all of these merchants were hungry beasts in a wilderness?

"Yes," she prayed, "he's not what I expected. But he's careful with money, and in the end that's all we'll have."

She saw her face in the mirror, under the flickering light, with the cameo and pearls, her hair arranged like that of her mother.

"Yes, in the end, it's all we have, when our looks go, and the children move out, and we're too weak to shovel the snow, or carry the bags up the stairs, or fix the car, and we move to the nursing homes, with the senile and insane who wander the streets and beg money, the ones by the boardwalk railing of Ocean Manor, talking to themselves and chain smoking cigarettes,

rummaging through garbage cans for—”

And she stopped herself because she didn't want to break down just as the light went out.

“Better now,” she said to herself, “before we're lost in the maze of impulse, eating away our dreams like cancer. Yes, yes, it's better to be safe than sorry, better...at least he's careful, at least there'll be food on the table, a roof over our heads.”

She returned to the dining room. Alan was standing now with the cook and the woman. They were pointing to dishes, to the menu, Alan pleading, shaking his head, demanding to see all of the menus, with the plastic inserts, all of them,

“...because, well, that's my whole case, that's my—”

and he stopped short, ran his hand across the top of his head, looked into space like he'd run out of options, and she saw it when she passed him, but he hadn't noticed. He was fighting for justice. She stood near the glass counter, with the leech nuts, the boxes of Chinese tea, the little wax bags of crispy noodles. She looked inside the case, everything radiant under the fluorescent tube. She thought about buying something for him, a gift for his effort, his crusade. But she imagined his reaction, how he'd probably scold her for buying something they'd gotten for free.

She sat obediently at the ice cream parlor and watched him consume a monstrosity they called The Queen Mary, a sagging mound of whipped cream, fudge lines, sprinkles and canned fruit, on a metal dish shaped like one of the caravels that Columbus sailed on, all the time talking with the chocolate slime in his mouth, barely swallowing one mouthful when he had the next one perched at his face, talking to her about the scam he'd uncovered, how they “aggrandized” (she could not believe he'd used that word) three puny scoops of ice cream “under this...this conflagrance of deception, it's really...” and he laughed, shook his head, muttering through the fudge, “hopeless, absolutely hopeless.” She'd looked at a menu. Then he reminded her of the ice cream she still had in the bag, from the Chop Suey, and that, well, maybe she should finish that one first. And she wondered if he'd brought her here just to punish her, to show her what she couldn't have because she hadn't finished all the food on her plate.

She put the menu down. She sighed, looked at him, without heat, without anger, just looked at the boy, like he was a picture of the Wailing Wall, a coat rack, this her first date. Her last first date. “Well,” she thought, “it could be worse.” At least she'd been spared the ordeal of a long painful courtship, what with all the games, the lies, the hidden costs and false bottoms. All right, so there were no stars, no song. Just a mensch, just a few scraps she'd press in a book; a bowling scorecard, a fortune from a cookie, a paper napkin with a fudge stain.

How They Live On The Moon

Alan Catlin

In a rare, more whimsical moment, I thought about what it might be like for a reluctant stranger to wander into “The Oasis,” unaware of the kind of clientele the place attracted on a regular basis. One of the earlier rejection notices for this story felt it was simply too unbelievable. Another felt it owed too much to the Twilight Zone. And I thought, my life has been lived in a Twilight Zone. I didn’t dare think about what kind of Zone she lived in.

I wondered if this was what Carson McCullers had in mind when she wrote Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The man who looked as if he could be the janitor in a drum was counting the invisible cars on a nearby Intergalactic Expressway in his mind, offers a bit of advice before I consider ordering the coffee at the counter.

“See that guy talking to the cigarette machine? Don’t pay any attention to him, he’s crazy. I could tell you weren’t one of them right away.” He said, smiling, pointing upward toward the ceiling, “Know how I could tell?”

I was about to say something about not having retractable air horns on each side of my head when he said, “It’s because of the aerials they’ve got. Yours are retracted. Forgetting to retract them is a dead giveaway. Do you want to see your star chart? I get all the best information from above.”

I must have looked as lost as the two old guys at the booth on the wall to the left of the counter, playing a kind of three dimensional chess in a fourth dimension they didn’t need pieces in. They seemed to be arguing heatedly over a disputed move one of them made that I hadn’t seen.

“Shut up, Henry. It isn’t your turn anyway. It’s Max’s turn.” The middle aged lady behind the counter yelled at them. Smiling, she turned to me and asked, “Car breakdown on the Parkway?”

“You don’t get much casual traffic here, do you?”

“Not much. Usually just folks whose cars are getting repaired down the road and the regulars. You get used to them after awhile and they get used to you, once you let them know who’s in charge. I keep telling those guys down at the service station to say something about the locals who come here but I think they get a charge out of how people handle the action here. Bet you never thought a cup of coffee could get this interesting, did you?”

“Well, it isn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“You would think that a state hospital that size, one that houses some folks who are criminally insane would have tighter control on their patients, wouldn’t you? Hey, but I never have any trouble here. Don’t you go telling the boys over the station I was bitching

about them not clueing you in; it would be real bad for business and we need all the referrals we can get.”

“You’re secret’s safe with me. Tell me exactly, how do these people get here anyway?”

“Well, as I said, the state institution is right next door, just past the overpass you walked under to get here from the station. Most of ‘em walk on over. Those low brick walls and tree lines are all that’s keeping them in there. Those people may be crazy but they sure as shit ain’t stupid now, are they?”

”See that one over there? That’s BJ. She graduated top of her class from Skidmore, a real prestigious school upstate. Smart as a whip, that one. Her thing these days is reading your fortune in an ashtray. My best advice to you is if they start asking for cigarettes or quarters, pretend to be deaf, they understand that.

“Enjoy your coffee, dear. If you need a refill or anything else, don’t be afraid to yell, everyone else does.”

I watched the guy trying to convince the cigarette machine to yield butts without benefit of coins of the realm. So far he had tried mind over matter and an interesting, vaguely philosophical argument that might actually have convinced a living being. It was almost a shame to waste all that wonderful, creative, mental energy speaking to a machine.

I sipped my coffee and watched the freak show gather a strange kind of momentum, wondering where the sign was painted outside that warned off itinerants from entering here. I knew then, where Woody Allen had recruited the cast for the dream sequences of mutants and walking-dead on the LIRR in Stardust Memories. He’d just walked on in here, shouted out, “Hey everybody, let’s go! We’re shooting a movie and you guys are in it.” And they would all have gotten into a passable line, filed out as asked and gotten into whatever transporting vehicle there was and off they went. When it was all over, they’d be brought back, richer by a day’s pay and no one would have been the wiser. That is until the movie came out.

I left a five dollar bill for the coffee said, “Thanks for the good advice.” I stopped to have a word with BJ on the way out. Unseen by anyone, I slipped her a few bucks in singles, pointed to the jukebox in a corner of the room, gave her a conspiratorial smile and whispered in her ear, “Wait five minutes after I’m gone then do your worst with the money I gave you.” She smiled back at me and nodded as if she knew exactly what I meant.

As the door closed behind me, she was still contemplating the hidden messages contained in the ashes of her pressed metal ashtray. I was confident that exactly five minutes after I’d left she’d be making selections of music no one had dreamed could be left on a jukebox for anyone to find if they were properly motivated. As I walked along side of the local highway I thought, this will give new meaning to giving a monkey a machine gun.

“We must be true inside
True to ourselves
before we can know
a truth
that is outside us.

But we make
ourselves true by
manifesting the truth
as we see it.”

Thomas Merton

It was just another Monday night in jukebox hell. Bearing down on midnight, bar nearly empty, waitress flirting with the cooks, ignoring her last tables. Situation normal, geared up for a party and no guests.

All the people with half a brain and a life, were home asleep dreaming of a better place, the alarm clock set, clothes pressed and ready, reports verified, everything set on Go. A bartender's life is never that simple, though it might seem rudimentary to someone who has never-been-there-got-the-scars-and-the-bloody-bar-rags to prove it.

Bartenders are kind of like real people only they never seem to act that way. Or that's the perception. Bartenders are a walking conglomeration of cliches: gambling profligate, whoring, booze-hounds with an attitude. I foreswore all of the major vices but one. One guess which one that was. I don't see having an attitude as a vice.

I was just about to pour myself a little toddy for the body, against the express wishes of the House Rules Committee when the lone-rider-of-the-purple-sage's girlfriend hit the door.

It was kind of freaky if you perceive her presence as more than a break from the long stretch of boredom begun around seven in the PM and schedule to last to near sunrise, as I did. I felt as if it was some kind of instant punishment for allowing myself to pour a routine breaker well before its appointed time.

I poured it anyway. I had a feeling I was going to need it.

A little Dutch Courage in the face of adversity never hurt anyone.

Or that was the excuse I would use if whatever was going to happen next actually ended up in court. Things I did sometimes would.

I might have wondered where the phrase: Dutch Courage came from, if my mind wasn't occupied with trying to figure out where she was coming from with the few details offered.

She looked like Mother Courage after a bad day at the office rabble rousing and getting the stuffing kicked out of her by people who abused others for fun and profit.

It wasn't so much the mottled look of someone with fading bruises, expensive-when-new clothes that had seen better days before they ended up on her during the latest phases of the Civil War she was fighting with an unnamed enemy and losing badly. No, what struck me was something indefinable, her aura, such as it was, emanations that came from some place way beyond where we were now. I wasn't eager to find out where that was but I had an ominous feeling I was going to find out.

"Mescal." She says, "Neat. Hold the worm..."

"No can do sweetheart," I say, leaving out the part that meant the most: we don't carry the stuff.

"Let me try again. Mescal. Neat. Hold the worm. The last part is a joke someone like you wouldn't get."

As a rule, I like to call upon my vast reserve of savage comebacks, to strike while the proverbial iron is hot, but in this case, making her wait seemed to be the most appropriate response. She didn't seem like the type who ever waited for anything she really wanted. There was something about the tarnish on her rich-girl-spoiled veneer that made me want to add a new layer of discoloration.

There'd be some Dutch Consolation in it for her in the end whenever and wherever that might be.

I waited and looked into her eyes. Saw that once you melted off a layer of frost and freezer burn, there was more ice inside. Iceberg or dry ice, it didn't matter which.

I could see the wildness that lay inside, something from the tundra in a land of a midnight sun that spoke of endless Winters, lost expeditions searching for the True North of her soul, wolf packs howling after her whenever she ventured forth into the dark.

She says, "Last man kept me waiting for something I needed this bad, ended up face down in a ditch sucking mud into his lung instead of air."

I'd been reading about people who lived the way she did, reading about them all my life in a personal survey course of Comparative Lit that made no sense to anyone but me. Bartenders aren't supposed to be conversant with any kind of Literature that didn't have the last three racing results after their names. But I was different. The statement that summed her up from my reading went rushing through my own personal darkness inside,

"No people sing with such
pure voice
as those who live in
deepest hell."

Franz K-

I had the distinct impression we were going to find our own personal version of that place soon enough.

She says, "Cat got your tongue? Or are you just one of

those dead-heads that have to be prodded into action? I have one of those electric cow things in my car. If you'd like, I'll go get it for you. Otherwise, I'm going to ask one more time before I get really pissed off."

I'd love to see her vehicle. It would be easy to find, if she actually had one. Her car would be the one that had acres of mud, dried grass and other undefinable sludge, viscera and shit embedded anywhere the stuff could stick. There would be a bent and rusty coat hanger for an antennae and there'd be the wildest assortment of discarded liquor bottles, beer cans, and musical tapes scattered amid the mounds of garbage collect-

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ed in the back and front seats. If the car were a house or an apartment, it would have long ago been condemned. There were no laws on the books condemning cars as unsafe or unfit to live in. Not that I knew of, anyway. Maybe there should have been.

"Where's my cactus juice, pard?"

Her voice literally cut through my reverie. I wondered briefly if she were packing. If she was, the noise

of her emptying all the cylinders into my body might alert the waitress and cooks that something strange requiring their attention was happening at the bar.

Then again, it might not.

"Sorry, little lady, no cactus juice for you."

I think of the places her mind went to in that brief moment it took her to process the information and send it to the facial muscles to form an expression. Most of us do these things instantaneously but her brain mechanism had some flaws in it that could be traced directly to her juice of choice. That much I could infer from her manner and choice of spirits. I didn't want to go to the desert place where the rest of her spirits lived. I could envision men she had done business with staked and tethered there, literally between a rock and a hard place dealing with complete exposure to the sun, fire ants, lizards and snakes. Those were just the visible torments. The invisible ones were much worse.

"That wasn't funny, Mr Barman, soon to be Mr Dead-man Barman."

"Wasn't meant to be."

"Too bad for you." She says, staring deep inside my pale, hard eyes. I thought about going for a refill of the

Dutch Courage but decided that might be pushing it. I'd actually have to not look at her for a split second when I fired it down. That's when she would do her worst, whatever that was.

I could pour without looking, could have offered her a substitute for her request but what was the point? This was clearly a black and white situation, nothing that was ever in column B could be moved over to column A and be successfully substituted.

Instead, I stared back at her and waited. I was good at waiting. It's what I did for a living and I knew she wasn't. Her need was larger than her patience. Besides the Need was beyond her control now, the Need was everything and it must be fulfilled.

For the moment, our horns were locked and we silently struggled, staring into each others' unknowns; a strange Mexican standoff on another Monday night in jukebox hell.

I could almost hear her chipping away at the marble memorial of my life, carving something illegible into the rock, something that made sense to her but to no one else. What she was writing was probably the story of my life I deserved to leave behind.



PETERSBURG SEMI TRAIN
by christopher m.

The Tourists

Rebecca Epstein

The sky, which had been baby blue all day, was snowing white confetti. We stopped walking and looked up from our maps. We were reminded of parades when we were young. We leaned our heads back to see where it was coming from, and blinked as the confetti fell in our eyes. It wasn't coming from the sky as we'd first thought, but from the magnificent skyscraper across the street, fluttering out from hundreds of shattered office windows.

It was funny how the paper came first, before anything else, before the sparks or the strands of hair, the clouds of skin cells set free from their anchors, the fibers from shirts and slacks and socks, the rain of teeth glistening with saliva, and then whole shoes set free into the sky, hitting the pavement with rubbery thuds, and then fingernails, pale and polished and gnawed, and then hats and eyes and elbows and patches of tattoos and wedding bands.

If this was a celebration, as we believed in those first moments of confetti, then where was the music? In the confusion, traffic halted. The street and sidewalk became a plain of white. Bicycles tipped over and the confetti cushioned the riders' falls. We thought of winter storms and shivered even though it was summer, tourist season. We shook the confetti out of our hair.

It was mostly white but we also saw bits of pink and blue and yellow, and the hallowed gray of newspaper. Some pieces of confetti were hole-punched and some were stapled. There were words on many pieces, or almost words, like "Mem" or "thon" or "ling." Simple sounds like babies make, half-words, non-words, guttural cries. On some shreds of paper we even saw whole words if the words were small enough, like "Sir," or important enough, like "shareholders."

We dropped our backpacks and cameras and folded our maps, all of this still in the time before anything but confetti had rained from the sky. We rolled up our sleeves and set to work collecting the confetti letters and words to combine into longer words, and then phrases.

Once we had that, we lined the words and the phrases up on the pavement, discarded those that didn't seem to fit, and rearranged words here and there.

Son of Iapetus, surpassing all in cunning, you are glad that you have outwitted me and stolen fire — a great plague to you yourself and to men that shall be.

Hesiod, someone murmured. We gasped. No, no, we said, That's not right. We took the words apart as quickly as we could: the phrases, the clauses, we tore the

confetti into separate letters. We sorted the letters and laid them out in alphabetical piles along the ground. We saw what we had done, and we liked it. Yes.

And then the sparks began to fall after the confetti, burning the pieces of paper that were still lingering in the sky for want of room to land on the ground. We covered our hair with our hands, fearing we'd go up in flames.

Firecrackers? we wondered. Birthday candles? The air smelled of childhood memories dug loose: a crackling fireplace at the ski lodge, a campfire at a Girl Scouts retreat, Dad grilling hamburgers in the backyard. With the confetti out of the air we could see the sky again, pink from the embers. When we realized the sparks were soft and cool from the long descent, nothing more than ashes, we laughed and held our hands out to catch them like lightning bugs.

But there were more than ashes in our hands. There was a sheen of dust, cells of other people's skin. Our fingers felt like they were caught in a web and we discovered strands of hair woven around our knuckles. Some of the hairs were longer or shorter than our own, or lighter, or darker. We looked up again and saw hair and skin descending in slow currents from the windows of the skyscraper. We sighed, and opened our palms to the sky, gathering enough stray hairs to make many wigs.

Then we began to sort the hairs into their colors and we lined them up on a patch of pavement where the confetti had been cleared away. Blonde and brunette and auburn and white and silver and black. And we subdivided each color into straight, wavy, curly, kinky, ringlets. We pursed our lips to keep from swallowing the lost hair and skin, and we took precautions not to let our own hair fall into the piles. We nodded in approval when we were finished, because this seemed like a good way to manage such a thing, and we waited to see what would fall next.

The wind arrived, roaring around the corner of the skyscraper, strong enough to bring unwilling sparrows and pigeons with it. The windows belched dust, and then a great many things began to fall. Oh, we didn't know what to think. We ran this way and that, organizing the fallen objects into piles: socks here, collars there, the pile of brassieres towering twenty feet above them all. We were dwarfed by the piles around us.

The descent became faster and we panted to keep up. We flexed our muscles and stretched our calves, and took sips from water bottles in our backpacks. Bracelets fell, earrings, fillings, canes, hearing aids, half-digested pills, and a shower of diamonds coated in dirt as if only just dug from the earth. A black patent leather three-inch high heel fell and pierced one of our skulls like a spear, and as he crumpled into the pile of neckties with a dying moan, we understood how truly serious this was. We dragged him out of the way.

Faster, we said. A pair of lips fell, freshly glossed, open in what might have been a scream or a big bite. The teeth rained down after it. Incisors here, and bicuspid here...Molars were crunched under our heels in the frenzy.

A lone fetus fell without a sound, the placenta trailing after. We started a pile for that. Then a silver belt buckle. The myopic blue iris of an eye. A pair of glasses—perhaps they had once helped that iris see—fell to the pavement without breaking, while a once-full scotch glass shattered into a thousand wet pieces. An office chair landed upright and swiveled in tragic circles.

We had piles for knee joints, big toes, tongues, thumbs, and a pile for hearts that pulsed and spread blood in waves over the tips of our shoes. We had piles for inboxes, outboxes, ballpoint pens, fountain pens, office phones and mobile phones. A woman's vibrator fell, smooth and pink, and began to thrum when it hit the ground. A long curved knife came next, caked with blood or dark chocolate. We licked it; it was blood.

When the rain of things began to slow, we leaned our heads back and waited. We were wise and weary and almost glad of what we had done. And then we heard it. At first we thought it was music, a drum or a horn, but as it went on we were able to tell it was the sound of breathing. It was hot and low. It was our own breathing, only us.

Navajo Moon

Gary Every

The first lunar astronauts
were training in northern Arizona
because some of the lava fields
resemble the surface of the moon.
One day a group of Navajo elders
were taken out to the training site
by government publicists.

One of the elders,
a brown skinned old warrior
whose face was as wrinkled and craggy
as the lava fields themselves
asked the government officials
if he could record a message
in the Navajo language
to be played through loudspeakers
to anyone on the moon
who might be listening.
Recognizing a golden public relations moment
when they saw one
the government quickly agreed.

When they played the message
back to the old man's son;
the boy could not stop laughing.
When they took the tape
to the nearest Navajo village
and played it
the people all giggled
refusing to tell them what it said.

They called in a government translator.
He laughed too
but at least he told them
what was on the tape.
The message went like this.
"People of the moon, Beware!
These assholes want to steal your land."

Vortex Sweet Tooth

Gary Every

I hike along the beautiful red rock cliffs which could be anyplace on Mars except for the shallow stream bubbling over the red sandstone; laughing and gurgling. No streams on Mars for millions of years.

I am not hiking on Mars but Sedona, Arizona and just across the creek there are maybe a hundred stacks of stones piled on top of each other like knee high hiking cairns. There are thousands of stones creating hundreds of knee high piles. I have stumbled upon another vortex.

Sedona is proud of its proximity to the Lowell astronomical telescope which was built to observe the canals of Mars. In 1927, Sedona became the first place to spot a spaceship, a genuine UFO hovering above these earthly skies.

Another of my favorite hikes goes to Vultee Arch. A canyon named after an early aviation pioneer who crashed and died there. Vultee Arch is a big red rock window in front of a giant sandstone cliff whose base is littered with hundreds of stone piles, thousands of rocks; another damn vortex.

“It was hard growing up in Sedona,” Natalia said, “and still believe in organized religion.”

She tosses some of her long cascading curls away from her face, and over her shoulder. “You have to remember,” she explains. “That I was alive for the Harmonic Convergence. When all the New Agers descended on Sedona like a plague of locusts. Some of them had purchased expensive tickets for the spaceship that was supposed to emerge from inside Bell Rock. Very expensive tickets”

“I grew up,” she said “Seeing all sorts of cults come and go. For instance there was one hippy cult living in the RV Park and they used to go up to the junior high kids and offer to buy their blood.”

“Why did they want to buy blood?” I ask.

She replies. “Who knows.”

I ask. “What did they do with the blood?”

Natalia shudders. “Who really wants to know. The whole thing is kind of creepy.”

Then she shrugged.

“I spent my blood money on candy.”

The Buddha's Palm

Gary Every

The red scarf is tied in a top knot
atop the statue's skull.
The hands are folded in prayer
and become the receptacle
of gifts and offerings;
coins, cigarettes, lottery tickets,
and pictures of sick loved ones.
Most of all there are seashells.
Why would people in the middle of a city
in the middle of the desert
place seashells
in the hands of a life sized Buddha statue?
Even more incongruous,
what is a 2,000 year old Buddha statue
doing in Arizona?

Why do people like exotic gods
and pray for rare valuable treasures
or things they don't have
rather than appreciate the abundance
which surrounds them?
If people in the desert
really want to be blessed
by the rare and precious
why don't they pray for snow?
And even if a snowflake
were to land in the hands of the Buddha
wouldn't it melt
inside the warm stone
of his sun basked hand.
Then again,
isn't water the most precious blessing
in this land of sand and cactus
and perhaps that is why
the Buddha is smiling.

before you go inside
let me guide you
part of the way
i been there...
i done dat...
this is a nursin
home...
you say you are
lookin for a good
place for your mom,
who is eighty years
old and has alzheimers?
you came to the right
place, buddy...
my own mom has been
in this nursin home
for a year...
what's that? is it
a good place?...
well, buddy, it goes
down like this,
it's a good place to
die, okay? sorry i said
it, but look, buddy,
we are all gonna die...
here we have a one legged
woman who pushes around in
a wheelchair all day, mumblin
to herself,
later she plays bingo, and then
she hollars and cusses, and then
goes to her room she shares with
another black woman who is demented,
then there's one guy who stares at
the ceilin all day, and there's others
out in the hallway pushin their
chairs from one end to the other...
food is piss poor, and there's
nuthin to do all day but sleep...
your mom will miss you at first...
she might even cry when you leave...
they all do... treat her gentle like,
okay?... tell her everything will be
alright... then run the hell out
of there, and keep runnin and never
look back.

The thwacks of arrows hitting
the wall at night don't bother me.
A new TV season has started:
I love criminals on court shows
finally being brought to justice.
I'm also mastering the controls,
the soldier I play in a videogame
has nearly found the villain's hideout.

Neither do buckets of boiling water
we drop on them concern me.
I'm sure they had it coming,
who doesn't? I'll shop tomorrow
for combat boots, the kind I saw
cool kids wear, and everyone knows
I'm militant about my fashion.

Explosions next door can't worry me,
the bodies unrecognizable in smoke.
Plenty of good friends talk to me
on the computer, and when one dies
someone takes over their sites. All
of us continue our discussions: music,
movies, other important going-ons.

The images I saw one night, the half-
melted girl, a boy shitting out his
guts, eyes floating in bloody cream,
have shown up in my nightmares.

But I have a new therapist, a bundle
of medicines I love more than mom.
If they're really working I can't
understand the nightly news. It's like
wearing really great headphones;
all that comes through is laughter.

Notification

Donald Illich

Everyone receives notifications but me. Not that I'm anxious about it. I spend my time washing windows, spit-shining shoes. It isn't until now that I realize how many crumbs and strands of cat hair are lodged in the carpet's fabric. I can't turn on the vacuum cleaner. They might knock quietly, as if not wanting to disturb me, when that's exactly what I need. Did someone accidentally delete me from the list? I never saw it, a sheet of paper slid inside a folder, a prisoner kept from everyone's eyes. I build a shelf for a thousand books, nail the boards with quick, forceful taps. My eyes never leave the door, which is grimy, powdered with dust, not the glad face I wish to give the world. Should I eat? Inside the refrigerator it's dark until I open it. I drill a hole to view what's going on when the meatloaf thinks it's alone. Is that an envelope? Is that my broken doorbell, chiming again? It's cold in here. I think I see a mouth.

It's a free country
our veteran neighbor said
listening to and watching
two talk shows at once.
I'm going to a picnic
of my own making;
Jake's portable radio and TV
will not stop talking.

"Even all those redneck voices
and opinions are important,"
Jake says,
"more than even Army brass.
When you grow up"—
silently giggling
by my salad days—
"you may make public policy."

Sure, I nodded
over the dogwood fence
munching on yesterday's pasta
and Jake tells me
he feels abandoned
by family, God and country.

I do not understand
being only nine,
there is a shot heard
round the neighborhood.

How they make your new fridge about: they have a refrigerator

spiel

Provided a man is not mad, he can be cured of every folly but vanity.

“Emile; or, On Education, IV,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1712-1778

You got a new fridge.

Lord knows. It was not easy. You will pay out your ears.

You tell They about your new fridge.

Want they to be excited for you.

They make your new fridge about
they

have a big refrigerator. They

will have to get a bigger one. How *they*

need to store a whole side of beef. They

need to keep more ice.

They have so many friends. A huge dining room.

They need more ice-in-an-instant for so many friends.

Practically a banquet. They could use TWO bigger fridges.

They probly serve over a thousand a year in they huge dining

room. They tell about the bar has a refrigerator

as big as most kitchens.

You tell they about: You have cancer. Stage four.

They make your cancer about: *they* have a brown spot. They

want you to look at the brown spot. They guess they probly

have cancer. They want you to be more sensitive about how

when *they* have something like the brown spot. You should

notice these things.

They are people with needs too. You should notice *they*.

You show they a picture of your Sally. Tell about how happy
she is about her new refrigerator.

Then you make a grimace on your face.

Like when you get too much pepper on your steak. Tell about

this is how Sally looked when you told her about your cancer.

They tell you about how *they* make the ladies look that way
when they hose them. They make the ladies make that same
look when they drive it home.

They tell you how they really sock it to the ladies.

They tell you all the ladies in Vegas can't wait for more of *they*.

They tell you they make the ladies scream for more. They tell

you about they are sure glad they do not have to put up with

an old lady they have to answer to. They tell about: the old lady

has learned not to ask questions.

They tell about: a man's home is his castle.

They got to get a bigger refrigerator right away. A couple of

them. They got a lot a friends. They do it to the wives of they

friends. They don't figure they owe they friends nothing.

Not the way those guys treat they in business. They treat they

wives the same.

Those guys treat they wives the same. Bunch of lowlife

bastards. They tell about: they friends are a bunch of lowlife

bastards so they diddle they wives. They do they wives

a favor. They tell how those wives scream for they.

You tell about: You got to start chemo again. It makes you sick.
You tell about: How you get sick about: How Sally gets sick:
about seeing: How you get you sick.

They tell about: nothing makes *they* sick.
Then they tell: those lowlife bastards make they sick. Ya know.
You got to just get over it.

Be a man.

They tell about: you got to just be a man. They
tell about: they tell they sons you just got to be a man. They tell
about: they tell they sons a pecker isn't for nothing. It is not a
dead stick in a bush. Hose a woman so she knows she's been
hosed. Don't let nothing make you sick. They tell about: if you got
cancer then you just got to get over it. They tell about: they got a
brown spot. Maybe you should take a look at it. They probly got
cancer. They
tell about: *they*
expect you to be more sensitive about when *they*
got something
they
need.

You tell about how you are felling pretty washed out.
How you just don't have it in you anymore to be sensitive.

They tell about *they* life ain't so easy.
How *They* really got nobody no more.
Like when they've got a brown spot.
They got nobody to look at it.

For what you learn to love they teach

spiel

Trees and fields tell me nothing: men are my teachers.

“Phaedrus,” Plato c.428-348 B.C.

they say the torturers are your saviors.

they say from at the start they say that you have got to learn to love it they say that torture is endurable they say if you can only learn to love it that if you can let yourself believe your fingernails will grow back they will be stronger than a horse's hoof they say that you got to teach yourself that it will be easier to pat yourself upon your back when it's all over once they have prepared your elbows to snap the other way they say that you can learn to love the sound of cracking bones they say that you can learn the cracking sounds like church bells clanging and you don't have to wait for sunday anymore to hear the clanging in your ears they say about the clanging in your ears that you can teach yourself to love the ones who bring it to you every day instead of waiting for a sunday anymore they say that you can please them in return when they pince your tongue if you regurgitate your mouth blood that they love to feel the warmth of you upon their hands that they love the red and warmth that you give them in return for pinching down your tongue they say you got to teach yourself to love the white-outs of your eyeballs that you got to learn that you are fortunate to get a glimpse of this that this is like the heaven that you always knew you had that you always loved that your torturer has brought right to your feet with the twisting of your neck they say that when your head is turned around that you can look straight back at the wrong they say that you have done to get you in this place that in your interest you have learned yourself to love for you

they say that you must never profit and that you will never get a memoir book deal and that you will not recall your memory that out of love your memory will not grow back they say that in the end that the only thing that you will have is love alas or so they say that you will be among the white hogs so familiar to you where your government reclaims you with its flag you know and its papers and it runs you through and this is what they say that it has to process you you know it has to shred you for its best for what you may have known or said or seen or given up that you claim you do not know they say that you will do it all for love in the end

a cosmic clown throws down on the patriarchy

roibeárd Uí-neill

for Del Reitz, 1933-2005

*“One freethinker bites the cosmic bullet,
and 1,000 idiots are born to fill the vacuum.”*

- John C. Erienne

I

To quote the bumper sticker,
Who Would Jesus Bomb?
I wanted to print my own,
Who Would Jesus Torture?
But I came to my senses & realized,
if Hell exists...

II

Sexual predators
stalk the electronic highway.
The future patron saint
of ecclesiastical pedophiles
strides the corridors of The Vatican...
...both, unmolested by conscience.

III

Then there was a former Secretary Of The Interior
happy to declare until every tree was put to the ax
the Son of God couldn't be expected to return...
...the lungs of the world cleared to make way for a landing strip.

Sonar-stunned whales beaching themselves in delirium?
Harlequin frogs & polar bears eulogized on postage stamps?
With a little luck, it's the asthmatic squeaking of your children's
prayers
that finally goads the Son of Man into action...

...& after re-entry torches the Second Coming,
once the ecosystem concludes its downward spiral,
even the wealthiest 1%, perforce, shall wear pennies on their eyes.

IV

Which of Adam's ribs did God pilfer
In order to create the hermaphrodite?
Ah, yes, the vagaries of nature,
knocking the “intelligent” out of Intelligent Design.
Ah, yes, the vicissitudes of nurture,
no equality in Heaven, so it is on Earth,
testicular psychosis ascendant, self-ordained
to impose cultural misogyny upon the female psyche...
...burkas, chastity belts, foot-binding, clitoral mutilation,
adulteresses stoned to solitary death,
widows fed to the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands,

self-centered yang prying the legs of prostitutes apart.

V

A hydra of holy spook-swelled heads vomits the “...culture of life...”
They can't hear a chorus line of stem cells
wagging their mitochondrial D.N.A., singing,
“Our brief existence made a positive difference!”

The hydra's totalitarian ideology
demands a Constitutional amendment
aborting the autonomy of women,
forcing wombs to carry the wrigglers of incest or rape to term, surely
applauded by the patriarchs of Hindu households...
...provided the fetus is sporting a penis.

VI

Point from The West:
Joe Strummer correctly observed,
“He who fucks nuns later joins The Church.”

Counterpoint from the Middle East:
Explosives gird a suicide bomber's loins,
a last task demanded by *his* totalitarian ideology,
the consummation of which launches him into Paradise,
where Allah rewards murder
with 72 slices of 2nd-class hair-pie
never allowed to cool upon ethereal windowsills.

VII

You think The Prophet has a short fuse?

A hydra of televangelical heads barks at shadows.
Their totalitarian ideology would have us believe tsunamis
& hurricanes are punishment for the sexual orientation of
blue-eyed sponges & purple, purse-toting roly-polys.

Russia booted Donald Duck back across the ocean.
He sullied their boob-tubes during primetime
when he appeared, minus pants,
no mistress in a *dacha* to pardon his exhibitionism.

Betty Boop is the smouldering, top-heavy daughter of
Lilith, she who tweaks the libido of witchfinder generals.
7 veils wouldn't improve her dancing.
She be-bops toward re-instatement as the madonna of us all,
her magnificent hips cradling the mysteries of rose & volcano.

VIII

A state executioner masquerading as leader
of the free world assures his re-election:
He snaps his fingers, & 4 million halos magick
into 4 million golden nose rings—
no jobs, no education, no environment,
no social safety nets, no national surplus,
no health care, no corporate accountability,
no science unless it's been smashed to junk,
no tolerance unless you kiss one mandated celestial ass,
no **distillate of petroleum** without pulverizing brown babies,
no global credibility!

What does it matter?

The righteous insist a Constitutional amendment
is required to protect the “*the sanctity of marriage*”
from same-sex abominations unto the God of Love.
How dare they love strongly enough to wish monogamy!

& i suspect the hermaphrodite
might have some pointed comments
about a divorce rate standing at 50%.

IX

i remind you, children,
i don't enjoy wine-in-a-box,
what do i want with your God-in-a-box?

i remind you, children,
if necessity intrudes,
i'll get drunk on the former
& mock the latter.

X

Nor am i obliged to the Puritan work ethic.
Holstein cattle graze the shade of sublimated phalluses,
silos playing king-of-the-hill, capable of valuing old growth for-
est only in terms of board feet, acres only in terms of cash crop
yielded, a portion of fertile corn rows tithed to the
concrete of banks & churches.

& those who sell their souls,
those who starve their minds,
what cold stone soup salvation must be!

XI

Why do so many of the filthiest words abrading the roof of
the Anglo-Saxon mouth begin with **C**? **C**rusader, **c**onversion,
conformity, **c**omplacency, **c**apitalism, **c**onsumerism, **c**ar
culture, the **c**lash of **c**ivilizations, **c**ompassionate
conservatism, **c**ronyism, **c**owardice (of **c**ourse, intellectual
& spiritual),

& determined to have the last word...
...**c**ensorship...

XII

Take it from a freelance *lambastard*,
the Bible Belt ostracizes any deviation from the norm—
should you doubt the divinity of manifest destiny,
if you question “**...in God we Trust...**” on the lips
of thin, dead presidents fleeing your wallet,
the powdered wigs of deists taxed away
to fund coups against emerging democracies.
The Phillipines, Iran, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatamala...
...alas! we spilled your blood, bequeathed you resentment!

Take it from a battle-hardened freethinker,
the Bible Belt quickly becomes a garrote
if you applaud Dover, Pennsylvania's defense of apedom,
if you espouse theosophy as a reasonable alternative to
religious violence, if you worship life's cruel, indiscriminate,
wonderful implacability,
if you dare testosterone-pudded immortals to refute

Mark Twain's brutally honest suggestion for the nation's flag:
Every white bar painted black, every star eclipsed by a skull &
crossbones.

When, upon hearing the sheep who bleat

"...it's in God's hands..."

you ask them if apathy is the afterlife's renewable resource.

XIII

How i miss you,

my fellow ghost in the machine!

We reveled in satire, irony, absurdity.

We berated our own hypocrisy.

We castigated the inherent ignorance

& aggression of our species.

We knew demons & angels

weren't wagering on this planetary cockfight.

We were complimentary chuckles in the wilderness,
waiting for the anthropic principle to pull the nails
on a hominid hammered for his hegemonic idealism
over 2,000 years ago, & replace him with an icon
representative of the 21st century's destructive mindset—

a Left Behind, a right behind,

& a neck disappearing between the 2.

Final Relapse

Alessio Zanelli

Failure makes people bitter and cruel.

—WILLIAM SOMERSET MAUGHAM

And the rarest nova is exploded and sent forth,
to pierce and tear apart the longstanding veil of obscurity,
but the refractor is pointed at the usual, empty, flat circle of sky.

And there is the watcher—spent, sour, sick—
brooding again—dejected, deluded, defeated—
over his anonymous, ungrateful, miserable fate,
crouched outside against the dome's wall.

And the dawn thrusts the night away,
along with the globe of magnificent glow,
along with a skyful of alternate, unchased lots.

And the rooster crows for the second time in a few hours.

And the curtain drops—heavy, tight, opaque—as if made of lead,
to seal up his blind, deaf, mute, numb miniature world forever.

And all is the same as before,
though not the same the same way anymore.

And he ups and shambles off the observatory,
blessing the twilight and blaspheming the stars,
to look for the rooster and slay it.

The Sex of Angels

Alessio Zanelli

We spend the most time
debating or musing on trifles,
while facing pints in sequence
with friends at our favorite bar
or else while staring into the void
sitting alone at our office desk.
Noa or JLo?
The dollar or the euro?
Kant or Hegel?

We positively live on a petty spherule
and Einstein proved that space is warped
because of the mass it comprehends.
So there's no right and no left,
no top and no bottom,
no inside and no outside,
no yea and no nay.

Yet a question recurs:
upon what does the whole universe rest?

On a long night of alcoholic excesses
a wonderful angel came near me and said
it definitely knew the answer,
but then added *it* couldn't reveal it
for the shame of not understanding the question.
It also confessed all *its* misery
due to *its* being denied any other knowledge,
first of all the one about *its* sex.

I replied *it* was of no sex,
that sex had no concern with *it*,
then I let *it* join the party and hit the sauce.
I also said that now it was *its* turn to spill the beans.

I blacked out before *it* spoke and haven't
seen *it* ever since.

wordmakers

Robert Aguirre » *From Belle Harbor, New York.* [This story made me nervous from start to finish. His style paced the plot perfectly with such a bittersweetly numb event that likely is close to the truths for many who seek security over self-worth. A fine exploration of fear and paranoia as perfectly normal.]

Alan Catlin » *Barmaster in Schenectady, New York. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. 'Killer Cocktails' is available from Four-Sep, as well as its fine successors 'Hair of the Dog That Bit Me,' 'The Leper's Kiss,' and 'Death Angels.'* [A couple good ones from a long-time favorite in these pages. Catlin can shape a character like few others.]

Rebecca Epstein » *From Ithaca, New York, and a recent Cornell graduate.* [A creepy piece, with obvious allusions, yet I was fascinated by the method by which the human mind sorts even the most absurd elements into some kind of order. The complete absorption in the moment and the return to self, the breathing, make it.]

Gary Every » *His exceptional 'Cat Canyon Secrets,' 46pp of especially descriptive and fantastic stories from the southwest, is available for \$6 from the author (First Class will forward).* [A little bit of profundity and humor to grace the center of the issue. Another favorite of mine, with a keen eye for finding a message in the apparently mundane, a story in the tossed stones.]

Ed Galing » *The famed Poet Laureate of Hatboro, Pennsylvania has appeared all over the independent press and numerous chaps, including 'Tales of South Philly' from Four-Sep Publications.* [I seek out those who write what they know, and Galing always jabs out his message through knowing eyes. This is a direct, clear commentary on a hard place where you may one day be.]

Donald Illich » *From Rockville, Maryland.* [Anxiety and self-absorption are hallmarks of our culture, and these two poems capture that essence. As postcards from the past to a far-off future these are an anthropologist's dream.]

B.Z. Niditch » *The artistic director of 'The Original Theatre' in Brookline, Massachusetts. Several of his plays and prose have appeared in First Class. Three of his many books are available from Four-Sep Publications. His latest, "Poetica II" is a terrific collection from Snark Publishing.* [A short poem, jagged, plain and straightforward. I consider it a reminder, or sorts, that real people kill real people in real wars and are robbed of a portion of their humanity.]

spiel » *A writer and illustrator with appearances in the best mags of the independent press. His book, 'Insufferable Zipper,' is available from Four-Sep Publications.* [These two pieces explore the "they" that we all know about—or do we just talk about the "they"—anyway, they tell me the forthcoming book "They put it in the water" will feature these stories, and they say it's gonna be great...]

roibeárd Uí-neill » *From Corydon, Indiana.* [I've never published a rant, though this is not quite a rant... It's easy to blast away at the world these days, but it's difficult to find a well-written and interesting "throw down." Here's one.]

Alessio Zanelli » *An Italian poet who has adopted English as his artistic language and has published widely in literary mags across the world. He is the author of three collections, most recently "Straight Away," and a featured author in the 2006 Poet's Market. "Straight Away" is a killer collection—check out www.writesight.com/writers/Zanelli.* [A couple quirky poems from Zanelli that focus on a favorite theme of mine—missed opportunity; in this case a supernova and the secrets of an angel.]

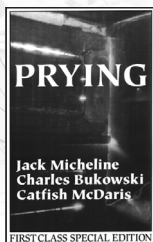
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— 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*



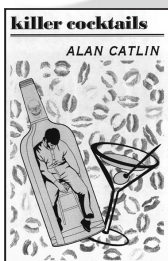
John Bennett

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



First Class is very open to submissions. Especially sought after are pieces of short fiction, but poetics are, of course, accepted as well. **I am now also very interested in illustrations and some stark photography for both cover art and internal pages.** I seek the very best words and images you have available for me to read.

There are a few important things to make sure that you do when you submit your work.

For the computer users, please do **not** justify or force-justify your text. Please do not "double space" after each period.

Name and address on the first page of each piece only.

Send along a SASE.

Disposable/recyclable manuscripts are cool and mandatory.

Lastly.....drop me a letter with your submission, it sure beats the hell out of a chunk of submission text and a SASE dropping out on the table without at least a brief greeting.

I make it a point to take advantage of the technology I have available to keep track of everything that comes in and leaves First Class. You can expect timely responses and notifications. I know from experience that it is disturbing not to know the status of your words.

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

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-Christopher M.

need a chap?

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Four-Sep Publications *also* produces chaps-for-hire under the imprint

"Lockout Press." There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design, as well as inclusion on the Lockout Press page of the Four-Sep Publications Web site. The foremost concern in this venture is to communicate your work with production matching the scale of your message. Professional layout and design along with crisp laser output will be combined with experience, skill and text-crafting ability. After dropping too many paychecks at the copyshop, I want to share the ability I now have to reduce the costs associated with this wondrous obsession, and increase the quality of the finished product. Plus, I'll be able to read more of all of your fine words. Nothing is impossible to work out, up to full-color covers and perfect-binding, and I assure you that you will reel in amazement. **Drop me a letter or e-mail (christopherm@four-sep.com) and I will work up a quote based on the info you give me.** Everything is included in the rates: layout, design, **shipping**, printing, binding, and proofs-til-you're-happy.

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

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

The 24# White paper is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include a cover printed on coated stock, other stocks are available. These are samples and subject to change. Some special projects and various cover options may entail a greater commitment from both parties. **For additional information, testimonials, sample cover art and more, please check out www.four-sep.com and click on the "Lockout Press" link. Due to a serious prick out there, half-down is now necessary after the first proof.**