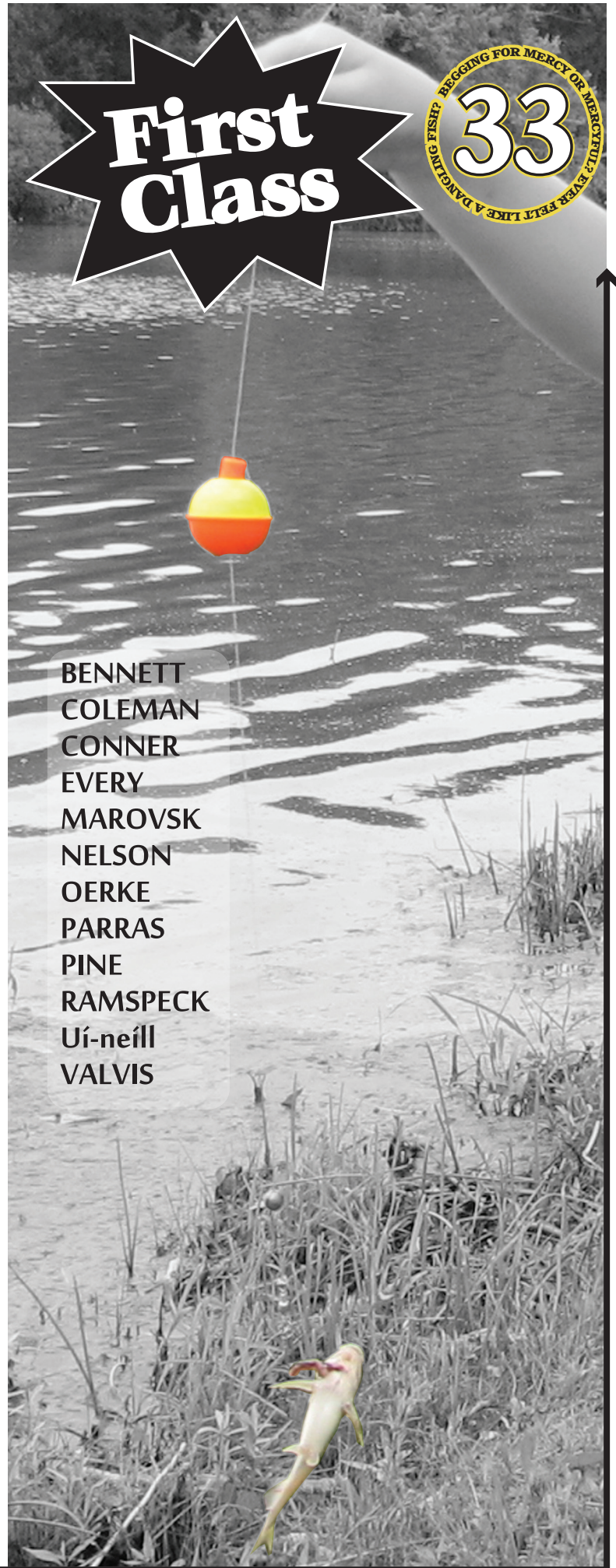


ISSUE THIRTY-THREE
FIRST CLASS II of II.2009
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ISSUE THIRTY-THREE
NOVEMBER, 2009



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christopherm@four-sep.com

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First Class **contents**

- 1: **America's Problem**
by John Bennett
- 2: **The Street**
by John Bennett
- 5: **At Bryce Canyon**
by Don Conner
- 6: **Feather Gift**
by Gary Every
- 7: **School Pageant**
by Gary Every
- 8: **Thai Noodling**
by Gary Every
- 9: **Red Square As Mutant**
by Chriftor Marovsk
- 12: **Paper Or Plastic**
by Bruce Nelson
- 13: **Mutatis Mutandis ((dementia))**
by Bruce Nelson
- 14: **Red Barn**
by Andrew H. Oerke
- 15: **How Ice Came To The Islands**
by John Parras
- 16: **Dance Of Bees**
by Darren Pine
- 28: **Water Shrew**
by Doug Ramspeck
- 29: ***The Gospel According To Geiger***
by roibeárd Uíneíll
- 31: ***anarchism, Ph.D.***
by roibeárd Uíneíll
- 32: **The Gas Crunch**
by James Valvis

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

First Class #33 is out in November! This is the first issue on the new publishing schedule of May/November, as the February/August schedule was snuffed from existence following a series of “it’ll be ready next week... I promise” from the computer repair dude. Oh, I was willing to wait a bit to get it done right by a local small biz owner who had helped me out in the past, rather than fork over the dough to big-bad-HP. This was back in July, and the machine still sits on his workbench awaiting a replacement of the mother-of-all-boards. The design software was the hold-up, as it can only be on one machine. Backing up files is a religion around here, so no data loss. It will now be Spring and Severe-Fall for your recommended yearly allowance of First Class – just the third scheduling change in 11 years...

Likely, by the time you read this, you will be able to order back issues right off the web page. Currently you can subscribe online. I aim to make the vast selection of chapbooks available to order-with-a-click as well. We’ll take the hit from Paypal to save you that stamp! Ha! Actually, we’re hoping for the impulse click-and-buy, which is so much easier than addressing an envelope and writing a check, right? Well, whatever it takes to get First Class in the hands of more readers. The writers appearing within represent the very best words that pass through my pobox, and they deserve as wide an audience as possible.

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

Now, get reading!

- Christopher M.

- christopherm@four-sep.com

America's Problem

John Bennett

"Sag mir Bescheid, or I'll tan your hide!"

The last German in that neck of Appalachia, laying down ultimatums to his son, the boy gawking at him like he's gone over the edge on moonshine, not understanding, wondering where the old man comes up with this shit, not having a clue about ancestry, it's way too inbred, an "I'm my own grandpa" sort of culture, so inbred one person's thoughts can spill into another person's head so that homicide is as often as not suicide, and it's been decades since the sheriff rode into these hills.

The old man is the only one still speaking the old language, the rest of them gave it up when World War II broke out and the militia came up the logging road in tanks and drafted everyone in sight. They used them as interpreters and snipers and gave them a taste of store-bought whiskey for the first time in their fool-hearty lives and out of the twenty or so that got yanked off the ridge, only Wilhelm returned, Wilhelm being the kid's old man's grandfather, supposedly. So it must have been Wilhelm taught his grandson, the kid's father (and again, as always, supposedly) to talk Kraut. But sweet Jesus, that didn't begin to explain anything, and a dark cloud came rolling over the kid like pollution and made him feel like he was going to explode.

This is what's really going on in America. These are the real problems people face. One man in Appalachia speaking German to himself who never heard of 9-11 and who has no idea who the president is.

We're all seeking truth. We're all seeking answers. We're all looking for a way out, a way in, an anchor with links as thick as giant sausage to drop and weather the storm. And then reality strikes, the messy unpredictable here-and-now. There's nothing else, really. Roll with it.

People talking war. People talking carnage. People talking the abstraction of distant suffering. You don't know what six German riot police are until they kick in your door, and then they're not German, they're not even riot police, they're six men with license. From the moment the door splinters off its hinges and your wife starts screaming with her hands over her ears and the two English vagrants you've been harboring make a dash for the window, generalities and abstractions and speculations get vaporized and life explodes into a shower of micro-seconds.

The Pentagon: March, 1967. Face-to-face with a row of bayoneted rifles and gas masks with 19-year-old boys behind them. A girl sticks a rose down a barrel, someone barks a command, and the boys move forward in the short-thrust position. Someone grabs a rifle, someone gives a shove, Norman Mailer has come and gone, Dick Gregory has been rushed to the hospital at the tail end of his protest fast, and then they fire the tear gas.

Things shatter into myriad particulars. You and Grant slide down a hillside and come face to mask with a soldier who is pointing his bayonet at you, and you're thinking not about the war or justice or equal rights but that this kid doesn't know Grant. You've been here with him before, in New Orleans, on the streets of Brussels, this has nothing to do with McNamara or Mailer, with the 'Nam, this is personal, and like a swift jungle cat Grant wrenches the rifle out of the boy's hands, flings it aside, and rips off the mask.

The kid is scared and has no idea what he's doing. "I'm sorry," he says, choking on the gas, and—eyes stinging and throats burning—Grant and I laugh. Grant gives the kid a bear hug and we haul ass out of there.

I'm parked in my work van up on the hill at 6 a.m., the only vehicle up here, the window rolled down to let in the fresh morning air, drinking coffee and smoking and writing this, when a low rider pulls up.

A low rider? In Ellensburg? On the hill at 6 a.m.?

The tinted window goes down and a black chick says, "You got a cigarette?"

There's an Arab-looking guy with a gold chain around his neck behind the wheel, and a blond in the back with

plucked eyebrows. The four of us are taking readings like crazy.

“I roll my own,” I say.

“Huh,” says the black chick.

The window goes up and the low rider backs slowly in behind me.

I keep writing. I write what just happened and then I study the low rider in the rear-view mirror. I get out of the van and walk back there. The passenger-side window comes down about halfway and I walk around and hold out a cigarette. This isn't in the script, and that gives me the upper hand.

SURE ENOUGH, HERE'S THIS GUY COMING AROUND THE OTHER END OF THE HEDGE, ONE ARM STIFF AT HIS SIDE, A PISTOL IN HIS HAND.

“I don't smoke rollies,” says the black chick, but when I continue to hold it out, she takes it, reluctantly. “Do you smoke rollies?” she says to the girl in the back.

“I'll smoke it,” the girl says, and the black chick hands it back. The girl twists one end of the cigarette like it's a joint and I hand in a lighter.

The Arab-looking guy has both hands on the wheel and is looking straight out the windshield.

The girl in back lights up, leans forward, and hands the lighter back out. “Thanks,” she says.

“No problem,” I say, and walk back to the van.

I've got all the information I need to rest easy.

Years ago, in San Francisco, me and my friend Glenn, whose whole life is an abstraction, were driving down a deserted street off Broadway around midnight after a night of drinking when a woman sprang out from behind a hedge and came running toward the car, waving her hands frantically.

Glenn stopped, put the car in park, and with the motor still running, got out. I took one look at the woman, the way she was dressed, the way her eyes didn't match her arm waving, and my eyes began darting around. Sure enough, here's this guy coming around the other end of the hedge, one arm stiff at his side, a pistol in his hand.

“Get in!” I shout at Glenn. “Get the fuck out of here!”

“She needs help!” Glenn says. He still hasn't seen the man with the pistol.

“Fuck she does!” I say. “There's a guy with a gun!”

Glenn freezes in place, his eyes glazed—he was rolled

in the Fillmore just a week earlier. I reach out, yank him back behind the wheel, put the car in gear, get my foot on the gas and floor it. We go careening down the street, Glenn steering reflexively.

I twist around and look out the rear window. The man and woman are standing side-by-side in the middle of the street, the woman with her hands on her hips, the man with his arm still stiff at his side, holding the pistol.

If you've spent any time on the street, all this makes sense to you.

The street is where things get processed at lightning speed.

The street is a state of mind.

People who don't know the street are fair game, and they get what they deserve.



...photo by Craig Coleman

At Bryce Canyon

Don Conner

There is the Mexican boy
in tight white pants
with rocks in his pocket.
Hair, thick thatched black
with beads of sweat
careening down his neck
like miniature Rio Grandes.

His girlfriend wears pedal pushers,
but nowadays they call them capris.

There is the thin man in gabardine
with casual hips like a matador,
cigarettes in left shirt pocket,
keys in pants pocket right
jingling like a toy sleigh
being placed under the tree.

His wife is a stewardess,
but nowadays they call them flight attendants.

There is the brash man
who probably sells cars.
His striped shirt is Ivy League
but he is not.
His Nabs crumble lazily into his lap
as a hot air balloon floats overhead.

His wife is a secretary
but nowadays they call them administrative assistants.

There is my wife.
Though we've been in the heat all day
her cotton blouse and seersucker slacks
are starched to perfection.
She wants to take a picture
with her disposable camera.
This simple act is so joyful
that she bursts into laughter.

Remembering how much
I once loved her
causes me pain.
But nowadays they call it emotional duress.

Feather Gift

Gary Every

Pumping gas at the convenience store
when the woman at the car next to me
blurts out,
“I love your feathers.”
She is referring to my rearview mirror
adorned with maybe a dozen feathers
belonging to hawk, eagle, owl, woodpecker, and oriole.
I tell her thanks
explaining that I find the feathers while hiking.
“Where do you find them?” she asks.
“I am looking for a hawk or eagle feather
but can’t locate any.”
I open my car door
and tell her to reach inside
take her pick.
“Are you sure?”
It is a federal felony to collect feathers
even if you find them on the forest floor.
When I collect too many feathers
until my dashboard is full
I turn them into cat toys
and my cat shreds them into little bits.
“Thanks,” the woman giggles excitedly
reaching into my car
with an arm adorned with celtic tattoos,
“I have been praying to the earth mother
to bring me one.”
“You are welcome,” I say.
First time I have ever been called an earth mother.
She replies as she drives away, “I am making a wand.”
I do not have the heart to tell her
that she has picked out a turkey feather
and wonder what kind of spells her magic wand will miscast.
Gobble. Gobble.

School Pageant

Gary Every

Her father was so proud,
camera aimed at the stage
where the schoolchildren
performed the spring pageant,
pretty young girls
dressed in lady bug costumes,
burly boys dressed as bears,
wiping their noses on the back of their paws.
The forest was filled
with schoolchildren wearing costumes,
deer, eagles and frogs.
I asked my friend
what costume his daughter wore
and he smiled with glowing eyes
“She is the lawyer
with a little suit, tiny tie, and briefcase.”
School pageants certainly have changed
since I was a kid.
Perhaps the forests have changed too
but on the bright side
if lawyers and their briefcases
are now counted among the woodland creatures,
then surely once in a while,
perhaps in the winter
it must be hunting season.

Thai Noodling

Gary Every

In downtown Phoenix
the giant metropolis arises
in the middle of the desert,
big city drenched in the flames of the sun
while canals crisscross the urban landscape.
When we were young,
me and my Thai buddies
would jump in the water,
sticking our hands in the concrete crevices,
searching for catfish.
Fierce urban hunters,
we would carry our catch
back to the Thai barrio
to Bok's home
on the edge of the arroyo
where monsoon overflow
allowed wild grapes to grow
in the shade of a cottonwood tree.
Bok's mom would cook up the catfish
and boil some noodles
while we harvested the tart grapes,
rolling them in salt.
Bok always asked if he could eat my eyes,
plucking them from the fish heads on my plate
Who would have thought that adventures
 could be so grand
in this land where cactus and creosote
have been replaced with concrete and canals
shopping malls and traffic lights, traffic cops
 and more traffic cops,
Thai noodling and adventures so rare and exotic
that there isn't even a law against it.

Red Square As Mutant

Chriflor Marovsk

I bought a pack of postcards that were printed in 1990. It was a fifteen-card packet, illustrating the architectural magnificence of Krasnaya Ploshad, the glorious epicenter of Communist power, where the honorable members of the Party were buried along and within the Kremlin wall. Lenin's tomb, St. Basil's Cathedral, the sheer magnificence of the towers and spires of the Kremlin, in their power stance over the square. The photos were taken on a night of spotlights and perfectly wind-blown red flags. The stones of the square seemed to shimmer, and the long shadows, which were the result of the harsh lighting, were as intimidating as the monuments themselves. This was the Russia of might, strength, and superiority. This was at a time when smoking was forbidden on the square, even though every Russian smokes, because it was considered a national monument.

As I tossed the butt of my sawdust-filled Russian Marlboro just ahead of my next step so that I could stomp it into the oblong bricks, which make up the ground of Red Square, I exhaled the final gift from that cigarette, and gazed across the expanse of the large-enough-to-parade-tanks-in legend.

On the first day of my arrival, there was calm on the square. It was open to the public, and one could freely meander in the area, which was bordered by a museum, the largest department store in Moscow, a cathedral, and the world-renowned Kremlin. Besides the deaf-mutes, nobody hassled us at all. The big business on the square, since it is surrounded by photogenic structures, is photography. Tripod placards dot the landscape, sponsored either by Kodak or Fuji, with samples of the photographers "work" displayed on the remainder of the space. A few guys have the Polaroid action for instant gratification, but most stands require a return the next day to get your "beautiful photo in Russia." Glorified snapshots for those who forgot to bring their camera.

The most striking difference between the glory days on the postcards, and the reality today, is the grey-ness surrounding the square (if you're not looking in the direction of St. Basil and the amazing technicolor dream-cathedral). Those red flags, and the extra expense of the spotlights added a bit of color and grandeur to the scene. Plus, I think they used to polish the bricks to a high-gloss sheen...

Speaking of bricks, there was a pile of them on the far side of the square, that had been dug out, and were ready to be placed back in their proper spot, along with a little mortar to keep them there for a while. Mike and I contemplated scooping up a couple to bring home. Better than the Berlin Wall, right? What those bricks have seen... Well, since it was early in the day, hauling bricks along sounded like a pain in the ass, but a bigger

fear was leaving the country with them. Imagine...

Borderguard: What is that large object in your bag?

Me: What?

Borderguard: The square object on the x-ray screen.

Me: Oh, that. I don't know. A deck of cards?

Borderguard: That is not a deck of cards.

Me: I don't know... It's just a bunch of souvenirs...

Borderguard: Open your bag, please.

Me: Uh...

Borderguard: I will examine it.

(Thought: Shit, my piece of Red Square, I forgot all about it!!!)

Pull, tug, unwrap, peer, fondle, toss aside, examine, grab, pile up, wipe the nose, shake, dig down deep, and finally uncover that big square heavy curiosity at the very bottom.

Borderguard: What is wrapped up in these plastic bags?

Me: It's a present for my grandmother, you understand, she likes paperweights and stuff. (Panic sets in, just a little) I, I had to put it in the bottom so she wouldn't find it. She snoops.

Borderguard: I will open it.

He unravels the two issues of the *Moscow News* wrapped around it with shitty scotch tape, and beholds...a brick!

Me: Uh...

Borderguard: Ah!! Such a wonderful gift!! A quality piece of kilned Russian clay! This one is as beautiful as those that adorn the great Red Square! Be proud you have acquired such craftsmanship for your grandmother.

Me: Whew... (what the fuck?)

Anyway, we didn't swipe the bricks.

Red Square looked the same for about a week, wide open and normal. Then the giant scaffoldings on the department store, GUM, began to appear, and workers clogged the square-side entrances, blocking passage. They seemed to be putting up three frames of some sort of the face of the building. The pedestrian was still free to roam about.

On the day of Lenin's birthday, we were barred normal entrance to the square, and had to pass through a guarded "gateway," which seemed to serve little purpose. We didn't know it was a special holiday, and were confused by the change in protocol. About thirty feet before the entrance, there was a mosh of hard-core Communists milling about, and posing around pictures of Lenin, wreathes, and specific quotes by the master of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Red Square had

become a waiting room for the Lenin-obsessed to wind around each other, wave flags, and offer flowers to their waxy hero. Most people kept their distance and let them have their day, but I took a closer look.

There was an air of tolerance from the overwhelmed guardians of the tomb. They could rest assured that no one was going to harm the relic, but had to deal with the challenge of maintaining an even flow of bodies past the Body. News-cameras and wanna-be anchor-men hassled the masses, but the event was short-lived and sweet. Later in the day, things returned to normal. Only the scaffoldings spoiling the serenity of the cement and brick.

A week went by that I did not step foot in the square, and as the oft-mentioned date of the Ninth of May approached, the square began to be coated in grandeur, preparing to feel the footsteps of the most powerful men on earth. Leaders from around the world were gathering in Moscow for the Fiftieth Anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

Eight days before the Ninth, the square was closed off to public access. This was so that the “radical” marchers of May Day would not return to their old stomping grounds and fuck things up for the big party on the Ninth, or bother the government with their pleas for a return to the glory, and financial security of the past. Totally closed off. No access.

Then, a day later, there was a way in, as bleachers and grandstands began to pop up on the perimeters of the plaza, and large “posters” were pulled over the frames that had been put up along the facade of GUM over the past couple weeks. Red Square was quickly transforming into a festival ground for fortunate world leaders and their entourage. The poster-like billboards were reproductions of images that lined the streets during the Great War. Red Square was anachronistically metamorphing back to a time when the Red Army won.

The last day we were in Moscow, we had to enter the square at the northwest end, through a gate manned by three guards, and could only exit through a passage on the other end, far from where we wanted to be. Security was getting tight. We left just in time.

Paper Or Plastic

Bruce Nelson

After we've reached in and removed what was inside
Something teases them up into the air:
Floating, tumbling, a ballet of release –
Sans souci as if they were rising to a higher purpose.

But they are family Polymer with unbreakable chains
Condemning them to remain for the duration.
Snared by shrubs and trees, they rattle, shake,
Ghosts of a very material world, haunting our landscape,
The shed membranes of what was new,
Of what we keep putting inside.

And some will pass the night under tires
Of parked cars that no longer fit our garages.



...photo by Craig Coleman

Mutatis Mutandis ((dementia))

Bruce Nelson

Mama lived with rats, rats.
Saw one now and then, now.
So quick, quick not sure what she saw.
Made her forget what she was doing, doing.

Late night call – mad mama mad

So we came, trapped, poisoned, trapped
But old houses, well, old houses, they
Slouch, leave zippers down, let their mortar crumble,
Everyday new pathways for wiggling into walls & wires,
And as Mama's world shrinkwrapped around
 the chair, the tv, the bed,
They swarmed the unused chambers.
At night, inside clenched eyes, she heard them
Just outside her dreams, scratching at the scarred door,
Gnawing for the last room.
Saved by morning, she'd return
But more and more the room ignored her, shunned her.
Staring, her mind went round, round,
Scraping at edges of things, trying to find the
 end of the clear tape,
Find yesterday, clawing for an ending or a beginning
But the spool spun seamless.
She was standing like that the day we came for her.

Weeks later, packing up the house
We found what had been taken:
The small subtractions carried to the fouled nests–

Hair and buttons and broom straw
Words, numbers, and faces from photos,
And then, in a nest under the bed, the key
She'd accused me of stealing that night
So mad, sputtering, dropped the phone and
 stomped off with the jewelry,
If she couldn't open this damned box,
 then no one would.
And we never did. We never saw it again.

Mama lived with rats, rats.
Saw one now and then –

Red Barn

Andrew H. Oerke

Calf is pushed out of the slimy red balloon
of the cow's blubbery black lips that speak life,
and I remember when he jammed the knife
so she wouldn't jump over the moon in her bloat.
Slimy n slippery the calf in its bag
of birth slides into the straw softening
the cement barn floor. The calf wobbles as if
on crutches, and farmer and calf are one.
Next, he squirts a milky-way stream of cream
at the barn cats, their tongues working like half-notes
to lick the tit-squirted froth from their chops,
very pleased with themselves for being
in the right place at just the right time and
Bingo! Such juxtapositions are more natural
than mathematical.

Loafing on Monet's haystacks
with a straw in our mouths we waited for winter
to shake its flour-powder all over us,
but not for baking, for shivering instead,
clawing at us with Freddie Kruger claws.
But even with the blizzard at its worst
it couldn't penetrate the big red barn
and its red giant of a universe
down here on this spectral spec of earth.
The big red barn stood red as spilled blood
against the vast entropy of winter's blanch.
Bulwark it was, humble by having to brave
so much of the world's hunger for years.
It was so real it was virtually the truth
as the "red barn school" of painting did its
best to explain.

How Ice Came To The Islands

John Parras

Tabon man came walking across the sea 32,000 years ago waving his bamboo staff at the strange island animals, at the galagos and tapirs. He waited five thousand years for lightning to strike a dry palm, ten thousand years for a pygmy woman, a thousand more for his Negrito cousins, twenty thousand for blowguns and the seasonal comfort of dry agriculture. Still later came others with red polished stones called ruby and yam who with circular grass-roofed huts lured the Malays out of their caves. The Tabon man walked into the jungle without looking back. There seemed no end to progress. Came copper and bronze, paddies of rice stepped up and down the steep Ifugao hills. Came the Orang Dumpuans to Sulu, the miraculous porcelain of the Sung and Ming, came the umbrella, the gong, came metallurgy and gunpowder and from Mudum of Malacca the incorruptible and inimitable Koran. Snake and Sanskrit, fishnets and high numbers came to the middle latitudes, while north of Maynila the Tagalog held balagtasans and sailed vintas drunk with palm wine, heavy with mangoes in the prow.

That was long ago. Now there are big ships in the harbor, large ships, grey ships like clouds but hard as bullets and there are many men on the beach, many many men in green fatigues, fatigued yet happy, happy that the enemy has been vanquished. Two tanks and three armored personnel carriers crouch gutted on the beach road. A small white airplane has crashed near the school. The smell of rotting carabao carries everywhere. Otherwise it feels like a holiday, men digging and laughing, digging and grumbling, pitching tents and cursing, big men with pale skin like rotten coconut, men standing guard and building things and ordering each other around. How strange these men are, these big foreign men who have come to save us. One of them put a piece of glass in my hand that was so cold I could hardly hold it and it turned to water in my palm and was gone.

Dance Of Bees

Darren Pine

Ollie woke up one day trapped inside a French farce. He had no memory of who he was or how he'd gotten there, which suited the character he played—Ollie, the amnesiac and young lover, destined to fall for Catherine, the daughter of a billionaire, to rescue her from her own home, though never knowing if he could be the man she wanted, not knowing if he was a simple gardener, a rich foreign investor, or a petty thief.

Ollie's dilemma did not matter to Ollie, who took the name because he could not remember his own. That was what Jake decided to call him when he found him on a make-believe road on the outskirts of a theatrical set. The only thing Ollie knew was that he was not Ollie, and since he knew nothing else he just went along with it. Words came into his mouth, and he acted out his role with great expertise, and though he had no memory of life before the farce, he was certain he had never been an actor.

Jake was the gardener for Mason, a billionaire who sold stars for a living. While Mason was away at work, Jake was screwing Annette, Mason's wife, and Ollie was falling in love with Catherine and doing very little gardening. So little was accomplished, in fact, that every night Mason would come home and spend the entire evening tending the flower garden himself, lavishing all his love and care on his flowers, none on his wife. Thus the cycle continued, his unloved wife seeking surrogate love from Jake, the flowers in turn being ignored by the distracted gardener.

This was just backstory, of course, and not the plot Ollie enacted everyday. The play began with an infestation of bees that could be heard from morning until night. At the play's climax Mason killed the bees. He hated them and wanted them dead, despite the fact that they were cross-pollinating and helping his flowers to grow. Mason angrily orders Jake to get rid of the bees before he comes home that night or else he'd be fired. For once Jake has to get work done, which isn't easy for him to do with Annette's insatiable sexual appetite, but if he gets fired he won't be around to continue satisfying her constant hunger, so he finds himself in quite the pickle. Despite resisting her allures, he succumbs and is in bed with her when Mason comes home from work early to check up on Jake's progress, but a twist occurs and it is Ollie who is found in Annette's bed. Mason throws Ollie in the flower bed with the bees to punish him, torturing him until Ollie's memory comes back (the character Ollie, not the amnesiac actor playing him) and he remembers that he is actually the rich foreign investor who was supposed to save Mason's company from financial ruin. A further twist occurs when Ollie afterward admits, in private, to Catherine that he's not really sure if he was the investor or a thief who was coming to rob the mansion, but Catherine,

blinded by love, says that it doesn't matter and runs away with him.

Ollie's role during the opening scenes of the play is to be a sidekick and straight man to Jake, and to moon over Catherine. A scene that occurs after Jake has again succumbed to Annette's charms and left Ollie in charge of the garden, involves the young, hot, rebellious Catherine meditating on the lives of bees:

"It's a shame Daddy wants them killed," she says. "They're just foraging for food. The females—the workers of the hive—are the ones making all the noise that irritates him so much. They send out scouts to look for food before they waste precious time and energy going after it. The scouts come back and communicate where the food is, how much is there, and even if it's good or bad. They talk by dancing. It's a language that has evolved over centuries, and rarely is there any miscommunication. They talk because they want something. So, I ask you, my dear gardener, what do you want?"

OLLIE'S DILEMMA DID NOT
MATTER TO OLLIE, WHO
TOOK THE NAME BECAUSE
HE COULD NOT
REMEMBER HIS OWN.

"I really don't know."

She leans in close, whispers in his ear. "I'll help you figure it out. Wants can fall into a few basic categories—food, water, shelter, sex . . ."

Ollie is intimidated. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I'll go back to work now."

She won't let him go. He breathes in her scent as she leans toward him, looking him in the eye, her lips almost touching his. "The male honey bee lives to fulfill only one purpose. While the female goes out and forages, the male sits around and waits for his moment of glory, when the queen bee is ready to mate. Then, suddenly they forget who they are. They forget how happy they were just sitting around in the hive. They become focused on only one thing. They engage in killer sex during a high speed chase, up to a hundred feet in the air. The queen releases a pheromone, and her sweet perfume calls the males to her. They fly in like fighter jets, all rushing at one target. Only a few make contact with the queen, and when they do, they go out in a blaze of glory. The male loses his seed, his genitalia, and his life. The pop made by his sex organ tearing off can actually be heard from the ground."

The bee-sex talk arouses Ollie, who sees his amnesiac state as one in which he, like a male bee, has no purpose in life other than to serve Catherine, his queen, and he declares an intention of planting his stinger immediately with no concern over whether the encounter will cause it to pop off. They start to disrobe in the garden, but hear the sounds of Mason coming

home early. Catherine decides to hide half-naked Ollie in her mother's bedroom, since she knows her father never goes there, but Mason surprises her by going in anyway. He finds Ollie under the sheets with only his boxers on (Catherine, Annette and Jake are all hiding in the closet).

Ollie bears his time in the garden well, though he is tied up and gagged with duct tape and the rose bushes poke him with their thorns and the bees sting him. Even though it is a stage set, the bees are real. The endless sound of their buzzing is enhanced by a sound effect pumped through speakers in various sections of the auditorium. But at least during this time he can lie down and rest, and he doesn't have to say any lines until Catherine rescues him. He listens to Mason drone on and on about how pathetic his life is, though really he's not listening at all. His mind is a blank.

*

After the play ended the first night, the other actors disappeared into the shadows and Ollie finally had a chance to check out his surroundings. Rows and rows of faces stared at him with blank expressions. The seats were not filled with real people, but fake ones, mannequins of varied gender, class and ethnic backgrounds. The theatre was set up in the round, with long rows of seats circling the entire stage, gradually rising up and up and then disappearing into a black scrim. Behind this drapery was a long wall that encircled the theatre. It was dark, so Ollie put a hand on the wall and felt his way along it. There were only two doors, and neither of them was an exit, nor was there an entrance. It was an auditorium that would not allow an audience, a structure that could not fulfill its purpose. During the day, despite the funny lines and comic situations, no one had laughed, no one was there to laugh except for the humorless dummies. The thought depressed him.

He wanted to find a way out. But the two doors he found did not lead outside. One led to a bathroom, complete with shower, and he took a moment to use the toilet and wash up, running cold water over his bee stings. He looked in the mirror, and thought he looked too old to be playing a young lover. Maybe it was the stings on his cheeks and forehead distorting his features, but the man staring back at him was a stranger. The other door led to a kitchen with pantry and refrigerator stuffed with food. He found bread, bologna and cheese and made himself a sandwich and drank a Pepsi.

He moved one of the dummies and sat in a seat in the auditorium and studied the set. In the middle of the circular stage was a tall steel pole. Because of the black scrim, which hung from the top of the pole and draped itself around the auditorium, he could not tell how far up the pole went, or how high the ceiling was. Attached to the pole were the platforms that comprised the set pieces: one was Annette's bedroom, which had no walls so that the audience (if there ever was one) could see into it and witness Mason's discovery of Ollie in the bed

and see the others cowering in the closet. The other set piece was the flower garden itself, which was on a lower platform with a stairway leading from it up to Annette's bedroom. The garden was lush and vibrant and Ollie was surprised that he could name every variety of flower in it—red roses, pink tulips, purple orchids, carnations, chrysanthemums, Peruvian lilies, asters and hyacinth surrounded by seafoam statice.

He saw no sign of the other actors. He was tired from the day's performance and wondered if he might fall asleep in the middle of the flower garden, in the same place his character had been tortured during the day. The bees had left; even the extra buzzing no longer droned from the speakers. The rose bushes could be avoided, and there was padding inside that he lay on during the performance, and that would probably be comfortable enough to sleep on. But, for a reason he could not explain, it seemed inappropriate for him to lie there, as if sleeping there would be a violation of the exotic garden. Instead, he fell asleep on the make-believe road where Jake had found him that morning.

And the next day, Jake found him there again and the farce began all over.

*

This went on for several days. Ollie acted out his role and spent the nights looking for a way out, only to succumb to fatigue on the fake road, on a mud-covered rug surrounded by papier-mâché rocks. The other actors always disappeared afterwards. Sometimes he would notice movement behind the scrim and call out, hoping to make a connection with one of them. Maybe together they could find a way out. But they were too elusive.

He liked the first act. The scheming, being in cahoots with Jake, sharing his secret, sticking it to the man. Finding ways of making Mason look stupid. Flirting with Catherine, kissing her, taking her clothes off while she took off his. Running up and down the stairs like an idiot. Throwing the covers over his head like a kid playing hide and seek. It was fun. The immorality of helping a man carry on an affair wasn't an issue. This was a farce after all, and Mason was a prick. He deserved what he got.

Each day he wondered if the bee stings would kill him. Every day the bees stung him a little more, usually just when he was first thrown into the flower garden, when his sudden intrusion frightened them. Dead bees lay next to him, stingers gone, a few more each day. Their stingers were in him, his skin swollen in four-inch circles around the bite marks. Every day the swelling got a little worse, the circles turning from pink to red, and the pain and itching became maddening. He wondered if he had developed a bacterial infection. Since he only wore boxers while in the garden, the bites were all over him, and his clothes were starting to feel tight against his swollen skin. One night he had to make an extra hole in his belt, using one of the gardening tools.

He was truly beginning to suffer but the farce went on. Catherine would look for Ollie but had no idea he was hidden in the garden. Jake would be concerned about where Ollie had disappeared to as well, but was more concerned, now that Mason was home, with putting on the appearance that he was trying to rid the garden of bees. He would tell Mason that he would go buy the most potent insecticide he could find. Mason, looking through the flowers at his hidden victim, would ask if the spray could hurt humans—for example, would it really hurt if sprayed on skin broken up by bee

bites. Jake, not sure why he wanted to know, would say yes, and Mason would approve and send him on his way. Then Annette would come down, feigning ignorance of the fact that the younger gardener had been found in her bed, asking Mason how work had gone today, knowing that he was supposed to have met a rich investor.

THAT NIGHT, HE SAT IN A SEAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE AUDITORIUM, LOOKING UP THROUGH THE HOLE RIPPED IN THE SCRIM, EATING JELL-O FROM THE KITCHEN BECAUSE HIS PAINED FACE COULD EAT NOTHING ELSE.

“He didn’t show up. I was going to sell him the Eyes of God, but he didn’t show up.”

Annette, whose sole character trait until now had been her libido, would seem genuinely hurt. “The Eyes of God? I’m glad the investor didn’t show.” The Eyes were two large blue stars that Mason had declared never to be sold. They were his and Annette’s, a wedding gift for his wife, a symbol of their undying love. His plan to sell them said two things—that his company was about to crumble, and, to Annette, it said that Mason no longer loved her. Perhaps at this point the audience, if they ever became more than lifeless dummies, would find sympathy for Annette. They’d seen her betray him throughout the first act, but now he had betrayed her as well.

The actress playing Annette was pretty, obviously ten years younger than her character, but with a sad face that made her look older than the woman who played her daughter, Catherine, though really they were probably close in age. Mason began his monologue. This was a part of the play that Ollie had not bothered to pay attention to the first several days, but because the pain in his skin was now unbearable he found himself focusing more on the dialogue going on around him.

“My father left me all the stars in the sky and told me to sell them. But who am I to be selling all the stars in the sky? I don’t even know who I am. A rich man? A thief.” Mason had inherited the business from his father, had never had to work to attain anything. Had never had to

suffer, until now, when everything was being taken from him by forces he couldn't control. His torture of Ollie was about more than just finding a man in his wife's bed. Mason needed something from this torturing.

"What's the word for it, Annette?" he asks.

"The word for what?"

"For when you try to relieve suffering by watching someone else suffer?"

She thinks a moment, then quickly says, "Catharsis!"

"Gesundheit."

With that, Ollie passed out from the pain, not waking up until Catherine, as usual, rescued him from the garden.

*

That night, he tried to climb the steel pole in the middle of the stage. If there wasn't a way out on the sides, there might be one up top. But the pole was too smooth to climb, and his hands were swollen and slippery with pus. He got about five feet up and then fell down onto the upper platform, pain shooting through his back and legs. A few feet over and he would have landed softly on Annette's bed. Someone was watching him as he fell. He heard a gasp from behind the scrim, but by the time he limped back there the person was gone. A sweet aroma hung in the air.

The next day, after Jake woke him up, he noticed that some of the scrim had fallen and was draped over several rows of seats. He saw what appeared to be a tiny speck of real sunlight, high up in the rafters. He wondered if one of his cast-mates had tried to climb the cloth and found it unable to support his or her weight. His back still hurt from his own escape attempt. That entire day was torturous, not just the torture scene. His face was swollen and speaking was painful.

That night, he sat in a seat in the middle of the auditorium, looking up through the hole ripped in the scrim, eating Jell-o from the kitchen because his pained face could eat nothing else. The sunlight no longer peeked through, and all he could see was darkness, but he knew that was the way out. He heard the rustle of fabric. Catherine appeared out of the dark and approached him. She picked up the dummy in the seat next to him and threw it into the next row, where it landed in such a way that it looked like it was performing oral sex on another dummy. She laughed. Ollie tried to laugh, but his face seized up with the effort.

"You're not looking too good."

A moment passed. He silently regarded her. "Do you know who you are?"

She laughed. "Yes. Don't you?"

"No."

"Funny, fits your character. So how do you know your lines?"

“They just come to me.”

“That’s a good trick. I had to memorize mine.”

“So you’re really an actress?”

“You really don’t remember anything, do you? Yeah, we rehearsed this show for three weeks, but that was somewhere else. Learned every line, practiced some improvised routines. Then one day I woke up here, and I’ve just been going through the motions, like the rest of you.”

“So that’s all you’ve been doing? Going through the motions?”

“Wait. You didn’t think I was really in love with you, did you?”

“No, what I meant was—have you been looking for a way out?”

“How’d you know?”

“I smelled your perfume the other night. You picked up where I left off. You saw that the pole couldn’t be climbed, so you tried the curtain.”

“You smelled me. Jesus, you are in love with me.”

He looked at her. Certainly he desired her. She was easy to desire. Made for it. Blonde hair. Slim figure, plentiful curves underneath a frilly pink dress. Lines showed in the corner of her eyes, underneath make-up. Like him, she seemed slightly too old to be playing a young lover, but was still powerfully attractive. During the play Ollie was alternately afraid of and awed by her, at one moment trying to pull away, the next moment passionately kissing her until they’d stripped each other down to their underwear, but the play always kept them from consummating. It occurred to him then, for the briefest moment, that now, during this night between performances, they were free to fulfill the desires they had in the play. He wanted to kiss her badly.

“Maybe I am,” he admitted.

Her eyes, which during the play were bright with love, were now dark, distant, and tired. She shrugged. “I’m a good actress.”

“Why have you been hiding from me at night?”

“The truth is, I don’t know you. I don’t know who I can trust. You know that bee bullshit I spout in the play? Well, I think this—all of this—I think it’s all for one person. Aside from all these dummies, there’s no one to perform for, but we’re doing it anyway. I don’t know you, but it looks like you want out of here just as bad as I do. And I’ve figured a way out, but I can’t do it alone.” Her eyes left his, and regarded the theatre surrounding them. “This place has an old school fly system. Rope and pulley. Operates on counterweights. The rope holds up the scrim. You can’t climb it because it doesn’t have enough weight on the other side. You just keep pulling but the rope comes down to you, you don’t go up the rope.”

“One of us needs to hold one end of the rope so the other can climb it.”

“Smart boy.”

“But it’s dark, how will you be able to see?”

“I’ve got that figured out. I just need you to anchor me, and I’ll do the rest.”

Ollie agreed to help. He was excited by the idea of helping. He followed her to a place behind the scrim, where the end of a thick rope dangled.

“Hold onto this. The other end of the rope is directly across.”

She took off her shoes, steadying herself by putting a hand on his shoulder. Slipping one shoe off, then the other, then tugging at the pantyhose that had caught between her toes. There was something intimate about this, an intimacy that felt incredibly familiar. Ollie wanted to explore this feeling, but Catherine was already determinedly walking across the auditorium and behind the scrim. Then he felt a sudden weight on the rope he was holding. It cut through his swollen hands and blood and pus ran down his palms. The rope slipped out of his grasp. He heard a thump as she fell.

“Sorry!” he called out. “Give me a moment.” He wrapped the rope around his torso and one of his legs, and then sat back. “Okay, try again!”

This time he kept a firm hold. The rope wrapping around his body dug into his infected skin, but he held tight. He focused on her, imagined her climbing the rope, and then he saw her rise above the scrim as she got close to the rafters. She stopped, and then started to swing back and forth. This put even more pressure on Ollie, but he ignored the pain. She reached out and grabbed one of the poles hanging horizontally in the rafters. These poles were used for hanging lighting equipment, and in the middle of the pole a light shone down continuously on center stage, night or day. Catherine wrapped the rope around herself, then put both hands on the horizontal pole and shimmied across it to the middle light. Ollie got vertigo watching her since she must have been a good thirty or forty feet up. One wrong move and she could fall and break her neck. The dummies observed her with a collective hush, holding their breaths. Catherine touched the light and found it to be hot. She carefully ripped off a piece of her dress and wrapped it around her hand so that she could move the light, shine its rays up instead of down.

Now they both could see what was above the scrim. The steel pole that came from center stage ended about ten feet above where Catherine was now. Above that a ladder led straight up, maybe twenty feet more to the ceiling where there was a hatch, opened to a starry sky. It was this hatch that let in the sunlight Ollie had seen that morning.

Catherine smiled, then looked back at Ollie. His swollen face tried to smile back. She seemed happy, her face brightly lit by the upturned light, exuberant at the thought of regaining her freedom, and for that moment he was certain that she did love him, that they were in love and this escape would bring them together. Then she looked up and started climbing the rope again, repeating her pendulum swing to get to the ladder. Then she made her way up and looked back again at Ollie. This time she was so far away he could not tell if she was smiling.

She disappeared through the hatch. He let go of the rope and sat looking up at the small piece of visible starry sky. He waited a while, just looking up. Then he got tired of looking up and stared straight ahead. It occurred to him that she never said she'd come back for him. He'd just assumed she would. He went to the make-believe road and lay down. From there he could see the hatch above. He stared at it until he fell asleep.

He thought he saw her face in his dreams. Pained, distraught. "I don't know you anymore."

She'll come back. She won't come back. She didn't come back.

*

The next day the farce went on without Catherine. They had to improvise a little bit, change the story, work around her so that Ollie ended up in Annette's bed for a different reason. In this revised story, Annette was screwing both Jake and his sidekick, enjoying a three-way before Mason's return home. It was a flimsy fix, but it kept the play moving. Another problem for Ollie happened later. Without Catherine to save him before Jake arrived with the bug spray, he was covered with insecticide by the end of the play. It felt like a million razor blades cutting into his skin, down to the bone.

*

That night he tried to figure another way out. Tried to find something he could tie to the end of the rope that would provide a counterweight. But nothing was heavy enough, and even if he could climb the rope the open sores on his body would never let him reach the top.

He lay looking up at the two stars he could see through the hatch overhead. Dreamily he wondered if the Eyes of God had not been sold. The thought gave him unexplainable hope, a chance that reconciliation could still occur. A stupid thought. It was just a stupid play, after all.

*

The next day Jake didn't wake him up. Sunlight peeking through the hatch overhead did that. Jake wasn't there, and neither was Annette. For a moment the thought filled him with warmth. He wondered if they were truly in love, possibly having fallen for one another while

rehearsing the play. Now that they'd escaped, they could love each other openly. No more hiding. He imagined them using the rope to get out, much as Catherine had, Annette going first, then wrapping the rope around a rafter so that Jake could climb it. Ollie looked around, but could see no evidence that this was what actually happened. Still, it was a nice thought, and no matter how they'd escaped, they were gone, and how could the play go on without them?

He underestimated the actor playing Mason, who suddenly barreled onto the set. "What are you doing up? Back to places!"

Ollie followed his order and lay down on the make-believe road.

Mason picked up a gardening tool, the prop turning him into Jake. "Well what have we here?"

Ollie tried to say his lines, but his face was too swollen for him to speak.

Mason took over. "Can't talk? You probably have amnesia! That's okay. Hey, I'll name you Ollie!"

That day, Mason played the roles of all the missing actors. He ran up the stairs to become Annette seducing Jake, and then back downstairs to become Jake trying to resist the seduction, and up and down again until he found himself jumping lustily into bed with himself. Then he became Catherine, seducing Ollie, kissing him, pulling off his clothes. He dragged Ollie up the stairs to the bedroom and hid him in the bed, then pulled the sheets off immediately and yelled, "What are you doing in my wife's bed?" At which point he dragged Ollie back down the stairs and threw him in the flower garden.

Thankfully, the bees did not seem as angry that day. Or perhaps there weren't as many of them as before. Ollie only received two stings as he again ignored Mason's self-pitying monologue. But he did start thinking. There was something in the manic way that Mason threw himself into all the parts. Mason was covering. He was covering for everyone else, like he didn't want their absence noted until they'd had plenty of time to get away. Mason had helped them, this was clear to Ollie now. The two men had held the rope for Annette to escape, and then Mason had held the rope for Jake. He'd sacrificed himself so that two others could escape, the two who, in the play, had betrayed him.

The thought made Ollie smile underneath his swollen face.

Love did exist. They all shared it, just not with him.

*

That night he thought more about how Jake and Annette escaped. They'd worked together, but had not included him. They seemed to be avoiding him for the same reason that Catherine had, they didn't know who to trust. They'd decided to trust each other but they still didn't trust him.

He was the one they were afraid of. He wished he could remember why.

He decided to sleep in the garden. There would be no Jake to find him in the morning on the make-believe road, and that thought saddened him. No fun to be had sharing in his secret affair, his devious deceptions. He thought he might as well start the day in the same place he would end up. Perhaps it would end more quickly that way. He no longer had the desire to play along. It wasn't fun anymore at all. He wanted it to be over. He wanted to leave. He had a feeling that had been creeping up on him for days, a feeling that if he wanted to, he could end all of this. If he did something that he was unwilling to do all along.

He had to listen to Mason. He knew it wasn't boredom that had kept him from listening. It was fear of what he had to say.

When Mason made his entrance onstage, and found Ollie already in the garden, he did not tell him to go to his place. He simply looked down at his bloated victim, and said. "So this is how it's going to be."

Ollie looked up in acknowledgment. His mouth could no longer open. He could only see a blurry image of Mason through his puffy eyes. The buzzing of the bees had stopped. They were all dead. Truly dead. But there was a murmuring sound, as if an audience was present, as if the dummies had become real people. What will we do to entertain them, Ollie wondered, now that the farce is over and the bees are dead?

Mason began. "The Eyes of God look down in judgment, and I am found wanting. I am in pain, but how is it that I suffer when I have never really had anything to lose? Who am I to be selling the stars in the sky? I am nothing. I am only what someone else has made me. It doesn't matter that I'm rich. I'm no better than you are. You thief. We're the same, you and I."

Ollie smelled her before he saw her, and it was intoxicating.

He turned to see her standing in the audience. One of the dummies had risen from its seat. Through his eyes it seemed that she was hanging in the air above the rest, a single figure towering over a sea of worthless drones, unmoving in their plastic gaze. Then they began moving, as if by her command. He no longer trusted his eyes. His face was covered in gooey broken skin, eyes swollen and watery. Everything was liquid. She appeared to be moving while staying still, as if she vibrated with static energy. And the same hurried but static movement was shared by the plastic figures around her. They appeared to be melting and reassembling all at once.

It was for her. He was doing this all for her. He was nothing. That's why he couldn't remember who he was. He wasn't anybody. Not anymore.

He looked up at Mason, still delivering his monologue.

This would be the last performance. Ollie listened to every word. It was important to listen. Take it all in so that it could be processed, then purged, and tomorrow something else might happen. A new play had to begin tomorrow. But he didn't know who he would be tomorrow. Rich man or thief. Maybe that didn't matter. Maybe all that mattered was that the suffering would end today.

Mason continued. "She betrayed me. Then I betrayed her. Did it matter who did it first? I became obsessed with the man who stole her from me. He was someone I knew. He was younger, but he had nothing that I couldn't give her except time. I kept thinking about the sexual acts taking place in my own bed while I was away. His hands on her breasts. His mouth between her legs. Her face pulled tight with pleasure and guilt. The violation of what was mine. I was too worried about the bees to save the flowers. Now it's too late."

As Mason spoke, Ollie's memory returned to him. This farce was his life, the story of his failure. That's why he'd never listened before. It would have hurt too much, more than the physical pain he was suffering. That's why he knew all the lines. He'd cast himself as a character who would be a part of the secret, not a victim of it, as well as the one who could save them all, who could return the Eyes of God to their proper owners. He'd cast himself as the one who had lost his memory, who had a clean slate, who could start over. Who could fall in love again.

"I've lost everything, so I am nothing. Being nothing, I can become anything. I can have everything." With these words, Mason finished his monologue and walked away.

A new feeling washed over Ollie, and he stared at the woman in the audience, standing over the quaking plastic heads and arms and legs.

Catharsis.

Gesundheit.

It was Catherine. She had come back.

She's come back for me. I'm sorry, he wanted to yell. I thought you were the one who left me behind, but I was wrong.

It was her leaving that had ended the farce, forced him to see his life for what it had become.

And now she was back. Her eyes held a familiar shine, open and welcoming. Her breasts, her legs were shimmering in melting honey. His desire for her was strong, but it was more than sex. She was everything. From her sprang everything. He was nothing without her.

He rose from the garden and flew to meet her.

Water Shrew

Doug Ramspeck

Because the wall was stone
and the men were old,
she made a wide berth. She assumed the men
were whispering about cutting into the entrails
of a water shrew,

about wrapping the long bald tail
around a thumb when they slept.

Her own father had told her
that the soul of a body was connected to the blood:
a woman leaking between her thighs,
a doe or shrew sliced with the knife.

When her son was born her husband
inscribed the name on the peeled bark of a willow,
buried the fragment in the loam with a dead milk snake.

The heart passes through the body

*the way the shadow of a hawk
passes over a swiftly-moving stream.*

She felt the old men eyeing her in the way
a water shrew

dives down deep,
in the way the air in the lungs grows tighter and tighter
until all that's left is the constriction of the chest.

The Gospel According To Geiger

roibeárd Uí-neill

"And once this stuff gets in / you cannot get it out..."

- Midnight Oil

5 million flavorful neutrinos a second
pour through every centimeter of our bodies.
On occasion, there's a subatomic collision,
from which erupts a marginal solar flare.
Boils, bleeding gums, & hair loss
aren't by-products.

Brother Oppenheimer allowed
the periodic table of the elements
to dissolve upon his tongue –
but he failed to envision
the Nazi regime's collapse,
or Truman's verdict for Japan.
"Those poor little people..."
Robert said, & shook his head,
"...those poor little people..."
his brainchild would burn alive,
pink horses, peeling bipeds,
shadows shrugging
into concrete overcoats,
a nightmare legacy
tick-tick-ticking
down the buckled streets
of Hiroshima & Nagasaki.

Dr. Strangelove,
we're lying to ourselves.
The situation promises to proliferate,
national pride quantified by the amount
of enriched uranium caked under
a world leader's fingernails,
& the rest of us a psychotic episode away
from tripping on gargantuan mushrooms
where the green lightning coruscates,
a conflagration sniffing after
our skeletons,
startled & stunned,
shining in the light.

Nuclear **Unclear**:

Let's have a baptism by vaporization.
Let's purge the ghettos & Indian reservations.
Let's celebrate blind faith & unquestioning patriotism.
Let's heat those botox clinics for the next 10,000 years.
Let's abolish the need for duct tape & plastic sheeting,
abruptly made as redundant as the heliotropism of daylilies.
Let's put an end to those years struggling to prove our lives
meant something – weren't you tired
of watching the clock, anyway?

2003, addendum.

Sinbad, ploughshares were compressed
into plasma, & the blackened hulks of
the king's tanks still dot your desert.
Ali Babba, how do you greenwash
the depleted-uranium soiling

the cradle of civilization?
i didn't hear that familiar refrain,
*"Nuke 'em 'til their eyes glow
& shoot 'em in the dark!"*
because, Rummy explained,
it's a "cumulative" victory.
Another nightmare
scourging the indigenous,
who must lump it
or pray Allah intervenes.
Their *oud* players
pluck the strings of cause & effect,
a lamentation of mutinous cells
& fetal defects.
Their dervishes whirl in place,
a state of grace never free
from radioactive dust.

Rummy, isn't genocide,
however slowly it creeps
along the genetic level
of generations,
a war crime?

Ugly, uglier, ugliest
the neo-survivalists i'm monitoring
wish their paranoia was contagious.
They don't want peace talks.
(Like Christians United For Israel)
They aren't counting on The Rapture
(Unlike Christians United For Israel)
They'll be sorely conflicted if Armageddon
doesn't brighten their day, considering
all the disposable income they've spent
on bomb shelters & bottle water,
dried beans & banana clips,
for the greater glory of Jesus,
& please pass the prophecy of wormwood.

Our Father,
deliver us from fallout.
Dear God,
check my electromagnetic pulse.
Mighty Jehovah,
with hydrogen & stupidity
as my witnesses, won't You be lonely
basking in the radiance of suns squared?
Bless the last sterilized flies fucking
among the crumbs of Your cookie.
Damn the powers-that-be who've chosen
the most cost-effective & efficient tool
to cauterize those bleeding hearts
courageously protesting the imposition
of a global militarized zone.

Meltdown, addendum.
After midnight eats the last 3 minutes,
& a winter of immeasurable duration
ices the arrogance of brinksmanship,
maybe then the dissenting voices
will register.

“...you can pull it together / or you can pull it apart...”

- *The Minutemen*

You'd do well
not to belabor him
with bubblegum love songs,
or death metal's defeatism.

He gets the Mozart Effect
from old school punk rock:

There's rage
oscillating on its bipolar axis.
There's a pair of combat boots
tying its own laces.
There's a dollar sign
an aesthete should castrate.
There's a black dog
licking an Iraqi's purple fingertip.
There's the youth of Persia,
hitting the streets to protest
a fraudulent election,
purple fingertips twisting
the noses of stubborn clerics.
There's an African population
waiting to be empowered.
There's Katrina,
serving stump water &
eviction notices aboard Air Force One.
There's the ghost of a Russian peasant
who knew you can't strong-arm
a collective utopia into existence.
There's an International Brigade
bolstering Spain's clenched red fist
against the fascists' flat-handed salute.
There's Eugene Debs
giving the last dime
in his pocket
to a hungry factory striker.

There's a flagellant
who finally learned
the whip
wasn't meant
to be turned upon himself.

The Gas Crunch

James Valvis

My father sees an opening in the line of cars
and wedges in front of a guy who dozed off.

Somebody blares his horn from behind us
and my father flips a bird out the window.

I'm nine years old and just starting to learn
what my father calls the poor man's supply

and demand. That is, if a poor man demands,
someone will withhold the supply. It's summer

and all my friends are at Camp Wecan'taffordit.
It's two o'clock and we're at the Getty station.

The line is so long, even where we cut in,
I can't yet see the pumps. Another chorus

of horns behind us, another bird from Dad.
It's so hot in the car I feel like I have a fever.

Maybe another boy would ask how much longer.
I know better. I have my window rolled down

and I stick my head outside like a dog's.
Maybe I am a dog, I think. Woof, woof.

My father starts the car, we move up six feet.
It's taken a half tank of gas to make it this far.

My father's a poor man, he demands the supply,
never guessing the supply also demands him.

Maybe another boy would ask why he's angry.
I'm not that boy. I'm a dog, remember? Woof.

My father gives up, peels out, rubber tires burning.
Starts screaming about a family called the Fuckers.

I don't know who they are; I think maybe they're us.

wordmakers

John Bennett » *A prolific voice from the great northwest. Ran 'Vagabond Press' back in the day, and now runs non-stop 'shards' to his massive email list of readers. [Two pieces of what I consider to be "classic" Bennett. One, a profound peek into a corner of this dis-united states, the other, a series of rollicking street writing: characters and crazy situations from wilder times.]*

Don Conner » *Often-published poet from Halifax, Virginia. [This one delivers a rhythmic series of snapshots, considering characters, and the relevance of labels, which ultimately shape our view of the world.]*

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). [Three examples of why Gary usually appears on these pages. Great little nibbles of weirdness with tight twists in the end. Feather Gift is a fine example of the humor to be found in the human capacity to tunnel-vision into ignorance.]*

Chrifor Marovsk » *Reclusive writer. [This excerpt from a his forthcoming book full of travel entries and observations while in 1995 Russia aligns the Potemkin Village of Catherine's reign with the same "trick" still perpetrated by those crafty Russkies. Such baffling transformation but the norm – does it happen here?]*

Bruce Nelson » *Texan poet nominated for the Pushcart Prize this year. [Tight, terse commentary rips through the poetic justice of the plastic bag, while his second piece paints a sinister, yet sentimental portrait of the slipping mind, and those in the cluttered aftermath...]*

Andrew H. Oerke » *Published in 'Poetry,' 'The New Yorker,' and 'The New Republic' as well as a collection published by the UN Society for Writers and Artists. [An overdose of imagery that may as well have been a painting, as the brush strokes of descriptive poetics left my mind-canvas well oiled.]*

John Parras » *Teaches writing and literature at William Patterson University of New Jersey, with a prize-winning novel "Fire on Mt. Maggiore" published by the University of Tennessee Press. [Anthropology and historic plundering make for an intriguingly educational dip into the view-of-the-other. How fantastic a history book from the perspective of the vanquished would be! Alas, the "victors" own the presses and the final word.]*

Darren Pine » *A writer of prose and plays, who has seen his drama come to life at the Nevada Conservatory Theatre. Currently pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of Missouri-Columbia. [One of the longer pieces to appear in quite some time. This lapse into broken identity and mysterious surroundings is a well-crafted slip into a confused, alternate reality, and underscores the futility of passivity. A blend of theatre and a dance into mental darkness, hopelessness, and ultimately the triumph of desire.]*

Doug Ramspeck » *Awarded an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award for 2009, this prize winning poet teaches creative writing at The Ohio State University at Lima. [Quite simply, a mood piece rife with imagery that I read several times to absorb the nuances that I hope you discover as well.]*

roibeárd Uí-neill » *From Corydon, Indiana. His chap "A Cosmic Clown's Handbasket Blues" is now available from the author. [I came of age in the 80s fearing nuclear annihilation. That fear was restoked by the first piece of this duet. The second just puts another log on the tortured mental furnace, in that pulsating part of my mind that lights up on the brainscan whenever I consider the inability of the collective international/political arena to honor our humanity.]*

James Valvis » *Winner of the Chiron Review poetry contest, this poet from Issaquah, Washington has three Pushcart nominations as well. [We're all dogs sniffing around for the bones tossed out by the powers-that-be. Supply and demand is an excuse for the manipulators to tap our insecurities and make us believe that we have the cognition of the child in this well-paced, slice-of-a-slice-of-a-life we're revisiting like a forgotten dream.]*

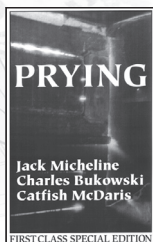
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— 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*



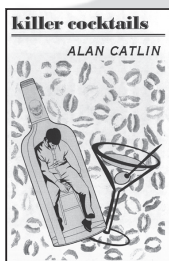
John Bennett

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.

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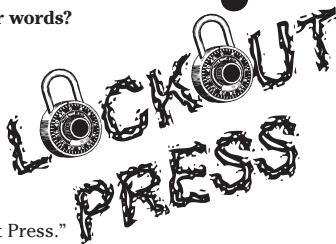
-Christopher M.

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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.

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