

# First Class

ARE YOU WATCHING THE PAPER OR WHO PULLS THE STRINGS?  
31

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



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- EVERY
- GALING
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- GREY
- GUGLIELMO
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- spiel
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**ISSUE THIRTY-ONE**  
**AUGUST, 2008**



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FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS

Indexed by *The American Humanities Index*

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

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

*First Class #31 is one hell of a pleasurable read. I have managed to cull the very best stories and poems that have passed through the Friendship pobox and plopped them on these pages for you to gain much ponderable insight in a mere hour. So, turn off that television and tune out the blathering of the political bandits vying for your vote so that they can pillage and profit, steal and smarm, threaten and thief. Take stock of your realm, be it small or large, and enjoy the swirl of life within arms' reach. While we surge through another replay of dark history, it is all we really have that we can live through and make our own.*

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

*Now, get reading!*

*- Christopher M.*

*- christopherm@four-sep.com*



## Desperation and Sheetrock

*L. Burrow*

I felt sick as I watched traffic pass on I-90 through the picture window behind him. It was autumn; the trees were bare and the sky was gray. Inside, the office was inundated with gas receipts, travel vouchers and gypsum dust. He held the phone against his thick cheek, and his moustache swept the receiver as he barked explicit directions to a wayward delivery driver. I waited patiently for the job interview to begin.

On the wall over my right shoulder, there was a painting of him with his wife and four children. They all sat on a stone bench with rolling hills of evergreens behind them; each held an American flag over their left breast. He had on a beige blazer over a "Gulf War Veteran" t-shirt and a pair of denim jeans. He had no moustache back then. The three daughters wore their hair in curls and the son was in a sailor suit. The girls were gusting with pre-teen glee. But I sensed sadness in the son's eyes, as if he had been crying but was painted with a grin instead. I couldn't look; I felt sick again.

I began to wonder why I never went to barber college. I could have had an outstanding compensation and benefits package. I could have crushed stones at the quarry if I had the experience and my own tools. I could have sold candles for cash if I had a working computer and internet access. I could have hauled fertilizer if I had a CDL and a pesticide license. If I knew about diesel engines, I could have worked the graveyard shift at city transit. If I had the ability to put the super in supermarket, I could have been a grocery crew manager. I could have been a secret shopper, a movie extra or a data entry processor, but I waited too long. This guy advertised an immediate opening for a laborer, and I felt sick because I would have to assume the tone of a man who didn't want a job, but rather needed one.

This was not desperation; desperation was the slaughterhouse. And if this didn't work, that was my other option for immediate employment. I had the address in my pocket, and I attempted to imagine every horrific sight, guttural sound and blunt scent I could, prepping myself to make seven dollars an hour the hard way. How bad could a shower of cow's blood really be? I dug too deep; it was time to climb out. A few weeks of pulling hides to settle a few scores then I would be out—the experience forever embedded into my unconscious, to dream the dirty dream until the day I die. Moo.

He hung up the phone and abruptly asked me if I could carry at least two sheets of drywall at a time. Yes. In fact, I think that I might be able to carry three, if not four, fully knowing the great deal of weight may cripple me, but I am fully capable; my legs are limber, my back is strong and my spirit is willing. No, I have never been convicted of a drug-related crime. Yes, I am certain. Of course, I will piss in a cup for you. I'll do it; right here, right now. Mandatory overtime is not a problem for me. I am yours. Thank you, sir, this opportunity means so much to me. I won't let you down.

The next day I called in sick.

*Mi amigo Arturo tienes nuevo cumpleaños, a new birthday. His Nuevo cumpleaños es noviembre Segundo, El día de los muertos, The Day of the Dead. All his troubles began one day at work when our big buffoonish bar-room manager Brian burst through the kitchen doors and announced, "Arturo junior is going to miss all his busboy shifts for the next week. His father died and he has to go back to Mexico."*

We all look over at the dishwashing machine where Arturo senior is working hard, working really hard for a dead guy. Arturo continues to work because he understands very little English and has no idea what Brian just said. Although in his quiet strong way Arturo might declare in a soft voice that rumors of his demise are greatly exaggerated.

*Mi amigo Arturo es abuelito poquito. Hombre es muy fuerte. Even at 65 años he is mas fuerte. He bicycles to and from work and after working fourteen hour shifts I imagine both directions on the bicycle seem uphill.*

I explain to Pedro in my best broken Spanglish what Brian has just said so he can translate to Arturo. I mean if he is dead, maybe Arturo needs to sit down and take a break, take a load off his feet, rest in peace. It takes Pedro a minute to understand what I am trying to say. Quite frankly I am a little worried about how Pedro will take the news of Arturo's recent death. Arturo and Pedro have been working together as dishwashers for almost a decade. They are fiercely loyal to each other, I call them "*Dos esposos*" or the two husbands. Pedro smiles as he gradually understands. He gives Arturo a new nickname, "*Muerto*," the dead guy. Arturo looks a little shocked and bewildered by the news which is pretty much how I always imagined being dead to feel like.

"*Como Estas Muerto?*" I ask him.

Arturo grumbles, he does not like his new nickname. Naturally, everybody uses it all day.

After working together as dishwashers for nearly decade, Arturo and Pedro are fiercely loyal but near as I can tell they do not like each other one bit. They bicker constantly like an old married couple. *Dos Esposos*, or the two husbands. Arturo shoves another tray of dishes into the washer while Pedro dries and puts things away.

Arturo grumbles about his nickname.

Pedro laughs.

One by one as word spreads through the kitchen all the *gentes* of the *cosina* stop by the dishwashing machine to pay their last respects to Arturo. Arturo does not find this morbid humor funny. Besides he has work to do and all these people are bothering him.



Oscar hugs him and pretends to cry. Manny slams his fist on the cutting board, weeping and wailing, crying out “*Que, que, que,*” or “*Why, why, why,*” slamming his fist over and over until the spices fall from the shelf. Everybody laughs. Armando lovingly places a candle atop the dish washing machine. Arturo glares. The laughter grows hysterical. Pedro laughs more than everybody.

Finally, Arturo stands in the middle of the room and shouts out, “*Yo soy es no muerto.*”

It is my salad girl who brings up another option. She whispers one word. “*Sancho.*” It is the possibility that none of us had thought of. Perhaps Arturo Senior is not really Arturo Junior’s father. Perhaps juniors real father, Mrs. Arturo’s lover, the *sancho*, is dead back in Mexico.

“*Sancho,*” Herlinda repeats.

Arturo can no longer keep a straight face. He laughs and laughs.

The kitchen erupts.

The line cooks return to the line where there are tickets hanging and food to make. The salad girl makes salads. The kitchen returns to its normal routine, the booming bass drum of the water spray striking the sheet metal of the dish washing machine rhythmically guiding the kitchen through its day. Arturo and Pedro bicker constantly. *Dos esposos.* Pedro calls Arturo “*Muerto*” every chance he gets. Arturo grumbles.

After awhile, Arturo pulls his wallet from his back pocket. He produces a picture of his wife. The little tiny brown woman is even smaller than he is but she is wearing the biggest smile I have ever seen, a big, real big smile. It has to be a big smile to travel all the way from the mountains of Mexico to the big city where Arturo lives. Arturo is in America raising the sons while his wife remains in their tiny rural village bringing up the daughters. Arturo’s wife is standing in a tiny private chapel. She is standing in front of a mural of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This woman with this great big smile and soft brown eyes would never ever cheat on the man she is posing for. Besides, Arturo’s son looks just like him, a dead ringer.

“*Muerto,*” Pedro asks Arturo to help him with the trash. Arturo grumbles and curses at him in Spanish. Pedro replies with similar cursing and soon they are bickering again, both insulting each other so rapidly that they do not allow the other one to finish his sentences, interrupting with curse words piled on top of curse words. I do not understand many of the Spanish words and those I do understand I choose not to repeat. With one hand on each side of the trash can they continue their bickering patter all the way across the kitchen towards the back door.

They carry the heavy can past the shelves where one of the waitresses is stocking napkins. Pedro lets go of

his end of the trash can. Arturo drags the full trash can along the floor while Pedro slides past the waitress placing a hand on each of her hips, gently grinding against her backside as he moves past. There is no need for this. There is plenty of room.

Pedro is a pervert. Our salad girl calls him a “dirty, smelly, drunken donkey.” The two dishwashers, “*Dos esposos*,” could not be more different. Arturo the loyal hard working family man, patriarch of the clan, living in a trailer crammed full of brothers, sons, and nephews, and Pedro the tequila drinking pervert, whose idea of a fantasy weekend includes an eight ball, a hooker, and a pair of rodeo clowns. Together they stand at the back door, preparing to lug the heavy trash can to the dumpster. The waitress escapes the shelves, looking a little flustered.

“Hey *Muerto*,” I cry out.

Arturo turns, slightly annoyed, still not liking his new nickname and probably hoping it does not stick.

I continue, “Make sure your *amigo* behaves. I have warned him before. Next time I will have to fire him.”

“*Donde amigo?*” Arturo replies.

“Pedro.”

“*Donde amigo?*” Where is my friend, what friend, Arturo says, shrugging his shoulders as if Pedro is invisible.

“*Tu esposo*,” I reply. “*Zopilote*.”

The kitchen laughs. Just like that Pedro is the one with a new nickname. It makes sense to me, who is death’s best friend and constant companion except for *Zopilote* or vulture? Beside calling Pedro a buzzard describes him perfectly, the way he hovers constantly in the kitchen waiting for a waitress to bend over or maybe lean over the ice machine and give him an unexpected peek of cleavage. *Zopilote*.

In a way you can hardly blame him, Pedro is a long way from home and so few Mexican women make the journey north. It is a long and dangerous trek, requiring years of savings to pay the smugglers, risking life to cross the deserts, risking life at the hand of bandits. Those few women who do attempt it are almost always raped by the coyotes who smuggle them across the border. When I think of such things happening to our sweet industrious salad girls it almost makes me cry. I would never ask the girls about this and when I ask the boys they grow silent and sullen, ashamed at being unable to prevent such atrocities. Yet once they arrive in this country they work so hard and laugh so loud.

The door opens, Arturo and Pedro return with the empty trash can and still bicker with each other. They take turns insulting one another with their new nicknames, poking and pinching each other constantly like little children. Yet both men are well over 60 years old.

“*Muerto*.”

“Zopilote.”

“Muerto.”

“Zopilote.”

They load the dishwashing machine and the water spray strikes the sheet metal in a booming bass drum while a knife clatters staccato rapid fast on a cutting board. Pedro and Arturo resume their bickering, the rhythms of kitchen returning to normal. Little do they suspect that tomorrow morning when they take out the trash there will be a raccoon stuck in the dumpster. A raccoon. *Mapache*. Like Don Quixote and Sanco Panza, like Batman and Robin, like mismatched and ineffective superheroes the adventures of *Muerto* and *Zopilote* continue on...

## Decapitated Lizard

Gary Every

The skull is crushed,  
jaws agape  
as if it was screaming in terror  
at the moment of death.  
The severed body lays nearby  
legs splayed in every direction  
and zebra striped tail half curled.  
A mountain bike tire track  
cuts through the soft sand,  
rolling between reptile skull  
and lizard torso,  
a swift and terrible death.  
Mountain bikes  
have become the leading  
cause of death  
for desert tortoises.  
Up in the mountains  
motion sensors detect stray elk  
who wander too close to the highway  
alerting drivers with flashing lights  
because such a large bovine beast  
can crush an automobile.

My first night in Juneau, Alaska  
I sit on a porch  
sipping a beer  
listening to a man tell a story.  
He says  
“I was hitchhiking in Sweden  
and I was picked up  
by these three really happy guys.  
They were throwing money around  
and laughing.  
They all had guns  
and were sipping whiskey  
straight from the bottle.  
Then they would reach  
into these paper bags  
and throw more money in the air,  
big bills everywhere inside the car.  
I realized pretty quickly  
these guys had just robbed a bank  
and picked me up hitchhiking  
in case they needed a hostage.”  
The pretty girl beside him asked.  
“Was this when  
you were part of the stolen car ring?”  
He pats her lovingly on the knee,  
a cute knee,  
and says  
“No that was Turkey,  
this was Sweden.”  
Because it was Sweden  
there was a moose  
in the middle of the road.  
The driver hit the brakes,

the car swerved  
but the giant moose  
was unavoidable.  
The automobile  
was totaled in the crash.  
The moose limped away.  
The guy telling the story says  
“While everybody was slightly dazed,  
I grabbed two fists full of money  
and ran into the forest.”

These are the thoughts  
I was thinking  
while hiking on the trail  
I hear the whir of wheels  
the clatter and rattle  
of gears, chains and pedals  
as two mountain bikes  
approach from behind.  
I step from the trail  
and let the bikes roll by  
waving hello  
as the riders mutter a thank you.  
I step back on to the path  
congratulating myself  
on averting disaster  
avoiding the fate  
of the decapitated lizard  
just before  
I trip over a stone  
and fall into some cactus.

# Coyote Sunrise

*Gary Every*

The coyote roared  
just as the first rays of sunlight  
bent over the mountaintops  
to illuminate  
the modern cosmopolitan cowtown.  
Standing in the middle of the intersection  
ignoring all the stop signs,  
the wild dog roared, barked,  
yipped, yowled, growled and howled  
letting loose with all the ferocious canine vocabulary  
he could muster.  
Domestic dogs hid in closets,  
cats cowered beneath covers  
and suburbanites were rudely awakened  
from their slumbers.  
Then just for the hell of it  
the coyote roared some more.  
While I fumbled for my television remote control,  
the coyote trotted off  
to wherever it is the wild things go  
while we busy ourselves  
with the foolish illusions of civilization.

they paid me forty  
bucks for my sperm  
it wasnt that i needed  
the money, it was just  
that there were so many  
couples out there who  
were married, and wanted  
a baby, and couldnt conceive...  
i was doing it for them...  
for humanity...  
so that some depressed  
and unhappy woman who  
wanted so desperately  
to have a baby,  
could have one...  
the lab said my sperm  
was just fine, and that  
nobody would ever know,  
(including me)  
who would eventually  
conceive from it,  
or how many would  
someday thank me for  
the benefactor that i  
was...  
the lab said it was  
all confidential,  
and that no one would  
ever know,  
thats what they said,  
i felt a bit uneasy  
about the whole damn  
thing,  
especially since i was  
married,  
and we had two kids of  
our own,  
but my wife knew about  
this and said it was all  
right with her, because  
she could just visualize  
how a woman could feel,  
wanting a baby, and not  
being able to conceive...  
it wasnt at all like i  
did it behind her back...  
it wasnt as if i even  
needed the damn forty  
bucks they gave me...  
i guess it was because  
i am a man who had the  
power of life...  
i was like a saint...  
the bible says so

we're standin in  
line  
admirals inspection

the hangar  
is cold

pigeons fly  
around up in  
the rafters

there are three  
hundred of us

squadrons on  
active duty

but its  
peacetime

we are the  
naval reserve

the admiral and  
his entourage  
walks up and down  
the ranks

looking with a  
critical eye  
at our imperfections

i stand erect  
spit shine  
neckerchief down  
at the V

when the admiral  
gets to me  
i try not to look  
him in the eye

he frowns a bit  
and then  
suddenly

someone  
farts  
the sound  
reverberates all  
through the hangar

as loud as a  
shotgun



again and again  
someone  
farts

somewhere in  
the ranks

i cant help  
but smile a  
bit  
as the admiral  
stares at me

like he hasnt  
heard the noise

i look him square  
in the face

as a pigeon  
from the rafters

suddenly shits  
down on his  
gold braided hat

i can hardly  
restrain myself  
from bursting with  
laughter

with pigeon shit  
dripping from  
the admirals hat

he moves on  
without flinching

as he continues  
to walk the line

another  
fart  
rings  
out  
    democracy at work

The boy pushed the mower up and down the thick lawn with the plaintive dread of a plow ox. The heat blotched his face the color of raw hamburger. Inside the house, two men stopped their work to watch the boy secretly. The cheap theater of the boy's anguish was nonetheless convincing; it suggested this chore was just the beginning of the unending succession of chores life would soon become.

Both Tommy Griffin and Ross Fuller understood this unending succession, especially Tommy who had spent his years pushing, pulling, lifting, hammering, and forgetting. It didn't occur to him that some people lived without the constant burden of chore or labor. And it never occurred to him that no unalienable truth existed about how hard life had to be. To Tommy, broken appliances, repossessed cars, and cancelled utilities were just part of the human condition.

The reason Tommy believed in such constant suffering was simple: he was a fuckup. He sabotaged everything he did with drink and drug and sloth and violent entitlement to irresponsibility. Ross, on the other hand, would believe in something if it sounded smart, regardless of its merit, but never committed himself to any particular conviction. You can't be a fuckup if you never do anything.

The men still stood behind a gauzy curtain when the rain began. It fell at once, wetting everything instantly. The boy did not stop mowing right away, and finally when he looked up into the sky, it was as if he had noticed a single drop on his forehead and wondered if it might begin to rain. Angry white streaks of rain splashed against his pink face. When the boy left his mower, he walked straight to the detached garage, turned on the bare overhead bulb, and began rummaging through the old man's cluttered possessions.

"You get the feeling he's done that before, don't you?" said Tommy.

"Just some kid the lawyer hired," Ross said. "Looking for whatever he can find."

"Probably dirty magazines. That's what I did when I was his age. Looked for dirty magazines everywhere I went. School, church, my grandparent's house, my friends' houses."

"Damn," began Ross. "Sounds like a lot of work for a little paper tit."

"Wasn't work," protested Tommy. "That shit was fun. I thought I was some kind of detective, snooping around everywhere." He paused and they watched the boy pull a framed picture from a box, look at it briefly, and then discard it rudely. "The best part was I found porn everywhere I went."

"They had porn at your church?"

“No Ross. Not at the fucking church.”

The men returned to their work. The lawyer who had hired them was in charge of the old woman’s affairs. She was in a nursing home in a nearby town. Her husband was long since dead, though all his things were still in the one-car garage out back, not so much disposed of as they were abandoned.

The lawyer, not the seedy type, but with a provinciality that surprised everyone despite his stylish appearance, had given them vague orders, saying, “I just want the house empty. Beyond that, I don’t give a rat’s ass.”

Tommy assured him everything would go straight into the earth.

He reached down and grabbed a box of albums. The bottom gave way like a bursting dam. On the dingy carpeting, records spread out in an alluvial fan of Mel Tormes, Tom Joneses, and Carter Families. Tommy’s hangover intensified as he bent down to scoop up the records.

The lawyer had told them: “The old gal’s kids already fleeced the place. Took the fine china, family heirlooms, and whatnot. Left the rest in big ass heaps.”

Tommy wondered what his son would want of his possessions. His own father had left what fathers of that generation typically left: guns and a legacy of dependence. The guns, which included an M1 Garand and a pump-action Mossberg, were long gone, sold in desperate moments, but the dependence—on women to make life easier, on booze when women failed—was fresh as a new grave, as a gaping hole in the earth brimming with colorful trash.

From a bedroom, Ross yelled, “I thought they took the good shit.”

Tommy stood erect and wondered what good could come from anything he saw spread across the living room floor. Boxes full of old clothes reeking of overuse, boxes full of greasy cookware and trinkets (ceramic ashtrays from every state)—all things that would be overlooked at a garage sale and then ignored for years on lint-covered shelves in a secondhand store. It was better to spare the world these items. They were reminders of forgettable lives. Secondhand stores validated people in the belief that others still wanted their frayed and yellowed junk.

Tommy thought it was better to burn it or bury it. With haste.

He tripped over a bag of polyester bedspreads and

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HIS OWN FATHER HAD LEFT

WHAT FATHERS OF THAT

GENERATION TYPICALLY

LEFT: GUNS AND A

LEGACY OF DEPENDENCE.

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walked into the back of the house. Ross looked heavy as he bent over, tight shirt betraying his belly. Sifting through a box of papers, he produced a sepia-toned envelope and scooped out its contents with a hooked finger as if gutting a fish. After briefly glancing at the letter, he handed it to Tommy.

*Dear Ellen, went to Seoul last weekend. Gls everywhere. Like we won the city. How many of us are here? I went with Sarg. Powles for dinner and a show. Tell my brother I said hi. Remember that time we went to the city and ate sour kraut on hotdogs for the first time? Well, Sarg. Powles made me eat Korean kraut. Called it Kim She. The vents to the crawl space need open now that its hot back home. If you don't the joists mold. A skeeter the size of a dragonfly just landed on my pencil. Tell my brother about the Korean kraut.*

The letter went on like that. Breezy non sequitars and the occasional imperative. Tommy looked down at Ross, who studied another letter before snorting with satisfaction.

Ross cleared his throat: "He tells here of how he and Sergeant Powles went to Seoul and saw a show with 'dancing girls that had extra mammaries.'"

"What the hell's the point?"

Ross dropped the letter and chose another. "All I'm saying is this is the kind of shit you'd think somebody'd want. You know, personal stuff."

"The last thing I'd want to know is the kind of bullshit my old man would of written to my mom. You're liable to learn something you were better off not knowing."

Ross laughed. "You kill me Tommy. All doom and gloom." Tommy was walking back down the hallway when Ross hollered: "God damn. Come check this out Tommy." Reluctantly, he returned to the bedroom. Ross had opened another box. It was brimming with aged Playboys.

"See. I told you it was everywhere. Porn."

"Shoot." Ross flipped through an issue. "This ain't porn," he said, pointing to a voluptuous but demure woman. "Ain't no beaver. No beaver, no porn."

"Wonder why the old lady held on to those."

"Well," pondered Ross. "My dad, he had this old green recliner he sat in, ate in, slept in for years. And, I mean, it was nasty. The dog wouldn't even get in it. The thing was stained with Dwight Fuller. My mom, of course, hated it. She even bought him a new one for Christmas one year. The next morning when she got up, the new recliner was gone. He just went and returned it to the damn store." Ross paused and stood up, grunting painfully. "Anyway, after he died, maybe like six months later, I went to see my mom, and guess what? She couldn't get rid of the damn green chair. When she

talked about it, she started crying.”

“So what? You figure this old lady had a sentimental attachment to her dead husband’s porn?”

Ross wagged his finger at Tommy. “No beaver, no porn. Let’s go get some lunch.”

They drove down the street to the Buy-Low. It was the newest grocery store in town. In the mornings, the parking lot smelled like donuts. By noon, it smelled like fried chicken. Inside, Tommy noticed Garrett Dozer at the salad bar in the deli. Dozer worked maintenance at the trailer park where Tommy lived. His massive hairy shoulders were bare beneath new Carhartt bibs. They watched him in silence as he built a salad.

First, he placed a layer of iceberg lettuce in the basin of a Styrofoam container.

Next, he ladled Thousand Island dressing until it covered the lettuce.

Then, he dusted the top of the dressing with several handfuls of bacon bits.

After that, he repeated steps two and three.

Ross whistled. “God dang Doz. That ain’t no salad. That’s a damn coronary.”

“Good,” said Dozer, before he even looked up to see who it was. “I don’t like salads.” His eyes flickered against his dark brow as he glanced at Ross then Tommy. He scooped five spoonfuls of boiled egg onto his salad. “Arlene says you’re two months behind Thomas.”

Tommy pretended to ignore Dozer, looking at the fried chicken behind the sweaty glass counter.

Ross said, “We’ll get paid the end of this week,” even though he knew it would irritate Tommy.

“Suppose you got something you want to trade this time round.” Dozer walked up beside Tommy. Against the pure Styrofoam container, his fingers looked like a manifold of grimy pipes. He smelled of used motor oil and onions.

Maybe a year ago, Tommy had run short on funds. To keep his trailer, he had given Dozer a cherry sunburst Les Paul with double-coil Humbucker pickups that roared like jet engines. He loved that guitar. Used to play it unplugged in the middle of the night when he couldn’t sleep, ripping on Black Sabbath lead lines and trying to imitate Eddie Van Halen solos. Sometimes, he would play straight through until dawn, but it never felt like a night wasted. “One day,” began Tommy, unwilling to look at Dozer. “I’m gonna come get that guitar.”

Dozer laughed large, like a bear in a cartoon. “I got that thing locked up with the guns. Arlene likes to pull it out when we got company. Anyways, you got ‘til the end of the week.”

Ross nudged Tommy as Dozer walked away. “Come on. Let’s just get some chicken.”

With each day, the job at the old woman's house became more difficult. No matter how many boxes the two men hauled out the backdoor, the number inside seemed never to diminish. Each time they opened a door that had been blocked by boxes, they found closets filled to the ceiling with junk.

Tommy and Ross slowed down more each day, demoralized by the amount of work. "I told you we should of bid more on this job," snapped Tommy.

"How was I supposed to know this little house could hold so much."

"Well, all I know is every time you bid on a job we end up doing charity work. You're too damn easy when it comes to other people's money."

Ross didn't say anything, but instead studied the old fridge that sat between them. "We gonna salvage this thing?"

"Hell, we should already be on our next job. I ain't gonna get my rent paid by ..."

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HE COULD SMELL THE AIR  
LEACHING OUT AROUND THE  
JAMBS, THE TWANG OF MILDEW,  
THE SORROW OF TRAPPED AIR.

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Tommy stopped himself, weary of his complaining tone. Both men stroked the cool, enamel finish of the fridge, as if it might communicate to them a secret for its moving. "Let's move this bastard."

Together, they lifted the fridge and pulled it away from the wall, revealing a square of

fuzz-lined grease on the tarnished linoleum. On the wall behind the fridge was another door. "Not another closet," cried Ross.

But Tommy already knew it wasn't a closet. He could smell the air leaching out around the jambs, the twang of mildew, the sorrow of trapped air. "It's a basement," he whispered.

"No, no, no. That letter the other day said there was a crawlspace, not no basement."

Tommy looked meanly at Ross, who so frequently allowed himself to believe whatever was easiest to believe. "The kitchen here's part of the old house, got a basement. The front part is newer, just built over a crawlspace."

"Well, whatever it is, I just hope there ain't a bunch of crap behind that door." Ross's voice cracked, as if he might cry.

"Amen," said Tommy, opening the door.

The stair treads were naked 2x10s upon which Tommy slowly descended. Before him was darkness. One hand searched that darkness. The other felt the rough terrain of foundation bricks, which were damp with

perspiration. Tommy looked up towards Ross, whose silhouetted figure stood in the open entry to the basement, his form menacing. A shiver raced across Tommy's flesh, as he recognized an old subterranean fear.

His mother used to send him to the cellar where the only light was in the cedar-lined closet they used for storing canned goods. When he would reach into the closet for the light, already enveloped in the darkness of the basement, he braced himself for the touch of another, of a man hidden in the basement, waiting for him. Maybe he would touch Tommy's hand gently at first. Tommy was always a little surprised when the light came on, revealing only shelves of mason jars and tin cans.

Once he reached the bottom of the stairs, Ross asked, "You alright?" Tommy didn't respond but walked away from the wall into the musky black of the room. He hadn't taken two steps when he felt a piece of string against his face. He pulled the string and a florescent bulb began twitching above, casting its sickly light upon a stack of boxes. About the size of a pool table, the stacked boxes rested on several pallets to keep them away from the damp floor.

"Dammit," yelled Tommy. Ross came crashing down the stairs and moaned when he saw the extra boxes. Tommy picked up the box closest to him. "Oh my god," he groaned. "This thing is heavy." Opening the box, he pulled out a dense wad of papers. "What the heck. These are business papers. Like receipts."

"Must have been from the old man's business. I remember his body shop. Did good work for an old Bondo dude."

"Looks like he saved everything. Every receipt, every work order, every catalog, every tax form." Tommy picked up another box and felt the same weight, the same density.

He always felt his rage coming, as if it were a train and he its tracks. He always felt it coming, but like a train, it was hard to stop.

The box still in his hands, he lifted it above his head and yelled, "Fuck this job," and hurled the box against the basement wall. The cardboard seams ripped apart on impact and a cloud of white, pink, and yellow papers fell slowly towards the floor, sounding like a flock of birds alighting in a tree.

"Whoa there," cautioned Ross.

Tommy grabbed another box and threw it. And another. And another. The air was full of paper, and it piled up around their feet like snow. Tommy could feel the rage draining out of him, but he couldn't yet stop. The job now would be much more difficult, but he needed to throw these stupid boxes.

When he picked up the shoe box, it felt different: not as heavy, but still dense, and as he threw it towards the

wall, he wondered what would explode into the air. It was money. Lots of green and white, cash money.

The Merry Go Round stank during the afternoon hours. Everything smelled of stale beer and dirty mop water. The floor tiles, the neon lights, the pool table felt, the glassware, the bar napkins. Patches of gray fuzz, produced by decades of cigarette smoke, clung to the ceiling panels like exotic moss. It was not until the happy hour rush, when enough bodies walked into the Merry Go Round that the stench diminished, replaced mercifully by smoke and men and frozen pizzas in the toaster oven.

Tommy Griffin and Ross Fuller sat a table by the window with a pitcher of beer. Outside, people rushed from their cars towards buildings, trying to escape the cruel heat. Inside, the two men dreamed in the air conditioning.

They dreamed of buying fishing boats, motorcycles, stereo systems, guns, and guitars.

Ross said he might get a bad tooth fixed.

Tommy wished aloud there was a decent place to get whores around here.

They had counted the money back at the house. In a paper bag on the table, there was \$11,400 in 20s, 50s, and 100s.

“I tell you what,” grinned Ross. “First thing I am going to do: take the rest of the damn summer off.”

“Hey now,” warned Tommy. Disappointment was already settling in. Fifty-seven hundred bucks apiece was not going to do much. It wasn’t going to change their lives. After a long pause, he said, “Oh whatever. You might as well take it off. Money ain’t gonna last very long anyway.”

“Wish there was more, but we might as well enjoy it.” Ross couldn’t stop grinning, and Tommy suspected that finding this money was the best thing that had ever happened in Ross’s life. He had to wonder how it ranked in his own life. He thought about his son, whom he rarely saw, who probably didn’t miss him. Tommy wished he could gather up the years, like that pile of papers on the basement floor, and throw them into a fire, destroying the evidence of his shortcomings, destroying the bad memories in the boy’s mind.

“Wish in one hand, shit in the other,” he said, finishing a beer. Tommy held his hands up like the counterbalanced pans of a scale. He lowered one hand. “Shit side’s always heavier.”

After another pitcher of beer, they left the Merry Go Round and walked across the street to Shooters where they each had a few whiskey drinks. Tommy’s spirits lifted as he drank, and he abandoned concerns about the money, half-hoping it would be spent by morning.



From Shooters, they walked back to the Merry Go Round and bought a round for the house. Then, they walked up the street to the Red Door. Ordinarily, they stayed away from the Red Door, which bustled in the early evenings with city hall officials and obnoxious groups of teachers and lawyers. Tommy hated it there, hated to see guys with whom they had gone to high school dressed in khakis with tucked-in shirts. They always wanted to talk about high school football, and Tommy never wanted to talk about it again.

If he had actually been as good as people remembered, maybe he wouldn't mind revisiting those times, but he felt like a fraud when people complimented what he had once been. He had only seemed talented surrounded by so much mediocrity.

As soon as they walked through the door, Grant Ferguson, the lawyer who had hired them to clean the old lady's house, turned from the bar where he stood, a tumbler of neat scotch in his large hand, and laughed. "Look who it is," he bellowed at his red-faced cronies. "Jeff and Mutt."

"I'm Ross," clarified Ross, and Ferguson's fat-headed drinking buddies laughed harder.

Ferguson, obviously into a second happy hour, turned to a bearded man who wore a bolo tie with a double-breasted suit. Tommy recognized the man from courtrooms. "These fellers are cleaning out that old lady's house I was telling you about. The one with all the damn troubles..."

"She sure has a lot of stuff in there," interrupted Ross.

Ferguson turned back towards them, and Tommy wished he could punch the lawyer in the face. Either that, or stand at the bar with him and laugh at the misfortunes of others. But standing there with Ross, while Ferguson looked at them in silence, working his lips thoughtfully, was intolerable. Finally, Ferguson said: "Well, not that it matters a gnat fart to you, but she should have had a rummage sale. Just found out she's broke. Can't afford the nursing home. Sure as hell can't afford me."

"Really?" asked Tommy. Beside him, Ross nudged the paper sack in Tommy's hand.

"Don't you boys worry. Just finish the work you were hired for. I'll see you get paid." Ferguson shifted back towards the bar, evidently done with them. Tommy felt certain they would never get paid.

Ross leaned into Tommy and whispered, "Let's get outta here."

But Tommy thought they should stay for a drink, thought it would seem suspicious to leave so quickly. When they sat at the other end of the bar, he placed the grocery bag in plain view.

As soon as they had drinks in their hands, Ross started in:

“Can you believe that about the old lady?”

“Uh, huh.”

“I mean, what a coincidence.”

“You could say that.”

“Maybe we should give the money back.”

“Hhmm.”

“If we don’t, where would she live?”

Tommy placated Ross through two beers. All he could think about was his rent, which needed paid in the next 24 hours. He told Ross, “That money didn’t even belong to the old lady. It was with her old man’s stuff. She never even knew about it. Hell, I’d say, he was hiding it from her.”

Quietly, they argued their points. When Ross stood, after their whispers had grown loud, Tommy knew the money was gone. He watched in horror as Ross turned towards Ferguson and yelled, “We got the money. We found money in the house.”

Tommy drove around until he calmed down. He cruised the gravel roads where he didn’t have to worry about cops pulling him over. Admittedly, Ross had done the right thing. Admittedly, Tommy had made a fool of himself.

When Ross raised the bag with everybody in the bar watching, Tommy had reached for the corner where his fingers, thick and hooked like nail pullers, had ripped at the papery flesh. He grabbed what he could as a jackpot of bills spilled into his lap.

Then, he ran. He ran past Ross and down towards the lawyers where Ferguson reached out a tentative hand, and instinctively, Tommy slapped it away. The reflex caused him to think of football, of the wonder of physical instincts. As he passed through the bar, cradling the wad of cash against his belly, dodging two women who danced with their margaritas, and lowering his shoulder against the door, Tommy couldn’t keep a smile off his face, even with shame in his heart.

Of course, Ross would have to explain everything to Ferguson. And later, they would come to arrest Tommy for stealing an old lady’s money, even if it wasn’t really her money. He would go to jail for a while and the old lady would continue to get her diaper changed by a stranger.

Really, Tommy didn’t care. This was the life he knew.

He awoke in the cab of his ’78 High Sierra, parked in front of the trailer where Dozer lived with Arlene. Before they came to arrest him, he wanted to pay his rent in full. He had enough money, with even a little to spare. Maybe he would buy a bottle and wait for the deputies. Get himself cleaned up. There was nothing worse than going to jail dirty. It only got worse from there.

Rivets on the side of the trailer rattled when he knocked on the door. Arlene answered. She was already dressed and pretty, even for being fat, even for living with Dozer. “Hey Tommy,” she said dryly.

Behind her, Dozer sat at the kitchen table, noshing eggs and drinking coffee. “Don’t be nice to Thomas,” he barked, eggs in his teeth. “We got to kick Thomas out today. So don’t let him sweet talk you about anything.”

“I got the money,” said Tommy, trying to sound dignified about the fact. He stepped into the trailer.

“Well thank Jesus for that.” Dozer stood up and walked towards Tommy, saying, “One less thing I got to do today.” But Tommy wasn’t listening, his eyes had fallen on his guitar, his Gibson Les Paul, the color of peach meat. It sat on Dozer’s couch. Two strings were busted and the fretboard was covered in dust. Tommy remembered that house dust consisted mostly of dead human skin. His guitar was covered in dead Garrett Dozer.

“I thought you kept that in your gun cabinet.”

Dozer dug at his teeth. “You got the rent or not.”

Tommy picked up his old guitar. “I want to buy this back,” he said.

Dozer and Arlene, dumbfounded, shared a look. Arlene stepped forward. “Honey, you don’t pay your rent today, I got to let Gary empty you out. That’s the rules.”

Tommy pulled the wad of cash from his pocket. “I got enough to pay for last month and the guitar. I got six hundred bucks.”

Dozer shook his head. “I ain’t selling that guitar back to you for no three hundred dollars.”

“Alright, how much then?”

Dozer and Arlene shared another look. “Six hundred,” he said.

Tommy placed the money on the kitchen table and said, “Get me the case.”

Dozer disappeared into the back of the trailer, returning with the fur-lined hard shell guitar case. As Tommy walked out the door, Arlene said, “You just bought yourself six hundred dollars worth of homelessness, Tommy Griffin.”

In his truck, he opened the case and found a new set of strings. Taking his time, Tommy cleaned the guitar with a chamois, restrung and tuned it. Then, he put it away and drove north an hour to the town where his son and his ex lived.

His ex was remarried, and Tommy had promised himself he would never meet the guy, who was a delivery driver for a beverage company. Tommy couldn’t even remember the guy’s name. Started with a “B.” They lived in the middle of town on one of the old streets. “B”

had remodeled an old two-story house, even replacing a stained-glass transom above the front door and the dentil block that supported the soffit.

Climbing out of his truck, Tommy examined his face in his rearview mirror. His beard stubble, thick and brown, left his face looking dirty, and he wished he had shaved. His eyes were glassy from last night's drinking. The buzzer by the front door tinkled like a fairy bell. Through the beveled glass of the front door, he could see her, Laura. As she approached, he could see her face, cut into jagged offsets by the bevels, as if she were a monster, or at least, a complete stranger. When her nose and eyes and cheeks realigned, Laura stopped and viewed Tommy in silence, through the glass

"Tommy," she said, a resignation of tenderness—or pity—in her voice. "You know you're supposed to call first."

Tommy could think of nothing to say, so he hoisted the guitar case to a height where she could see it.

Laura curled her lips inward until they disappeared. She always hated to disappoint people, which was the main reason it took her so long to leave Tommy. "Josh's not even here," she said. "He spent the night with a friend."

"OK. I'll wait."

"Tommy," she repeated, the tenderness withering. "You can't stay here. Brett's at home. What're we all going to do? Sit around the table and chat, talk about old times?"

All he had wanted was to see his son's face. For once, to see Josh's face as he did something good, something special, something right. But he wasn't mad, not at Josh's absence, or at Laura's inhospitality. He wasn't even mad at Brett. Placing the guitar case on the porch floor, he looked again at his son's mother, standing on the other side of the door. "I need you to do something for me," he began. "Inside this case is my Gibson Les Paul; it's a fine electric guitar. Now, make sure you tell all this to our boy: the guitar is mine, but I want him to have it. It's from father to son, like a pocket watch or...I don't know, something special fathers give to sons." Inside, Laura covered her mouth with her hand. Suddenly, Tommy was grateful for Josh's absence. He just wanted to leave. "You tell him all that." He was already backing off the porch. "Tell him why I wanted him to have it."

The late morning was hotter than any Tommy could remember. He rolled both windows down on the High Sierra and headed south towards home. A strong wind, swollen with the humid air, swept across the road from the west, but Tommy felt empty, light, like the summer air right after a rain, purged of all its burdens.

When he turned into the Crossroads Trailer Park, his

place could be seen down a long corridor of identical trailers, all of them in some stage of whiteness, all of them placed at a slant to the street, reducing their uniformity. But slant or no slant, the residents of Crossroads distinguished their homes with the junk they placed outside their front doors: trashcans, lawn furniture, living room furniture, busted appliances, rusted bicycles, bags of trash, empty beer cans, concrete statues, charcoal grills, bird fountains, and frequently, themselves.

Today, the wind blew trashcan lids, plastic chairs, and shopping bags across the roads, down the burnt yards between trailers. People's stuff moved to other people's places. Some of it would never find its way back.

But nowhere did more blow around, drifting across the street, than Tommy's place where Dozer stood in the front door throwing his possessions into one heaping mess on the concrete pad below. When Tommy stepped out of his truck, into the wind, Dozer smiled and yelled, "Almost got you packed."

Tommy walked amongst his things, mostly loose clothes atop household items—the TV, his recliner, a kitchen table. As he walked past this pile, he knew he would abandon it, that somehow it tethered him to a past he no longer needed. He truly believed he could live without a past, without connections, without memory.

Mounting the rickety front stoop, he pushed Dozer aside and furiously began grabbing everything left in the trailer—mostly old boxes he had never unpacked. They contained albums, books, old newspapers, photos, all his true belongings, all the things that told the story of his life—and hurled it all onto the ground outside where the hot wind blew his possessions around like flotsam, adrift on the sea after a shipwreck.

## At The Spa

*John Grey*

Women drift off toward the Turkish bath.  
I sit quietly in a cane chair,  
in a white dressing gown, sip carrot juice.

Don't we know that life ends badly?  
Immortality apparently is nothing more  
than the right minerals plugging the pores.

Or the taste of some unlovely vegetable,  
squeezed into a liquid, so thin and gruelly  
even a baby could lap it up.

People insist that I will leave this place  
feeling a new man, but that's as preposterous  
as angels splashing in the swimming pool.

This is a kind of culture that ought to disappear,  
be buried under its marble walls. Let future  
archeologists ponder mud-caked face cream.

They'll never know it was to keep the wrinkle,  
the sag of jaw, from the door. That's our civilization.  
Bottles and balms. No youth more ancient.

The young men and women in tight jeans walk strangely jumping as they go – on young limbs, cursing, touching, feeling....nuzzling in search of hope and sometimes love.

An aging homosexual in pomaded hair, greying in separate stalks stuck to sweating bulbous head – rouged lips pout and grimace... laugh clown laugh!

In regiments they stroll on summer nights – some thin, some fat – though always by the side of the road – or in parked Beetles – the swishing of skirts – of torn blouses and bitten breast – a limp balloon lying in the fertile dust of night.

A gigolo in Petrocelli suit and Gucci shoes, has seduced a lonely matron who smells of desperation and passionate peonies, and takes her to an X-rated movie reeking of Brut and stale tobacco.

The lonely virgin – the saddened nun – the divorced and the meek....play themselves to sleep in a game of frustration....angry at the sounds of love drifting through open windowsills.

Even the animals howl in a throbbing cacophony of urgency – as fireflies flicker in frenzy the code of love – mosquitoes buzz in anticipation – udders bursting with suckled blood – in the hours of sultry night and dawn.

# Charlatan

*Gayle Elen Harvey*

Inside and outside the pool-halls and gilded  
naves, there are charlatans,  
those going undercover with the Born  
Again,  
those whose faith is ornamental,  
un-tithed,  
one more misadventure.

There are charlatans who claim personal contact  
with a bony  
Christ and his passive-aggressive  
wounds,  
those who crave  
Bling,  
jolts of bourbon on the rocks  
with anonymous others.

There are charlatans who eroticize  
death, claiming infant  
souls,  
take their final breath without hem  
or haw,  
those who bash  
the Apocalypse, those who spend their final  
hours at the slots, counting obols  
and scars.



## Don't You Miss It, That...

*Lyn Lifshin*

smell of burning leaves? Color of fall, the rust smell, a smoky amber? Don't you on some days want to splash, no, cover your self in some scent that isn't light as lemons, doesn't smell like something you eat like vanilla or blueberries. You can't imagine the old movie stars not trailing a cloud of musk and heavy rose or jasmine, freesia. They were there and they let you know. Something from an animal's sexual gland. Something weighty and dark and strong. Yves Saint Laurent's Kouros and Rose Poiveres from a rich cream from the anal glands of a civet cat, strong and clear, persistent on skin. Structural, experts say, as an ocean liner, deep as the ripe smell of a French trucker's jockey shorts after a muggy day on A 51. One perfumer said her father loved the Civet cream, the perfume made of butt cream and rolled it around in his mouth and went home to kiss his wife. Sometimes the civet is cut, mixed with banana peels, butter and children's excrement. Zubie cream, "excrement d'enfants." Other scents made with horse manure plus rubber, fragrances that smell of a trucker's unwashed armpit and also like jasmine which smells like rotting corpses. Think of French women still dipping their fingers in their vaginas and using a drop of it on their wrists, behind an ear and its not surprising some go for what breathes life into their skin, like cream in soups or sauces, why something hits you like a boxer's right hook and really would you want to enter a room smelling of bananas or apples or bread? Really, admit it, wouldn't you want to bring out the animal in the ones you startle with something like Rose Poivree, even the name unsettling, gorgeous and pungent with decay and mystery?

## Modern Times

*Eric Obame*

There were trees there three months ago  
A few acres of nature between roads  
Now there is earth, naked brown  
And men with machines building houses  
The beasts are gone  
Their wood now forms  
The skull and bones of human homes

Purple, yellow, pink and red petals broke up the green  
I cannot recall the fragrance  
It has drowned in the sea of memory  
Road and homes  
The flower field of my childhood is gone  
It now lives only in my dreams

Another hill of reddish brown earth  
Another blanket of rock  
Another wall of orange and white cones  
Another line of vans, tractors, and trucks  
And people in yellow hard hats standing beside the road  
No more green just soil

I have not seen a dead deer in a while  
Their bodies no longer stink up the side of my roads  
I do not know if that is a good thing or not  
Have they finally learned our traffic signals?  
Or have these new homes and condos cleared them out?  
I have not seen a dead deer in a while

I throw my hands up in the air,  
they come back down.  
I wring my hands in despair,  
they stay attached.  
No fat lady's singing, clap my hands.

They chopped a man's hands off  
for stealing a chicken  
he couldn't eat.  
He went mad  
looking for his hands.

The Gypsy wanted a dollar.  
I gave her my last quarter.  
I watched her hands  
spread the cards.  
I was seventeen.

A Prince will ask for  
your hand in marriage,  
said the Gypsy.  
For a dollar.

Just a hand  
holding a hand  
in the beginning  
at the end.

i just don't care about the daily  
hundreds and hundreds of...

how can i care about another hundred casualties  
piles and piles mounting up in pounds of  
dead meat on their streets  
i don't care if the meat is theirs or ours  
i don't care if it is men or women  
chickens or children or donkeys

same as i don't care about the heaps  
of pounds of burgers dispensed  
by mcdonald's in one year or twenty years or fifty  
i am certain it must be in the billions by now  
but i will say this  
at least in return for its primetime space  
that fast-meat giant puts out real exchange  
to show off its meat

only it's we who have to cough out the billions  
for the tens upon tens of thousands of pounds of bloody  
somewhat skinned and oft-times conveniently partially boned  
and much too often so blown-to-bits-it-can't-be-shown  
raw man-meat voraciously consumed by our t.v.s  
to teach us not to care  
where our consumption dare not matter anymore

and it does seem that it is working  
because i do not care

but i do wonder  
might the fluid nature of blood plasma  
become more frightening  
in the last days when we all cave to wal-mart  
each of us squeezed into its aisles there and hacking  
out bucks for a high-wired much wider so much flatter  
new plasma t.v.

or might that fluidity become even more delicious  
more and more  
thus suspending the red of its reds  
even more extravagantly than ever before  
like gloss lipstick on the whore we have not yet dreamed  
because she can only be seen IF one is wide-awake  
as she torpedoes thru our home front door

axle grease, copper rivets, dingleberries,  
road tar, spiders, coal dust, steel shavings,  
lead paint, chicken beaks, mercury balls,  
mouse bones, my sister's snot, the tiny  
magnets glued to the bottoms of those little  
black and white scottie dog toys from  
woolworth's dime store, chips from uncle  
charley's new permanent asbestos siding,  
mostly i ate crap similar to what my dad  
swallowed before the age of five  
in the early 1900s

and i survived the few whacks to the ass  
because i busted our only thermometer  
to cop the mercury to swallow on a dare  
and every time i got new scottie toys  
and the magnets went missing  
and back in those days nobody  
never sued nobody for nothing

i've swallowed a lot but i cannot swallow  
the ostentatious narcissism  
the hypocrisy and the bullying  
of a nation's government that serves  
its righteousness to me

i will stand when you stand  
but i will grip my gut with my right hand  
while you put yours to your heart

## banger boy

spiel

how was it they made you  
feel so proud  
when they addressed you as *lady*  
directly  
in your boyface  
as they slapped you around  
to teach you  
the lesson  
how to become  
a man of men

because it would be  
a very naughty thing  
just to station a boy  
out there  
in the sand  
where the big bangs  
*bang* and *bang-bang*  
all night long and  
every bloody day

because a kid surely could never spot  
those bang-bangs coming  
and only *real men* are fit  
to bang it back

*plus* they would  
never dare  
to ship a *boy* back home  
in banged-up pieces

-

oh how they forget  
that with your mom  
they don't have  
the right  
to slap *her* around  
to teach her not  
to show her face  
on the 5 o'clock news

and say:

*he always loved loud noise*  
*he loved his christmas drums*  
*he...he...is.....uhh he was...my...baby boy*

## Father's Day

*Katharine Stewart*

Do the chickens wait  
For the boy to come and wring their necks?  
Do they not hear  
The sound of the dead  
Before them on the grass?  
I know I didn't  
As I tried to take the wheel.

It was his turn  
To pass out  
Communion on Sunset Boulevard,  
Martini glass rose  
In benediction  
As I heard his confession.

No priest came  
To wash my father's feet  
That Sunday, as he tried to  
Walk a straight line  
On Pacific Coast Highway.  
Claiming he could never do it,  
Even sober,  
They let him go  
And followed us the four blocks home.

## Civil War

*Katharine Stewart*

The lucky wives  
Kissed husbands goodbye  
After breakfast, pretending  
Not to know  
They marched into the arms  
Of the other side,  
Secretaries and starlets  
Stealing their rations.

Troops of mothers in bikinis  
gathered, poolside  
Waving gin and tonics, lit cigarettes  
In carefully manicured hands  
Before noon,  
These wives in the war zone.

The living rooms were empty  
Except for discarded candy wrappers  
And their children's innocence,  
Slipcovers no protection  
For little war orphaned girls.

In pink smocked dresses  
They marched bravely,  
Forced to wave the white flag  
Outside their bedroom doors.

Alone, they surrendered  
To uncles  
Family friends, or even brothers (now cadets),  
While their mothers  
Played outside.

Prisoners of war  
Drinking milk at supper  
With the enemy, as no soldier trained  
Can shoot their own.  
Slowly growing into ghosts  
Abandoning bodies  
On ruffled, lavender sheets.

Broken limbs,  
Souls held together with band-aids,  
Girls grown up  
Limped along  
Away from home  
Into new battlefields.



I

Nietzsche said the stomach was the reason  
man didn't readily take himself for a god.  
The Russians said every country  
was 3 meals away from a revolution.

Aphorisms & cautionary proverbs  
don't stick to the ribs during times of want.  
However one man's butter is another man's bullets.

II

The Sufis described coffee as the *drink of reason*.  
The law of supply & demand made short work of that.

His trembling hand pours a cup to the rim.  
He's been told each bushel of Bornean beans  
shakes orangutans out of their canopy –  
peaceful wise-men-of-the-forest  
swept out of sight, out of mind,  
on the first caffeine rush.

III

Black '47,  
a fungus again invaded Ireland's fields,  
tramped the humble spud to a rotten mash.  
Corn, wheat, beef, found its way to the docks,  
sailed across the sea to feed absentee landlords.  
Indigenous millions were left no recourse  
but coffin ships & starvation, many groaning  
their last ghost through grass-stained mouths.

IV

The more things change...  
He refuses to waste a Btu,  
imbibes his sake at room temperature.  
It calms the apprehension knotting his guts.  
The world on his plasma screen is hungry –  
the price of rice encourages its hoarding,  
& he gapes at tortilla riots south of the border,  
he gawks at bread riots across the land of the pharaohs,  
he gasps at the speculators who've  
    profited from the measure  
of a man's misery...

Progress in the greenhouse?  
Cleaner, ethanol-burning automobiles  
& fewer well-fed sapiens to drive them...  
...towards the cliff coming up fast.

V

What to do when alternatives become biohazards?  
Every dawn, a global band of omnivores  
puts a carbon footprint to the apocalypse.  
Every dusk, unreasonable hominids keep making  
the babies who'll go to war over the last lump of coal,  
the last dented tin of sardines, a final cup of rusty water.

VI

& the supernatural everyman expected to pull  
the monkey's fat out of the fire has skipped the solar system,  
his pockets stuffed with disappeared honeybees.

## \* a cosmic clown takes his medicine: alpha \*

roibeárd Uí-neíll

"Try though I surely might to stay positive..."

-Abraham Gibson

### I

Yeah, another health freak – 1 multivitamin a day,  
1,000 mgs of vitamin C a day, w/rose hips,  
but he can't swallow them dry.

A tall, cold cocktail straight from the tap –  
birth control pills & anti-convulsion drugs,  
among other invisible unpleasantness.

His blood cells haven't reached  
the saturation point, grovel for their nicotine fix,  
60+ a day, an ember & ash martyrdom funding  
education, health care, asphalt patches  
slapped on infrastructure ravaged by potholes.

He's blowing smoke rings  
at the self-righteous ingrates  
who've conflated "morals" with "habit."

### II

Enough already  
of polygamists & suicide-by-cop.  
Enough already  
of a German flesh-eater  
& his puerile, penile victim  
chatting anatomy & recipes on-line.  
Enough already  
of campus massacres & mountaintop mining.

The toxicity of negativity  
has God taking His own name in vain.  
It's a matter of decades before He throws up  
in a carbon sink, knuckles the corners of His mouth,  
& gladly writes us off as a species.

Back to the blackboard & a fresh line of chalk dust.

### III

Let the fool chew *quat*.  
Let the clown drink *soma*.  
What totemic beast would emerge if he were  
to draw on a pipe of the shaman's *salvia divinorum*?

A Cuban emerald hummingbird?  
Everyone's heart melting at the sight of  
its little bold beautiful unquestioning existence?

Amidst the bells & whistles  
of another newly-opened glitter gulch,  
a wizened, blind hunchback  
juggles 3 neon lemons, cackles to himself,

"That remains to be seen!"

# wordmakers

**L. Burrow** » *Resides in the great woods of upstate New York.* [A story about the pinned-down, trapped, vacuous position one may find oneself in when opportunities and motivation are lacking while seeking a meaningful way to occupy one's time while making ends meet.]

**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).* [Muerto is a hilarious tale of forged bonds behind the scenes of a restaurant, while I thought Decapitated Lizard was symbolic of our torn relation with the natural world. Coyote Sunrise further described our alienation from the natural world.]

**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.* [Galing is damn good at stitching a meaningful lining into the jacket of humorous while simultaneously serious situations.]

**Matt Garrison** » *Lives in Southern Illinois where he teaches composition and film classes.* [These characters desperately fight to find meaning in emptiness, seeking to define their identity, to do what is "right" to somehow beat the system, while being pulled back by their sense of what could be or should be the way things are in an unfair and manipulative world. Losers trying to be winners but somehow missing by just one shot.]

**John Grey** » *His latest book is "What Else Is There" from Main Street Rag. He has had several appearances on these pages.* [A nice short slice of cultural confusion. Where are our priorities? Self indulgence is the rule. Or so it would seem...]

**Dolores Guglielmo** » *Lives in Flushing, New York.* [I liked the imagery as the mate-pairings appear more as various observed beasts in nature, rather than the humans they pretend to be.]

**Gayle Elen Harvey** » *Has seven chapbooks, reads her work often, and has appeared in numerous publications, whilst living in Utica, New York.* [A scathing, minimalist attack on the self-righteous evangelically-minded posers who walk and work among us.]

**Lyn Lifshin** » *A very popular writer from Vienna, Virginia, with numerous books and appearances in a long list of magazines.* [Scent and scintillation, cover up and cunning – odors dominate the air in this creative tour de force of stink.]

**Eric Obame** » *Born in Africa, raised in Europe, with numerous publication credits. He now resides in Potomac, Maryland.* [Many share the sentiment of lost memories of landmark and scenery, though the last stanza's "I have not seen a dead deer in a while" resonated with me far stronger than mere complaints of scarred landscapes.]

**Ulla Pironi** » *Lives in Belmont, California.* [I just plain liked the imagery in this one.]

**spiel** » *He has appeared on these pages numerous times, with a collection from Four-Sep Publications (see next page) as well as several others. Two new books are forthcoming.* [These three from spiel are signature examples of his extraordinary style. His writing, regardless of topic, is interesting, powerful and laden with picturesque and stunning images, ideas and challenges to conventional perception.]

**Katharine Stewart** » *Lives in Sedona, Arizona.* [Two poetic tales that leave plenty of room for interpretation. Her style constructs a strong outline which is filled in with the mental meanderings one may take while reading between the lines of her image-rich poems.]

**roibeárd Uí-neíll** » *From Corydon, Indiana. His chap "A Cosmic Clown's Handbasket Blues" is now available from the author.* [One on food, and one on addiction. He craftily drafts his work, merging fact, allusion and opinion to challenge humanities work, and the very motives of our collective human and inhumane nature.]

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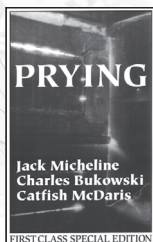
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— Christopher M.

# killer reads

## Four-Sep Publications Chapbooks

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



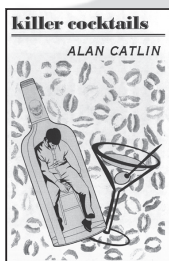
### John Bennett

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

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

### Alan Catlin

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



### Alan Catlin

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

### Alan Catlin

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

### Alan Catlin

**DEATH ANGELS** - is 'Killer Cocktails' spun out of control. Blending poetics within prose, mixing characterization with chaos, and serving up a hell of an ass-kicking booze-drenched nite-cap; Catlin continues to call 'em as he sees 'em from his side of the bar. *Craft cover/24# paper/44pp - \$6ppd*

### Stepan Chapman

**COMMON ECTOIDS OF ARIZONA** - a romp through the field drawings and notations of the eminent Stepan Chapman, Doctor of Etheric Zoology. A superb collection drawn from the freakish menagerie dancing in Chapman's skull. A truly awesome work of art. *Gloss cover/24# guts/44pp - \$5ppd*

### Stepan Chapman

**LIFE ON EARTH** - travel along as Life On Earth is personified in the guise of creatures, characters and imagery (36 pieces of art!) from the inimitable pen of Chapman's distinctive ink drawings. It's a tragedy, that we are all living, as Life On Earth struggles to survive—a blasting stare into the mirror of our collective consciousness. *Gloss cover/24# guts/40pp - \$6ppd*

### Christopher Cunningham

**SCREAMING IN SOME BEAUTY** - poetics from a strong voice in the small press merging anger, urge and the quest for art into gritty clarity and words that will ring the psyche's call to contemplation. The book feels as good in the hand as it does in the head. *Deluxe linen cover/linen guts/36pp - \$6ppd*

### Ed Galing

**TALES OF SOUTH PHILLY** - chronicles the sights, sounds, smells and action on the streets and in the homes of a long-since-gone South Philly. Hard living turning out the best people, leaving behind a few, struggling in the crossroads of a city and growing up. *Offset slick cover/24# paper/28pp - \$5ppd*

### Albert Huffstickler

**IN THE CLEARING** - a wandering collection which merges into a fragmented cohesion. Disturbing and fearsome, yet the most brutal aspect of this journal of poetics is the impact of frank self-examination. Albert Huffstickler is one of the best, period. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp - \$5ppd*



### Errol Miller

**THE DRIFTER TAKES ANOTHER LOOK** - pieces from the late 80s, Miller's mind ripe, the pen in his hand, once again, after an 8-year dormancy. This is the sweetest, most well preserved fruit plucked from the sealed cellar of the mind of Errol Miller, one of the more prolific writers on the scene today. *Offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/50pp - \$6ppd*

## Michael Newell

**COLLISION COURSE** - draws from the years Newell spent in Uzbekistan in the late '90s. These 37 observations reveal the confusion, anticipation, dirt, and beauty of the land and people wedged in the deep seat of the Slavic/Asian crossroads of ex-USSR. Invigorating. You may reconsider your own situation and stance. *Matte cover/linen paper/46pp - \$6ppd*

## Michael Newell

**MILES OF HIGHWAYS AND OPEN ROADS** - features 42 poetic slices of the exotic loaf from which the well-travelled Newell nibbles. Never presumptuous and hyper observant, whether it's a glimpse of Jordan or Oregon, these poetics are tight and full of precise, earnest imagery from the perspective of full cultural immersion. *Matte cover/24# paper/50pp - \$6ppd*

## B.Z. Niditch

**DICTIONARY OF THE 21st CENTURY** - features the wordplay and wit of Niditch in a format conducive to his quick, quirky jabs and observations. *Gloss cover/24# paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

## B.Z. Niditch

**MASKS AND BEARDS** - loaded with a continuous flow of killer short pieces describing absurd characters and their even more absurd actions ala the great Russian master of the absurd - Daniil Kharms. Modern and Post-meet on these pages. *Gloss cover/24# paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

## B.Z. Niditch

**MOVIE BRATS** - this novella takes a serio-comic look at the tumultuous world of Hollywood and beyond during an era of political, sexual and religious uprisings. A big fat book of Niditch's intense, witty and fast-paced dialogue. *Craft cover/24# paper/48pp - \$6ppd*

## B.Z. Niditch

**3RILOGY** - these three short fiction pieces explore art, humanity, political thought and the absurd underbelly of the 20th century. The fear of reprisal, unbelievable audacity and the mystery of murder - themes for a good read. *Craft cover/24# legal-half/34pp - \$6ppd*

## Charles Ries

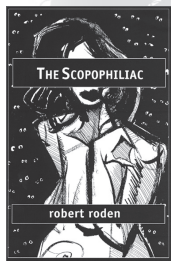
**BAD MONK: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE** - The Bad Monk, Charles Ries, marks shrewd, careful observations of the world around him, merging spirituality, a bit of beer, waffles and Milwaukee life. Bonus poem broadsheet! *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

## Charles Ries

**MONJE MALO SPEAKS ENGLISH** - is the second chap from the Bad Monk, Charles Ries. A refined, yet rough voice out of Milwaukee, Ries matures with meditations on Mexico, mamas, love and religion that have been pubbed throughout the indie press world. *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

## Robert Roden

**THE SCOPOPHILIAC** - the latest release from one of the Long Beach area's strongest voices. This collection stirs Lee Mallory to state that 'one could mount these poems, or like a greedy voyeur, just watch and listen'. Gerald Locklin observes that he 'blends the ineffable of the Symbolists and the cacophonies of Southern California rock into a music of his own'. *High-end slick cover/linen paper/24pp - \$5ppd*



## Robert Roden

**THE BITTER SUITE** - the is jammed with Roden's poetics pinning down new life, new death and new views, wrapped in the feel of dirty starched sheets, trapped behind the dual boarded doors of desperation and longing. *Craft cover/24# paper/28pp - \$6ppd*

## Spiel

**INSUFFERABLE ZIPPER** - you get fifteen cunning and outrageous stories and intense character sketches. It's the reclusive Spiel's world of weirdos, women and wild worldviews - like bubblegum stuck to hot sneakers, if follows you. Read what's been called a 'fresh blast to the face and ears.' *Craft cover/24# legal-half/44pp - \$7ppd*

## Wade Vonasek

**STARTING TO END IN THE MIDDLE** - pulls together 30 pieces of Vonasek's best poetics revealing somber introspection, consistent speculation, and often a glimmer of hope. Featuring artwork by Lori Dale. Vonasek was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *Slick cover/linen paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

## Wade Vonasek

**CLAY MOLDED INSANE** - revolted by the social morass of the 21st century landscape, fantastic and creative words leap from poetics rife with mood and cutting splendor. Featuring artwork by Dee Rimbaud, Michael Labash, and Stepan Chapman. *2-color offset cover/linen paper/26pp - \$5ppd*

## A.D. Winans

**PEOPLE, YOU THINK YOU KNOW?** - short fiction and poetics from one of the long-standing greats in the small press. This is Winans at his best with short fiction and gritty poetics. Get into Winans' head! Features fotos of San Fran folks, through the eyes of A.D. *Offset slick cover/linen paper/28pp - \$5ppd*



# cattle call



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

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

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

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

Send along a SASE.

Disposable/recyclable manuscripts are cool and mandatory.

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

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

[www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)

Speaking of technology » » » stay up to date at : [www.four-sep.com](http://www.four-sep.com)

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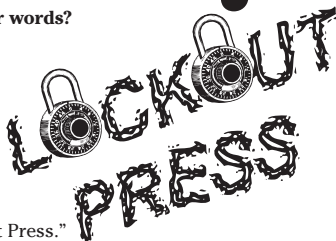
-Christopher M.

# need a chap?

**Looking for better production of your words?**

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

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



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

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

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

Quantity	Pages	Paper	Price	Each
50	28	24# White	\$229.46	\$4.59
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100	32	24# White	365.70	3.66
200	28	24# White	584.10	2.92

The 24# White paper is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include a cover printed on quality stock, full color is available. These are samples and subject to change. Some special projects and various cover options may entail a greater commitment from both parties. **For additional information, testimonials, sample cover art and more, please check out [www.four-sep.com](http://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.**