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First Class

HAVE YOU CHECKED FOR RACING STRIPES LATELY?
34

BIERSDORF
EVERY
FIELD
GREY
ROBERTS
TRACE
Uí-neill
VALVIS
WILLIAMS
ZOSCHKE



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Cover Art by Christopher M.

First Class #34 is heavier on the longer short fiction than normal, but I could not pass up on making room for these stories. There are a couple of fellow Hoosiers in here, as well as a story that wanders through my hometown (and the birthplace of First Class) Milwaukee. Call it a bias, but it snuck in on its own. A theme crept in as well, and many of these stories and poems examine transitions, evolutions, and changes – forced or otherwise, with somewhat atypical responses and odd results. You are highly likely to enjoy every last dripping word in this issue.

Please do pass this issue around to fellow readers and writers. Position it prominently on your favorite end table or in your most-used bathroom. I'd love to build the subscriber base a bit. If you're reading this... you get a deal! Give a friend a subscription and yours is free, just for being curious enough to read this. You'll have a friend for life, of course, and you'll be sharing something you enjoy with someone you enjoy. So, enjoy!

Once again, I must inform you that you are now able to order back issues right off the web page. You can also subscribe online, and even peruse the vast selection of chapbooks which are 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

My name is Id Est, or i.e. It's 2050 and the AMA has just published a report positing an alarming spike in developmental disabilities among children five and younger. Ed sent a link to the URL with the entire text of the twenty-five page report. My low-voltage battery of a brain needs recharging if I'm going to process all that information, so I'll divvy it up into ten readings or so. The battery doesn't hold a charge real well, but as long as I get the gist. Anything that long I'll cannibalize into a few paragraphs for public consumption.

Ed is aware of this deficiency. Ed is sixty-five and he's resigned himself to the permanent demise of long treatises and theses. He'll read the entire report start to finish, head tipped back peering through frames at the bulb of his nose. Ed's old school, he eschews Lasik surgery for the ten dollar cheaters he can get at Walgreen's and still reads novels in his spare time. He assures me I'm able to digest information in greater helpings than most of my colleagues. At best they'll read the opening sentences of a few paragraphs, if they make it past the Executive Summary, which is probably why he assigned this story to me.

I board the Maglev in Hamtramck. I've just come from Northville Downs, where they are resurrecting live harness racing solely for on-line betting purposes. Horses in this punctilious medium aren't permitted to gallop, I discover, but instead canter as if adhering to some ancient military tradition, the carriages they pull adulterated racing versions of chariots. There won't be any stands but a wall of cameras surrounding the indoor track. I wonder if people betting on speed-walking ponies toting human luggage with wheels will confirm or deny that get-rich-quick offerings are still one of the very last vestiges of entrepreneurial opportunity.

There's about fifty of us on the concrete platform, there would be more but since it's mid-morning we've avoided rush hour. It's the kind of cold where engines whine thinly and exposed skin turns angry red in protest of the sub zero wind chill factor. People are bouncing up and down on their feet or holding gloves or mittens over their faces or breathing bursts of frost, wearing long coats and scarves and ear muffs and woolen caps, some that tie under the chin.

The sound of the Maglev as it zooms into view is like a dog whistle, a dull and yet oddly authentic pitch that leaves me wondering if my hearing was more acute what additional sounds might be available to my ears. It's into the station like film on fast-forward then play, and it slides obediently into place, stopping with the trace of a lurch, as if it hadn't been going 300 thirty seconds ago. That's 300 miles per hour, but suffixing quantitative measurements has become poor word economy, like not abbreviating or not assigning an acronym.

I find a seat next to an attractive blonde woman. I won't acknowledge her right away to maintain the pretense that I randomly chose this particular seat. I'm wondering how her hair can be perfectly shaped, either the cold wind or a hat should have left at least a few strands loose or a symmetrical dent in her coiffure. She's wearing an orange turtle neck that rolls up to just under the point of her chin like a form-fitting plume, and the smell of her is like a smoky, intoxicating aura that engulfs everything in her vicinity. Her hands are still and resting together in her lap, over her crossed legs, her ring displayed, and it's an impressive diamond, enough karats to let everyone know a claim has been staked to her, and there is significant investment in that claim. She's on her way to Minneapolis, which is the end of the line for this particular route, to visit an old friend. I'm on my way to Milwaukee. I'm a journalist doing a story on an AMA report just published. Oh, that's interesting, she says, as if it's supposed to be but probably isn't, and we leave it at that. We're two or three sentences into the dialogue and that's plenty for now. She seems distracted, which is commonplace.

Later we introduce ourselves at my initiation and she goes along with it, charitably. We shake hands, but it isn't anything more than me taking her cold fingers in mine, our palms never touch. I'm i.e. Nice to meet you, i.e., I'm K. she says. What's the report about? Developmental disabilities in children born since 2045, and I leave off there, any more information than that and her eyes will glaze over, she'll turn away from me to the window and abruptly vacate our conversation. Which no longer passes for rude and hasn't for some time.

We zip over a river with a surface like dark glass and steam rising in wisps as if the water is preparing to boil. She tells me she went to UMinn and the friend is her old college roommate who's recently divorced. UMinn, that's about 200,000 students now? Yes, about that, she affirms, as we are suddenly coming to the forgotten rural reason for Kalamazoo. The doors slide open with a sigh, and about ten people board, grateful for warmth. The Maglev begins to glide and picks up speed quickly, and we watch K-Zoo run in the other direction as if embarrassed to be seen, old brick buildings and modest fraying homes on misshapen hillsides held together like duct tape, band-aids and randomly hammered nails by a small college, a minor league hockey team, and a few distribution centers.

I consider what she's told me during the time she forgets my presence and watches the crunchy white contours and thorny forests of the western Michigan countryside tear by like any color in the landscape can't keep up with our speed. The way she's dressed is to impress, and she wants her old friend to see how well she's aged, how she's been living well, and the way she looks and the ring make good cases for that. She is, I think, like many women, empathetic and ruthless at once.

Indiana comes next and it looks hammered flat as if by some massive object that desired a level surface. We zoom past Gary, past the patched and tuck-pointed cracking smoke stacks of the mostly abandoned factories, their jobs shipped to developing countries decades ago. Maybe that the factories aren't razed is some superstition that might bring the jobs back some day. Lake Michigan behind them is steaming like the river was, a massive cauldron going to boil. A ghostly ore freighter is nosing through the steam that rises above its bow, and most of what can be seen of it is an inverted dark steel triangle.

The elevated single track we're on descends to a flattened hexapod and we are sliding into the historical landmark of Union Station, it is from the distant past and never fails to deposit a large number

of new passengers regardless the time of day. They pile on in their different shapes and sizes and ethnicities, in various forms of bundle. A commodities trader by the looks of his red-rimmed eyes, premature worry lines on his face and the tie askew, is standing over me, hanging on, the helixes of his ears so red they might have burst from the frigidity. Maybe he's lost his ass on grain futures so he had to escape the flat screens that surround him and blink numbers and abbreviations at him, red and green, commodity prices going up or down, parodying his predictions.

The Maglev is out of seats so he has to stand and he's looking over me at K. like she's a can't-miss futures contract. She notices without noticing, she doesn't even turn to acknowledge the intrusion. Everywhere she goes people notice her like she's famous. She's probably in her forties so it's nice at her age to still turn heads, but the Maglev isn't the venue. When she never turns to acknowledge so that he stares at the back of her blonde head he rubs his face, tugging on it, as if trying to pull inevitabilities or irreversible outcomes out through the pores of it.

The cold has numbed everyone or we are hypnotized by the sound of gliding at 300, the arcane call of the dog whistle summoning. The glass of the windows has developed frigid cold scars so the bitter sunny day outside looks submerged in clear water. We are fifteen feet off the ground on an elevated rail, flying beneath radar detection over a white sea of frozen farmlands owned by Chinese interests. They squeezed the ginseng farms further north, setting the market, then financing then swallowing them whole as repossessions, then spread south like a blight, increasing production and exporting

WE ZIP OVER A RIVER
WITH A SURFACE LIKE
DARK GLASS AND
STEAM RISING IN WISPS
AS IF THE WATER IS
PREPARING TO BOIL.

dairy and soy bean and cabbage, selling these products at considerable profit back to the Mainland. Then they figured out how to leverage philanthropy and lease political influence and we are now well into The People's Republic of Wisconsin.

We bank right beneath a concrete interchange and we go from fast forward to play, and we are at the downtown Milwaukee station on St. Paul. I rise and the commodities trader makes way. Nice to meet you, K., have fun with your friend, and she turns and smiles. I won't see her again. She is just a pretty face who will join the stands filling a stadium of fading witnesses to portions of my life going by.

Dr. Moran's office is on the fifth floor of the Grain Exchange, a building built more than a century and a half ago with Victorian overtones. It is two long city blocks away, underneath the underpass and beyond, and I take on the elements as if paying some kind of penance. The wind beneath the underpass is the bitterest witch's breath, like the front of an ice age on its way to sealing the earth beneath permafrost. The exaggerated collar of my wool coat is pulled up to cover my neck but the vindictive arctic wind finds skin like water finds downhill. Just before I'm past a building that blocks some of it my outer ears feel like they've been scraped raw. Past the nape of my neck, the air finds a loose-fitting collar and its iciness infiltrates my shirt. As I'm walking through this canyon of mausoleums of failed corporate banks the wind is tempered by the vaguest pity for floor after floor of abandoned space.

The lobby of the Grain Exchange may be drafty because of its open emptiness but the wind is barred out of doors. I am across the shiny marble rococo floor where wheat and other grain were bought and sold late in the nineteenth century. I am walking across what was once the pit, bequeathed to the Mercantile Exchange a quick ninety miles south on the Maglev, when the advent of light passing through glass fibers rendered the Merc as obsolete as this grand lobby that is infrequently host to wedding receptions. The elevator is the size of a large sarcophagus and groans and creaks and shimmies with my ascent.

Since I didn't arrange the interview I have no idea how I'll be received. Dr. Moran was cited in the report, a somewhat alarming and brief mention about new disabilities. I need a few of these or one at least. I may or may not explain the disability in my two or three graph article. My article will be published on multiple websites, one verbatim to the next. I am the single point for multiple sources of the exact same news. It's unlikely I'll write enough to quote her. But then sometimes stories like these can take on a life of their own, and the disability could become the main thrust, with the AMA numbers as supporting evidence, an inversion of the initial plan. We'll see.

There's a door with her name inscribed on brass plating and her outer office inside is a children's play

room. Puzzles on little tables and in boxes, mostly big shapes and primary colors, there's an easel with tear-away sheets of paper surrounded by finger paints and boxes of crayons and water-soluble markers, a chest stuffed with second-hand clothes and costumes, there are nude androgynous action figures with wardrobe options, small plastic vehicles, and two computers, with no wires or cable, only small devices attached to the sides of them like flashing electronic parasites.

Dr. Moran has thick and short dark butch hair with an arbitrary smattering of white strands like she walked through some cobwebs to get to her outer offices. She is slim and plainly dressed, wearing jeans. She would be dressed elaborately if she considered my visit more of an event. Her eyes are big and green and expressive, suggesting the ability to listen to my laments with a degree of sympathy

THE WIND BENEATH
THE UNDERPASS IS THE
BITTEREST WITCH'S
BREATH, LIKE THE FRONT
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EARTH BENEATH PERMA-
FROST.

if I chose to spill them to her. She puts her hand in mine and it is fragile like an archaeological discovery that needs to be sealed airtight to keep its integrity from being compromised. She looks at me pleasantly but she doesn't waste smiles. She saves those mainly for the children, the little lives she can still affect before they turn into reporters or commodities traders.

I'm here to follow up on her commentary in the AMA report about new disabilities. People, parents of young children in particular, will want to know more. Can she give me specific examples? We are a society of brevity so we forego any meaningless small talk and get right to business. I follow her to her office.

Her desk is purely functional and disinterested in being ornate or making any professional statement. I notice the guest chairs are not across from where she sits, but one beside the desk and the other parked behind her, for tandem viewing, and she pulls the seat within discreet distance to show me a disability on her flat-screen monitor not much thicker than a piece of cardboard. She may be concerned that any detailed explanation will sail over my head as a complicated concept with wings soaring above the attention-deficient.

The digital recorder that disappears in my fist makes me think of the reporter of yesteryear pulling a notepad from the breast pocket of his blazer and jotting furiously, probably asking her to pause in order to keep pace. My recorder could isolate her editorial narrative from five other people standing around her and having simultaneous conversations. I can download what

she says and delete any irrelevancies. Instead of not being able to read some of things I'd jotted frantically on my notepad, and needing every one and not paring a lot of fat and some meat to the bone of two or three graphs. Not naively assuming people will read a long elaborate article from beginning to end, bogging down in its extremities, as with the offerings of old printed newspapers long dead.

The cameras in the corner find a little boy's big blue eyes, in the midst of the clutter of things he's yanked from their moorings and quickly discarded with sudden disinterest. They are beautiful pure ocean blue, those innocent eyes, and everything that happens in his mind can be seen beneath the surface with a translucence obfuscated only a bit by modest depths. Her voice is gentle and his eyes light when an answer forms in his mind to whatever she asks him.

Dr. M.: Did you like the movie, did...

Little Boy: Yeah, it was really scary. (overlapping)

Dr. M: ...you think it was scary? (overlapping)

They say scary at exactly the same moment.

Little Boy: Yeah, Dr. M., I thought it was really scary.

Dr. M.: So what time did you get up this morning, and...

Little Boy: I got up at six o'clock, it was dark out. (overlapping)

Dr. M.: ...was it still dark out? (overlapping)

They say dark out at exactly the same moment.

Little Boy (puts his arms on top of his head, sticks out his lower lip and pushes his breath out like steam from a boiling kettle): Yeah, it was dark outside still.

I sit back. He is someone's cherished little boy, the hands of his parents and of Dr. M. cupping the flickering candlelight of his early life from ambiguous gusts. Is he clairvoyant? Dr. M. glances at me sideways, looking at me with just one eye like a fish. He is not anticipating what I'm asking, she says, less gently than the tenor of her questions for the little boy. There is a delay, either in his hearing or his mental processing of what he's asked. It's a kind of ship-to-shore cognizance.

When I don't respond she turns fully to me, her bony knees pressed together and her hands on them. You are not familiar with that colloquialism. Its reference is maybe a century old. She pauses, searching for a better i.e.

With the first satellite phones there was a delay between when words were spoken and when they were heard on the other end of the line. If you didn't wait, what you would say would trample the words being spoken to you because of it, because of the delay.

I must have brushed against the form-fitting plume and there's a whiff of K.'s aura on my wool coat, and

Dr. M. is looking at me as if she is tracking the direction of my thoughts like I'm leaving large clumsy mental footprints. Maybe she too sees K.'s face when her friend tells her she looks fabulous as if she has to. Dr. M. waits patiently for me to return.

My disposition toward disabilities is like the average person's, I say. Ignorant as that may be.

She waits before responding. I look then at the computer screen and the little boy's little pink meat fingers, that until recently spent much of their time in his mouth, are plying the keyboard and he's looking at the screen. He types, then waits, types, and watches the screen. He knows the home row and can type without looking down. At age five. She sees the look on my face and she knows what I'm looking at and she can't restrain a knowing smile, maybe pleasantly surprised that I can follow some of this. It feels like the way she'd smile at me if I were five and something she was waiting for me to learn occurred to me ahead of schedule.

He is barefoot and his feet are pink and resting on their balls like the front foot of a sprinter waiting on a starter's pistol, when it dawns on me that he is instant-messaging. I wonder where his feet will walk, when they will run, whether at or away from things. His hair is the color of straw and a tuft sticks up on the top of his head and it is misadventure obviated only by the constraints of what he can get into at five.

Disabilities don't necessarily correlate with lack of intelligence, she says, and can sometimes be caused by the external. And the last thing she says that I hear, I'm wandering surrounded by Victorian columns and farmers in overalls with scraggy beards attending sacks of burlap disagreeing about the price of wheat, something about a harsh winter, resulting in a shortage of supply, used as rationale making the wheat more expensive. The commodities trader on the Maglev is pulling on his face again, trying to pull this irreversible history out through his pores, cursing these first traders of grain, cursing the cold. Evolution, she says.

1

A shipment of Nike shoes spills overboard into the ocean, riding swift current streams, traversing the expansive Pacific. The traveling tennis shoes wash upon the western shore of North America, never to be worn again, mated pairs tragically separated by their castaway adventures. Some tennis shoes land as far south as Santa Barbara, California while others ride the frigid surf as far north as Ketchikan, Alaska.

An oceanographer takes careful notes measuring each and every voyage. Most of the shoes touch the blessed sanctuary of sandy shore on the beaches of Oregon, not far from the Nike factory as if they are spawning salmon returning home. This wet and soggy footwear journeys across the biggest ocean in the world, thousands and thousands of miles, returning home without leaving behind a single footprint, without a single soul taking up space between the laces.

2

Two years later another cargo ship loses three merchandise containers overboard. Tossed among the waves, are tens of thousands of bathtub toys. An entire flotilla of rubber duckies is set free to roam the waves for all eternity. Thousands and thousands of yellow plastic ducks float atop the sea, a sight to see more grand than any Spanish Armada. The ducks ride from Indonesia past Japan and then come ashore at the beaches of Sitka like soldiers storming Normandy. At least most of the rubber duckies come ashore at Alaska, some rubber duckies ride the surf and waves, pass by the land in disdain choosing an aquatic adventure and take another lap around the world. Ocean currents spin in long elliptical circles and every eight years the rubber ducks reach Sitka, Alaska, like swallows returning to Capistrano, like vultures coming back to Florence, Arizona, like the march of the tarantulas after torrential monsoons, the rubber duckies migrate back to Sitka and a few of them land and a few choose to circle around the earth one more time.

This journey takes eight years like clockwork. In speedboat, sailboat, motorboat, row boat, tug boat, and trash barge, the oceanographer follows the rubber duckies, measuring, taking notes, and drawing maps. The oceanographer makes one major discovery and then slowly goes mad. He was a mad scientist don't you know. He realizes the intervals in the length of the cycles of the global ocean currents, one, three, five, seven and eight years, form a perfect major chord. The rhythms of the waters of the world measure their journey from beginning to end by forming a perfect major chord and singing in harmony.

On the bottom of the sea sediment in every ocean on the planet is a layer of plastic trash, bags, tools, toys, stoppers, snappers, and buttons. A thin layer of plastic garbage debris soils the bottom of the sea like industrial diarrhea. In some places the layer of plastic trash is ten times deeper than the plankton upon which every sea creature eventually feeds. Someday future archeologists will write textbooks declaring “In the era of the Plastic People these stupid morons nearly killed off our planet by poisoning the oceans.”

The oceanographer was pondering and thinking about the best way to stop the insanity of this polluting horde of humanity. In every ocean, every sea he had found little toy soldiers bobbing in the waves. He had found little plastic men in the deepest of waters and shallowest tide pools. Little army men, usually green but sometimes red, blue, yellow, white, or gray, whom he gathers up, washes and gives a home. The oceanographer’s merman military is growing stronger every day, filled with castaway toys and abandoned forgotten plastic soldiers. This scientist has gone quite mad – the way he laughs it makes me afraid. The other day this ostracized oceanographer walked into the room with a long flowing beard and carrying a trident – demanding that I call him Poseidon

I started building an ark, just call it a hunch.

My wife thinks I am nuts.

An army of a trillion tiny little plastic men gather along the beaches of China. Tiny toy soldiers stand on each other’s shoulders one after another after another after another. Tiny little plastic warriors stack themselves in giant pyramids, towering hundreds of feet above the beach. The mad oceanographer, long beard flowing in the breeze, blows a note on his conch shell and all the little men jump at once.

JUMP

in perfect synchronicity, a billion little green men land in the shallow ocean at exactly the same moment. A low deep bass rumbling groan roars across the ocean, a wave rushes away from the shore and as the wave races away it grows bigger and bigger. The wave continues growing as it flows away, white surf frothing and churning disappearing beyond the horizon and rushing towards the heart of the North American continent.

When Hawaii is swallowed whole the people in California know they are doomed. There are these fools in Las Vegas, who drag their beach chairs onto their lawns and wait for the wave, hoping to be the proud owners of beachfront property. Too bad the wave reaches all the way to Kansas. Las Vegas is obliterated in an instant.

The tsunami is devastating coming in but it is even more destructive going out. As the retreating wall of water receded, it carried flotsam and jetsam, boulders,

trailers, and tractors swirling in the current, debris which scoured the earth. Glaciers slowly carved Yosemite, inching along over centuries but this giant wave flooded the mountain range and changed geology in an instant. All those tiny plastic soldiers ride the walls of water like little green surfing superheroes, floating atop the ocean currents to the next invasion point. In the middle of a moonless night the little plastic soldiers gather on the beach and stack themselves into pyramids, all leaping at once and unleashing another tidal wave.

Wave by wave, shore by shore, the little green men invade the world. Poseidon's cavalry leads the charge, plastic toy soldiers saddled atop rubber duckies riding the frothy waves. Poseidon orders his soldiers according to a master plan, changing the directions of the ocean currents, pulverizing the harmonic chord, altering the weather for the entire planet. Using flood, rain, ice, and wave as weapons, Poseidon destroys the world, while I work on my ark, hammer and nail, nail and hammer, board after board. How long is a cubit anyways?

5

My ark floats across an endless ocean. All the continents have disappeared, replaced by chains of archipelagoes. Everything else is ocean, one vast ocean ruled by a crazed oceanographer who calls himself Poseidon and his army of little plastic merman soldiers, floating atop the ocean currents wherever they wish to go. The ark saved my life but I am beginning to think it was not such a good idea. I am so bored. All the ark does is float, we will never be allowed to reach landfall. The little plastic soldiers will make sure of that. So we float and float across a vast and endless ocean.

I tried that Noah trick. You know the one where you release a bird and if it comes back, you are still in the middle of the stinking ocean but if it doesn't then you are near land. The first thirty seven birds I released all came back to the ship but one day, it would have been a Thursday if those things still mattered, one of the birds did not return. The good word spread among the other birds who chattered all night long and then at sunrise took off together in a giant flock. All the birds launched from the ship at once. It was a magnificent sight and I haven't seen any of them since. This was followed by the amphibians hopping off every edge of the ark, landing in the sea with plop after plop. The snakes sneakily slithered silently into the sea, unseen.

All that was left were the mammals. The only passengers trapped on the ark are me and my fellow mammals. We are loud critters, roaring, howling, grunting, barking and purring punctuated by the occasional splatter of rumbling flatulence. I have to tell you that we mammals are a hairy sweaty smelly bunch. You haven't experienced stink until you have been stuck on a boat with elephant dung, cow pies, horse apples, rabbit pellets, dog doo doo, cat scat, and camel caca. The

stench was incredible. Even the skunks were offended. Two of every animal included me too. I had a wife. Lilith bore me two sons, so the continuation of our species wasn't looking so good. Jonah and Ahab were the apples of my eye. One day a white whale swallowed Jonah whole and Ahab took off, swearing vengeance on the white whale. I haven't seen him since. There was still my wife. Sure we bickered sometimes, bored on the ark, what married couple doesn't bicker, but what could she do about our relationship – I was the last man on earth.

I had forgotten about the oceanographer. My wife left me for the mad scientist. So now it is me and the other mammals, floating on an ark in the middle of the ocean. Just floating – floating and stinking.

6

I still remember the day we were saved, I was kneeling on the deck of the ark and praying, begging for a quick and merciful end when a terrible clatter arose in the bathroom. There was a great deal of shrieking and one of the baboons ran out from the tub, towel tied around his waist and his hair all lathered up in shampoo. (The ship had pretty much gone to hell since the night the apes had broken into the bag of forbidden knowledge apples.) The baboon was pretty excited, shrieking, leaping up and down, baring his teeth in a maniacal grin. He stuck both his monkey hands into his monkey hair and then held his shampoo lathered hands in front of my face. I figured there was probably something wrong with the shampoo. The baboon was pretty vain about his hair. He liked to wear it in a sort of Elvis Presley pompadour.

The baboon thought I was some sort of idiot. It wasn't about the hair. It wasn't about the shampoo. It was about the bubbles. The baboon had come up with an idea, a brilliant idea. We began a bubble factory right there on the ship. I don't want to go into a great deal of detail about manufacturing bubbles except to note that it involved slightly fermenting oats and plenty of zebra flatulence. Messy, nasty stuff, zebra farts and on an ark full of hairy smelly mammals that is saying something. The bubbles surface was made of a sticky glue. We made a gazillion bubbles and set them free to float atop the ocean, drifting all across the world. Imagine the sight at sunrise of millions and millions of bubbles floating away from the ark, bubble skin glinting in the dawn.

The rubber ducks did not like the stinky sticky bubbles. The rubber ducks migrated. Who knew rubber ducks could fly, but as the ocean became polluted with millions of sticky bubbles, the rubber ducks suddenly rose up from the water all at once, flapping their little yellow wings frenetically and then the rubber ducks flew away.

Gradually all of Poseidon's floating army of little plastic soldiers is getting stuck to the bubbles and getting stuck to each other. One day my ex-wife returned.

Lilith was stuck to a thousand different little plastic soldiers. I threw her back to the sea, not realizing that she would return again and again. One by one, all the little plastic soldiers are becoming stuck to each other and the sticky bubbles. Poseidon has been defeated.

Still it is not as if things have suddenly become paradise on earth. While Poseidon was king, genetically engineered giant sea monsters were released into the deeps of the ocean and they certainly don't seem to be going anywhere. As ocean levels fall and the archipelagos swell back into continents they are not exactly the same. The bugs and reptiles no longer respect us. I do not think it will be easy for mammals to become the top of the food chain again. So I am not certain if being saved from the cruel reign of Poseidon has been such a good thing.

For one thing the baboon is now boss. Ever since the baboon invented the bubble machines and led the revolution to overthrow the tyrant Poseidon, the other mammals on the ark demanded that the baboon be put in charge and I was demoted. The baboon lords it over me pretty good. He calls me his banana boy. After the fall of Poseidon, my ex-wife left the oceanographer and now Lilith dates the baboon. She says it's the hair, "drives her wild." The sounds of their vigorous monkey love fill the boat. "If the ark is a rocking don't bother knocking."

Just as I was wondering if things had gotten better or worse, would future generations of human beings, my descendants, be content as servants of their simian overlords, that was when one of the chimpanzees, Cornelius, rediscovered the telescope. Cornelius had been reading about Galileo and decided he would give it a try. His telescope worked pretty good, amazingly good really, better than Galileo's. Then one day Cornelius found a comet headed right this way, directly at planet earth.

7

Without the little plastic army men floating atop the sea, the ark is free to travel from archipelago to archipelago. As we travel from island to island different species leave the ark. The hippopotamus were the first to depart, dropping off at an island with beautiful lagoons and plenty of aquatic weeds. The giraffes and gazelles were left off at long sandy beaches with plenty of room to run. The skunks and ferrets looked like their island was the most fun. They built wonderful waterslides, frolicking all day long.

At last we discovered a small island which held surviving humans. Before the Poseidon Wars the island had been a top secret government installation. It had been atop a mountain in Wyoming but rising ocean levels had left only the peak poking above the endless ocean. The little island was filled with government scientists, military personnel, and a handful of lawyers. I had the ark drop me off at the island of the humans. Lilith

stayed on the ark, waving goodbye to me as she floated away, holding hands with the bubble inventing baboon with the handsome Elvis Presley pompadour.

There was a lot of bickering on the island of the humans. The government scientists conducted a study. The study discovered that the bickering was caused by the lawyers. The military personnel were assigned the task of killing the lawyers. It wasn't hard. Luckily, before they became extinct, we realized the lawyers served a necessary purpose in our tiny little human ecosystem. The lawyers organized the scientists. So we keep a few lawyers around, not enough to take them off the endangered species list but just enough to keep the former government employees occupied.

THE MILITARY PERSONNEL WERE ASSIGNED THE TASK OF KILLING THE LAWYERS. IT WASN'T HARD.

Don't get me wrong the top secret government scientists are smart, plenty smart, but they need to be organized. Between the scientists, soldiers, and lawyers, I am probably the dumbest person on the island. I am still known as "banana boy." The scientists are beginning to rebuild our civilization and technology. Not exactly the same technology and civilization, but a new society adapted to this strange brave new world. In many ways it is an island paradise. No traffic, no smog, no crime, and only a handful of lawyers. We have food, shelter, and the weather is warm enough to remove the need for clothing. Not surprisingly, on an island full of naked women, the fertility rate skyrockets.

8

The ape of arks stopped by the other day. It was good to see everyone on my fellow family tree of evolution, even though the baboon is still a pompous ass. It was even good to say hello to Lilith. The apes keep devouring the forbidden knowledge apples and now the howler monkeys hold the most outrageous poetry slams. Cornelius the chimpanzee invented a new power source that allows you to water ski behind the ark. The wake behind the ark and the movements of the water skier attract those genetically engineered sea monsters Poseidon unleashed during his reign as king. It is the most exciting, dangerous fun I have ever had, skimming across the surface of the ocean with a sea serpent snapping at my heels. The other day I saw an orangutan water skiing when the tentacles of giant squid suddenly shot up and pulled him under the waves. The baboon cut the ski ropes so the whole ark wouldn't get sucked down to the briny deep. No one has seen the orangutan since.

The gorilla invented this thing better than beer. It involves freezing slowly fermenting kelp. He calls them kelpsicles and they are so much better than beer. Lilith stays just slightly drunk all the time, smiles and tells me that as alpha female on the ark she has gone “bonobo,” whatever that means. As the ark floats away, the gorilla leaves behind plenty of kelpsicles and the fertility rates on our island of naked people keeps skyrocketing. The government scientists are thrilled with the high fertility rates. They are all nerds and high fertility has never ever happened to nerds before. All this nerd breeding has evolved a smarter species of human than has ever been on the planet before. Things should have been looking up, what with it being paradise and stuff, if it hadn’t been for that comet.

Remember the comet that Cornelius the chimpanzee saw in his wonderful telescope, the one headed towards earth. It is still coming, getting nearer everyday. At first the comet was just a bright light in the night sky, brighter than any star. Then it gradually grew larger and larger, becoming bright enough to be seen in the daytime. As the comet nears, chunks break off and fall to earth, burning up in the atmosphere. The shooting star show is incredible, hundreds of meteorites at a time burning fiercely as they whiz across the sky. We humans sit atop the highest mountain peak of our tiny island and watch the shooting stars, a display more brilliant than any Fourth of July celebration and wait for the Apocalypse.

Bring it on I say. Every single global catastrophe creates another roll of the Darwin dice. Phrases like survival of the fittest, food chain, tree of life, make it sound like life is quite organized and progressive, not the choir of cacophonous chaos which rules this planet, this tiny chunk of rock hurtling through the cosmos as it revolves a burning ball of explosive gas. What’s another comet I say, as I take a moment to laugh at the dinosaurs. Big, stupid reptiles just couldn’t hang. Here comes the comet.

Splat!

9

The fireball was incredible but not as bad as the wind. It approached with a roar that sounded like all the wailing banshees hell could ever hold were released at once. The banshees came screaming across the waves and when the wind hit full force, me and most of the other humans were ripped from the mountain peak and sent rolling across the sky like soaring tumbleweeds. We flew for hundreds of miles, tossed up and down by the buffeting winds before landing in the middle of the ocean with a splash. We were the lucky ones. The wind from the comet impact was followed by a fireball which melted the granite mountain that formed our island, incinerating those few people still clinging precariously to its shores.

Those of us floating in the seas saw the fireball coming for miles. We swam underneath the water, the fireball

scorching everything above sea level and everything in the skies. Me and my fellow survivors floated in the ocean, treading water furiously. All that water treading attracted Poseidon's genetically engineered sea serpents who began to devour the humans one by one. Things looked hopeless for the human race when the most unexpected heroes suddenly arrived and rescued the last humans from extinction.

The rubber ducks appeared on the horizon and swam towards us quickly, little yellow plastic tails wagging like puppies. The desperate humans climbed on to the backs of the rubber ducks. The rubber duckies formed a convoy, floating along the ocean currents, rescuing the human race. Perhaps all those years floating in bathtubs together has forged a bond between humans and rubber ducks that endures even through the apocalypse.

Maybe it is just because the rubber ducks hate the sea serpents with a passion. You have never heard a sound as fierce as an entire navy of rubber ducks quacking and quacking as they float into battle. Cornelius the chimpanzee has a theory that Poseidon's sea serpents are genetically descended from the drain monsters which live beneath bathtubs. Drain monsters lurk beneath bathtubs waiting for toes to come too close to the drain. They are the rubber ducks' natural enemies. The rubber ducks may have rescued humans just to spite the sea serpents. Whatever the reason we humans are grateful. The rubber ducks drop us off on the nearest shore before swimming back into the heart of the ocean, containing their epic war of extermination against the sea monsters.

10

So what next you have to wonder? I ponder the future, walking along the shore. I always find that walking beside the ocean is a wonderful way to think. My footsteps fall into time with the rhythmic crashing of the surf upon the sand. I have no idea where I am. Not that it matters, because if I have learned anything through all these adventures it is no matter where you go, there you are. I am probably somewhere right now. This place used to have a name but that doesn't matter anymore. This place will probably have another name somewhere in the future but that doesn't matter either. It's just where I am at this moment, walking beside the ocean and thinking my thoughts. Not that I am thinking deep thoughts or getting close to figuring things out, mostly I am just trying to survive. So in many ways, despite everything that has happened and how everything has changed, really nothing has changed. I am still just trying to survive. Just like before.

The next wave which washes upon the shore brings with it a gift, a tennis shoe surfing atop the white froth and skidding to a stop on the sand. Except for being soggy and wet the tennis shoe seems perfectly fine. The tennis shoe has floated atop the ocean currents for years, surviving the tsunamis, surviving the sea

On A Visit To My Parents' Home

John Field

This is a house of windows rough winds rattle,
Of sagging walls and ruined shadows.
A maze of eight doors sentinels the kitchen,
Sacks of sinister looking vegetables
Decay in the pantry,
Twenty five feral cats sleep in the garage
And boxes crammed with filth junk
Desecrate the laundry room.
Somewhere in the attic a glass eye weeps,
Contaminating my visit with premeditated grief.

On the back porch moonlight bleaches the bones,
Of my bicycle skeleton-white,
Its wounded wheels and flat tires
Homesick for the myth of the open road
Which expired decades ago when I left home.
What does my father see
When he walks in the backyard?
A child's slagheap of decomposing playhouse walls,
Caved-in slides and broken swings?
Or nostalgia hidden behind death's perfect disguise
Of rust and mold?

In the meadow beyond our garden
A new retirement center rises like a sepulcher
And waits patiently for my parents
To forget who they are.
Before the days of human barns
And blacktop pastures cattle grazed there
In harmony with oak trees and the river.
Now sequestered septuagenarians
Devoid of voice and manner
Low fitfully in their stalls
For sleeping pills and bedpans
While nurses help them endure
The deepest darkness of their minds
Until their delusions finally beat them blind.

On A Park Bench In Miami

John Grey

Vicente doesn't speak
of his cousins in Havana.
Instead, his talk's
mostly about spiders,
the size of the beasts,
especially the ones
with huge head and abdomen,
so transparent you can see
the blood they suck.

Castro's like a nameless void to him.
Speak it and that's where
the conversation empties into.
Arachnids are his specialty.
More feet than a man can count.
Such speeds and never in
the same direction twice.

He describes the gorgeous jungle parrots
and how those birds, when fruit was scarce,
would feast on spiders.
He'd see them crunch those monsters
in their beaks,
inhale the mangled parts.
Sometimes, you have to sate your hunger
down where creatures swarm.
How else, he says, can gruesome fail,
and beauty triumph.

We could see to it that it doesn't get any more.
Starve it. That's one solution.
Another would be to flush it out with smoke and water.
Even small quantities should cause it to scream
at a higher pitch than usual.
It normally and naturally shrieks,
so we aren't sure if we should call that language yet.
That could cause questions to arise -
Are these simply cries we hear?
Or calls for help to others of its kind?
And will others come? Will they be hostile?
Warmongering? Ready to do battle?
Will they have weapons?
Devices to maim us, to end our way of life?
Or will they be equipped with long appendages?
Will they use them as whips or talons?
Or will they blandish them about like sexual organs?
Will they breed? Interbreed?
Come in triple digits?
Will there be enough of them to begin colonies of their
kind?
Right here in our homeland?
Our property values could fall through a hole
in the rusted bucket of our economic achievements
like a ball-bearing in a wet paper clown costume.
That could lead to abandonment. Of our homes and land.
Our malls and values. Our perfected beliefs.
And then what?
We should take action now.
The answer is to kill the bastard.
And the sooner, the better.
Let us pray.

Conceptual Interpretations Of A Starving Coyote

(What I saw as far as marshmallows were concerned.)

Stephen R. Roberts

I saw a coyote once eat a marshmallow.
And a marshmallow-shaped man in a thong
play chopsticks over a loudspeaker
at the local bar and grille outside of which

I watched a hawk deep in the sky fall into
a sharp dive, strike a pigeon mid-air, and end up
in the median of a limited access highway
with its prey stuck on its talons
like a fishbone in the throat of a child.

I saw a woman hit a man with a child
with a bible. Then pray he wasn't injured
though he flailed on the sidewalk
like a pig in a slaughter house.

I saw a slaughterhouse with only dried blood
because of drought brought on by the lack
of anything iridescent falling from the sky.
The land dried up when the birds fell down
in a smattering of feathers, wings and gizzards.

I watched a man with a plate of deep-fried gizzards
at the local bar and grille shoving marshmallows
through the loudspeaker so the hawks would leave.

I saw a woman alone with the prayer of a child.
And a pig with a desire to go into a steep dive
over the slaughterhouse like a marshmallow
in a thong playing chopsticks across
the iridescent ribs of a starving coyote.

I hate yard work but
from the looks of it,
you had it worse.

You dragged your sea bag
down the sidewalk and through the gravel,
tripping and catching yourself
but finally falling down.

You started crying and sat raving
through your tears at life,
alcohol and a streaked list of enemies.

Your knees, elbows and shoulders
were bruised and abraded. I could
hear the wounds throbbing, bloody
red against your sunburn.

Watching you get up and cross the street
to the bus stop, my rake
and I hoped you'd make it to the
opposite curb.
You did and sat down again.

You cried and gushed and saw me looking.
You cursed me, dared me to call the
cops and sneered at my tidy
front yard.

I brought you two sodas,
handing them to you
as you squinted up at me.
You said tomorrow was
your 50th birthday. You told me
about your kids.

We agreed this tangled
mortal coil never sits still.
We keep pulling at the knots with
bleeding nails and chipped teeth.
The knots are tighter for some than others.

You tucked the second soda away for
your friend back at dignity village, soothing
the reptilian brain as best you could while
sitting on the curb with your beaten shins
bridging the gutter.

Sick of looking at my face you looked up and told me so.
I walked across the road and picked up the
rake resting in my front yard.

a cosmic clown joins 4-H

roibeárd Uí-neill

"Indifference is the invincible giant of the world."

- Marie Louise de la Remee

Joe 6-pack, on average,
reads 4 books a year, &
the number will certainly decline.

The plutocracy's confidence
must be high, since an educated,
well-informed working class
would bollix its self-serving interests.

How do we avoid responsibility?
We fill our heads with dust bunnies
& bottle caps, lock our doors, harden
our hearts, zip our lips, plug our ears,
make sure we don't give a damn
when the Buddhist monks of Myanmar,
advocates for the very thing
we've squandered,
are beaten down by police
who perform above & beyond
the requisites of hazardous duty pay.
Huh...
...they're slant-eyes, & it's only television.

None of us
receive a gold watch.
None of us
get to bronze our timecards.

Clock in – the red arrow
on my monotony meter
ricochets between death
& defiance, fails to find
equilibrium,
imminent shattering stayed
once the workaday haze
glues cottontails
to my sense of direction.

i stir momentarily,
wonder where in the world
waste management buries
all the plastic car bumpers
i consign to the dumpster,
but any twinge of guilt
(which might have become
a rebel with a clue, at least)
wakens to a broom handle
rap-rap-rapping its knuckles.

Hello, wage slavery.
Howdy, short term memory.
Huzzah, paycheck and panty night.
Hurrah,
one more
gutless odd-me-dod
no coming-of-age punk band
may scream into naked empathy.

white flags waving from steeples

roibeárd Uí-neill

“Hell is an outrage on humanity. When you tell me God created Man in His own image, then I reply, He was very ugly.”

- Victor Hugo

The Anglican Church
went through a major crisis
in the mid-80s,
after venerable graybeards
reinterpreted Hell as
unequivocal
spiritual oblivion,
sent British asses & elbows
scampering for the exits,
redemption lost in a cloud
of marble dust
mottled by stain glass.

The hierarchy
convened an emergency synod,
reinstated Hell
as eternal punishment –
the fearful faithful lured back
to fill pews & coffers,
limp ties & summer dresses
incapable of
abandoning a deity
who created them
with a dualist mandate –

bow to
divinely plotted obsolescence,

embrace self-preservation
at any cost.

Especially the loss of dignity.

white flags waving from radio antennas

roibeárd Uí-neill

"I wish I were like you / easily amused."

- Kurt Cobain

Love, love, love
e.d., purple pill, size matters,
country fried chicken & cherry cola,
teabag fascist rant
& fend-for-yourself government,
in God we rust, & trust
our bigger bombs, faster bullets,
my Southern Indiana 'tis of thee
untroubled by rising sea levels
because the Midwest's the best &
the corn-fed bitch likes my sexy tractor
& over-played Christ's coming back
at the head of a 7 nation army
tramping through
the mud-colored dead of Haiti who ate
mangoes from the wrong tectonic plate.

Okay, Yankee Doodle Drones,
grab crotch in unison
& slide to the right,

(ignore the sudden stop at the end
of our race to the bottom of the ladder)

thank the corporate sponsors
who've dictated your priorities,
who insist what you don't know
can't hurt you.

The Rebel In The Ranks

James Valvis

I could lie and tell you I questioned the feel of the M16 rifle in my hand, or the cold weight of the grenade as I chucked it over the wall, knowing I was practicing how to splatter flesh. I could say sticking the bayonet into rubber men gave me the creeps, or planting the Claymore was deeply troubling, or that when we screamed how blood and guts made the grass grow green I was sickened and horrified by the grisly nature of not just what we did but the enjoyment of it. I could say I took a stand against the slaughter we were all there to train ourselves to love. I could say all that but I was just a young man, not very smart but with a sense of the absurd, and the only time I ever showed any rebellion was when I asked Sergeant Harris why army girls were allowed to have mustaches but we weren't.

The Lines At St. Paul's

James Valvis

The nuns lined up the boys on one side, girls on the other.
We lined up knowing God loved us and Jesus was God.
We lined up understanding our place in heaven was arranged.
We lined up as boys and girls, but that was all that separated us.
Not once did we line up according to appearance or wealth,
or according to size of our breasts, or the strength of our biceps.
We didn't line up as Democrats and Republicans, blacks and whites.
Never lined up as fats and thins, prudes and sluts, gays and straights,
We didn't line up as believers and doubters, saints and sinners.
To the nuns, we were all sinners who were trying to become saints.
To ourselves, we were all saints who would like to one day be sinners.
They lined us up and marched us to recess, lunch, the bathrooms.
They lined us up, all the girls pretty and smiling,
all the boys tough and smirking, like it would always be that way,
like those perfect rows would go on forever and ever and ever,
like if you simply followed the person in front of you
you would get to the place you needed to be,
and for a while you dreamed it possible,
maybe you all did, even the nuns,
until one kid stopped suddenly
and the pushing started.

Part 1

Part 1 is the only part. In it I awake to find the fog on the grounds residing heavily within my skull. I feel euphoric. No, I am euphoric. I get to leave today. They told me I get to and so I get to. Life is simple, easy. Everything I say seems witty to me, but the pretty blonde nurse's look quickly dispels that notion. She makes no bones about telling the doctor that they should keep me for another twenty-four hours. I try to tell her I have to work tonight, that they're counting on me at the restaurant, but my words sound like my mouth is full of marbles and besides that she ignores me. She doesn't even lower her voice to tell the doctor that I've obviously gotten into something. She even looks at me while saying this, and even though it looks like I'm seeing her through a sopping wet window screen I can still tell that I'd very much like to fuck her. And even though my emotions drift like butterflies I can still pin down an intense hatred for her not wanting to fuck me back.

This is like a hangover, but instead of headaches, thirst and regret there's just this insatiable need to sleep for half a week. Like Batman, when he would do that and not even realize it until Alfred woke him and said, not like a father, but rather like an amused friend, that he had been asleep for the better part of the work week. Which is no small feat considering his work week consists of bashing costumed villains and saving innocent lives. I look at the nurse and realize that even though she's sexier than a soaking wet luxury car she still takes her work as seriously as Batman. I speak slowly, as if letting the marbles fall from my mouth, asking her what her name is again.

How much work Bruce Wayne misses tilts the weights of justice in Gotham City. How much work I miss tilts our customers' weights in favor of their health because I always recommend the chimichangas. They come with sour cream and guacamole. Both. They look like torpedoes if torpedoes were shimmering golden brown and atrociously delicious. Torpedoes and all weapons should be delicious instead of destructive. I feel that would alleviate a lot of the world's problems. I feel that. I ask the nurse and my mom if they feel that. When my mom came into the examination room I can't exactly remember. I only want to know if they are ready for Hershey Kiss bullets, chimichanga torpedoes and red rope mortar fire unraveling across a dark chocolate night sky. I realize this is my life's work, and I'd like to get up and turn all weapons delicious now, but it's clear that I'm lacking something, a vitamin or maybe a chemical that's necessary to my standing up. I press the nurse about this. She shakes her head. I realize I'm breathing hard. "It will just take time."

I would like to sleep half a week now but I'm afraid

whatever I've taken will wear off. Once I took a handful of a friend's epilepsy pills because I knew they wouldn't kill me. I knew they would put me out until Thursday and that I'd probably be fired by then. They were so slight and pale, like tiny moons, and I was surprised at how hard they slammed me into a dreamless sleep that was probably closer to death. They let me roll in my own piss and shit in blissful mindlessness, awaking only to vomit and masturbate. My room dark and musty, I felt I had channeled Bruce Wayne, but with no Alfred to chide me back.

I never did get fired. That time, like this time, my boss was absurdly nice about everything. It was as though he was working on this sort of thing in a meditation class. When I came in to try and explain myself none of my coworkers would talk to me, and some of them wouldn't even look at me. I was afraid for a minute that they had told my boss about the fall. Nothing but my own imagination hinted at this, as they remained perfectly opaque in their duties. There were only cooking sounds of timers going off and dishes being finished. It sounded eerie without their normal chatter. It was like a grand birdcage with all its toys and bird feed and water dishes with feathers in them, but no birds. All the favorite toys are moving slightly from recent play, maybe a bell even tinkles as it rocks on the newspaper floor of the cage, but there are no bright birds in sight, no lilting bird songs to be heard.

My boss put his hand on my shoulder and led me out of the kitchen to his office. Once there he smiled a smile that told me that he didn't think of himself as my boss at all. He said it was okay and to take care of myself, that my job would be waiting for me. Standing there avoiding his gaze, I felt this intense guilt, like I was visiting the grave of someone I had killed. But as soon as I left his office and started walking in the fog I forgot all about my guilt. All I could think about was how nice he had been about the whole thing and how easy I'd gotten off. It was as though by walking away I was bringing my victim back to life, though I was pretty sure that this particular skeleton would haunt me well after I had left the graveyard.

But I'll be back at work in a few short hours. Though I feel a bit too foggy to put my food armaments plan into motion quite yet, I'm sure that at the very least I could seat some customers. As long as my boss told me where I could seat them I could do that no problem. I'd say that I could wait some tables, but I don't want to fall again. My busser Manuel was more than nice about it, but the hour I took to recover in the dry storage, an econo size can of tomatoes as my pillow, wasn't fair to him. Wasn't fair because he barely speaks English and had to cover all my tables. Wasn't fair because I had hit my head on a table and he had to leave his already impatient tables periodically to wake me, in case I was hemorrhaging, which neither of us knew how to say in each other's language, but which both of us knew was a major concern. Wasn't fair to him because I still

needed to keep all my tips that night, for reasons that don't matter now that I'm leaving this place.

A family of two parents and two adolescent girls stare at me in the waiting room. Have I been talking? I feel dumb and giddy, as if God were giving me butterfly kisses on my brain. I start to tell the skinny little family what that's like, but think better of it. Instead I tell them that they are my heroes, my idols. My Batmans and Robins. Before I express this as completely as I'd like to, or maybe before I've even started to express it, the nurse shakes me by the shoulder and starts giving me my discharge instructions. My mind doesn't so much wander as it falls all over itself. Let's live in Japan and eat fresh fish everyday, it says. We can practice the zen art of eating fresh fish everyday. We can play baseball against a rag-tag team of seagulls on a sun-baked pier. Then, when we lose, we can exercise honor in defeat. No sword vengeance where we're going. I need to give a lecture on guilt now. Forget about food weapons or heroes and listen. I stand and after I've stood it feels like I'm still extending upwards, like some indefatigable tent pole, like there's no way this room could hold a man taller than his own tales.

Now the nurse and my mom are on each side of me, steadying me and urging me not to look down because I could fall. A smirk works its clumsy way across my heavy face. I want to fall. I want to fall because I am sure that I won't ever hit bottom. They aren't so sure. They agree to move to Japan with me only if I keep my head up. Well okay, sometimes we need to compromise. This place has taught me that much. We can't all be a nation apart. We can't all be Japan.

Outside it's foggy and windy like we're on the Golden Gate and it's summer. My soggy head dries out at this thought and I smile no problem. How couldn't I? There I am on the bridge with two beautiful women at my sides, and we're heading south. Japan can wait. Work can wait. We're heading south and everyone's invited: Alfred and Manuel, the nurse and my sex drive, my boss and the undead skeletons of the world, the family in the waiting room and God's eyelashes, my coworkers and all the escaped birds of San Francisco, and my customers and me, a poor man's Bruce Wayne. We're heading South, to the end of the world. To Patagonia, because it will be gone soon. Because it's melting like the rest of the world. Like all of us. Like a blue toy car in a microwave.

Birds Of A Feather...

Robert M. Zoschke

The air in the trailer was hot and stuffy. Coming out of the two windbags who had grown accustomed to each other, through the years, more or less.

“Goddamn clicker’s on the fritz,” he barked, trying to change the television channel.

“Ain’t the clicker at all,” she replied, shaking her head. “Told you last night, when you finally got home from the tavern. We need new batteries in the clicker.”

Like codependent nicotine fiends heading to the convenience store to steal a pack of cigarettes, it was their habit to revolve all Saturday night entertainment around the Antiques Roadshow television program. At some point throughout the course of each week leading up to each Saturday night, she would pry two porterhouse steaks out of the butcher who ran the meat department at the grocery store where she was a cashier. Her method of prying the steaks out of the butcher was weird, of this she was certain, but there was something about it that flipped her switch, to a certain degree.

When the shift changes of the stock boys would line up just right, and the delivery trucks weren’t coming, the butcher would let her know the coast was clear and she would take her fifteen-minute break. Instead of heading to the break room or the regular bathrooms near the break room, she would travail a path through clutter and wind up in an alcove of the stockroom, where an old wash sink and toilet was closed off like a closet by an old rickety door. She would coo to the butcher from outside the closet, cooing to him through the rickety old door, while the butcher sat on the toilet playing with himself until her cooing intensified just the way the butcher liked it. At which point she cranked up her cooing horny passion like a call-in operator on a porno line, until the butcher finished. The butcher always finished with a nasal noise of quick yet epic proportion, which did indeed flip her switch, to the point that she thought about it sometimes, to get in the mood for her own man back at her own trailer.

For years now, nobody at the store had ever caught them, nor heard her cooing in the cluttered stockroom space near the old rickety door. But someone once heard the butcher emit his orgasmic glee, and they told the manager about the sound, but the butcher explained to the manager that the nasal sound was due to the pain of hemorrhoid-blocked bowel movements. Subsequently, the manager agreed there wasn’t any reason for anyone to be snooping around the butcher’s washroom area anyway, so everybody else in the store remained none the wiser, and every week when the time was right the butcher finished with his nasal noise and the cooer got two thick juicy porterhouse steaks.

Her man kept on twiddling the television's remote control, until he held it out toward her like a child bringing home a grade school art project to a parent. With his arm extended he spoke to her again. "How old do you think the poor bastard child slave was, the one that made this piece of dog shit clicker over there in China? Six years old? Seven, maybe?"

"Don't come from China," she told him, sighing. "Says right on the back it was made in Taiwan."

"HOW OLD DO YOU
THINK THE POOR BAS-
TARD CHILD SLAVE WAS,
THE ONE THAT MADE
THIS PIECE OF DOG
SHIT CLICKER OVER
THERE IN CHINA...?"

He set down the remote control and picked up the half-gallon bottle of Jack Daniel's. "Says right on the front, this here is made in God bless the U.S.A. You ready to finish washin' down your steak with another drink?" She shook her head, no. He rolled his shoulders and crinkled his neck at her, the special gesture just

for her that meant, hey babe, suit yourself. Then he tipped the Jack Daniel's bottle and poured a couple shots worth on top of the melting ice cubes in his plastic Wrestlemania Souvenir Collector's Edition cup. The only cup he used that he washed himself, because he didn't want her using the dish scrubber on it and destroying the special Wrestlemania insignia that made it a Souvenir Collector's Edition.

"Goddamn, that Jack tastes good tonight," he said, burping a burp that sounded to her like it was trapped in his gullet somewhere. Probably by that end piece of his porterhouse that she told him he should cut into separate pieces, or at least cut the damn fat off of, before he swallowed it without chewing it hardly at all.

"You sure you don't want a refill of the good stuff?" he pried.

"What the hell, might as well," she said, leaning against the arm of her recliner for leverage and stretching her drinking arm out toward him. Right before he was about to pour her the next drink, she drew her hand back a bit. "And don't scratch that big bottle against my great grandma's crystal glass, like you almost did last week," she commanded. He steadied himself against the arm of his recliner and made sure to hold the working end of the Jack Daniel's bottle a good four inches from the rim of her glass. For years, she had been maintaining that as soon as the Antiques Roadshow passed through town, she would show them the glass and probably get enough money for it to buy them a dishwasher for the trailer. He had a running bet with the butcher at the grocery store where she worked, betting the butcher that if the Antiques Roadshow passed

through town, they would tell her it was worthless, probably a simulated crystal glass sold at an old Ben Franklin Five and Dime. He didn't know why the hell the butcher had so much faith in her belief that it was exceedingly valuable, but he had always thought the butcher was a strange bird.

He started slapping the remote control against both of his thighs like a crazy drummer playing bongos. The last thing he wanted to do was admit to her that she was probably right, that it had to be that the batteries were going dead.

"We got seven minutes yet 'til our show comes on," she told him. "Why don't you just settle down a minute, tell me how your day was."

"Typical Saturday shift," he said. He was a certified repairman with a certificate of merit for ten years of service to a repair outfit in town called The Handyman. His ten-year certificate of merit hung on the wall behind the storefront counter, right next to his certified repairman certificate, so all the customers could see he was the most certified employee who worked at The Handyman. The fact that the hustler who owned The Handyman had concocted his certified repairman certificate on a photocopy machine, well, shit, there were things the customers needed to know and there were things the customers didn't need to know.

"How?" she said.

"How what?" he responded, as if she had asked him how the Pythagorean theorem came into existence.

"How was it a typical Saturday shift?"

"Boss sent me out to the laundromat down by that two-bit, two-year technical college," he said, shaking his head. "Whatever those dipshits that couldn't get into a real college are learning, got any technical application to anything, you wouldn't know it by how they jam up their goddamn quarters in the washers and dryers." For a moment, feeling good and greased and rolling right along from the second Jack on ice he had just finished, he actually thought about telling her how he had told his boss that the goddamn college kids had stolen one of the coin boxes, ripped it right goddamn out of one of the dryers. But his boss was none the wiser and that spare dryer coin box had been gathering dust in the truck and the old coin box he removed from the dryer had enough quarters in it for their Saturday night bottle of Jack, so, he merely burped again, savoring the steak essence of the burp before deciding there were things his woman needed to know and things she didn't need to know.

She looked at the clock on the wall of the trailer. It was her favorite clock, the one she got when he took her all the way to Dollywood for a theme park vacation. A big clock with big numbers and big clock hands and enough room left over for a simulated authentic Dolly Parton autograph on the clock face.

She got out of her recliner and—very much on purpose, because it was Saturday night—she didn't bother to pull the waistband of her sweatpants up past the crack of her ass. Then she bent over just like the women in her man's porno magazines bend over the arms of sofas, at least she thought she was bending over the same way, she wasn't sure, it had been a few years since she had gone out to his tool shed behind the trailer and taken a peek because there were things she cared about and there were things she really didn't care about. Whatever got him fired up for Saturday night was fine and dandy. She had heard him messing around in the tool shed when she got home from work, and that was what she cared about, that he was out there getting primed up for her tonight.

Bent over the way she was, with her ass damn near right in his face, she worked the buttons on the television's control panel until the Antiques Roadshow appeared. At which point she hollered, "Ta da!" Then she started to recede toward her recliner.

"Love machine," he purred to her. "Please just bend back over a minute and shake your tail feather right in my face."

"Oh, hush now," she cooed. "Our show's on, honey."

"Hell, they don't even have the first son of a bitch up there with their worthless piece of shit yet. Come on, love machine, just gimme one shake."

She did as he had asked and she even put a little extra hip roll into it than she usually did. The way he growled at her made her shudder. Goddamn it to hell, she knew what that growl meant. Tonight, the way she figured it, he wasn't going to want her front door, he was after her marble peach, no doubt about it.

She straightened up and stepped aside from the television. Pulling up her sweatpants past the crack of her ass she thought, well, she had done too good of a job of letting that marble peach of a horse out of the barn. "You better pour me another one," she told him as she settled back down into her recliner and tossed back her glass like a gambler tossing dice at a craps table.

He poured her the next drink then another one for himself and by the time he had the Jack bottle on the floor next to his recliner, the first fortune seeker was showing off a painting to the Antiques Roadshow expert.

"Look at that son of a bitch," he told her, pointing the remote control at the television like a television weatherman pointing at looming storm clouds on a funky map. "Fuckin' dipshit," he said. "Guy's got a goddamn paint by numbers jalopy some Alzheimer's patient did in a hospital, now he's tryin' to scam a couple bucks with it."

"I betcha anything it's from the Renaissance period, worth a lot of money," she told him.

"Renaissance period?" he howled. "And just when

the hell was the Renaissance period, little miss smarty pants?”

“Du-uh!” she howled. “Everybody knows when was the Renaissance period. It was during the Renaissance!”

“You’re a strange bird,” he told her.

“You’re a strange bird,” she shot back.

“Well,” he said, pausing to growl at her like he had growled at her ass in full glory as the Antiques Roadshow came on the screen. “If you’re a strange bird and I’m a strange bird, and hell, it’s Saturday night after all, how about you and me make a little bet on this one.”

“That depends on the bet,” she said, and damn it, she was cursing herself for saying that, she knew good and goddamn well what the bet would be, because he never growled at her like that unless it was Saturday night and he wanted her marble peach instead of her front door.

“You win if it’s from the Renaissance period, I win if it’s a supposed to be somethin’ it ain’t piece of fuckin’ dog shit like I know it is,” he said.

“What do I win and what do you win?”

“You win, I wash all the goddamn dishes until next Saturday night. But if I win,” he said with a growl. “Then I get the marble peach tonight.”

“That don’t sound like a fair bet,” she said.

“It don’t?” he said. “Take a look what’s in the cupboards, doll. Nothin’ but cans of franks and beans and chili, that’s dinner all next week. You know good and goddamn well how you let the dishes stack up till Saturday mornin’ and just imagine how crusty and petrified all that slop will be by then.”

“Okay, you’re on,” she said. “Goddamn it to hell, it’s a bet.”

He swerved his head away from her and reached for the bottle of Jack without looking and goddamn, he was tumbling out of the recliner and had to catch himself on the arm of the recliner to keep from falling out and maybe tipping over the bottle of Jack. In so doing, he somehow pressed the mute button on the remote control that was miraculously working again, wherever it was now, maybe under his own ass, he wasn’t sure. But the goddamn television sound was off and it was jeopardizing the bet.

She leaped up out of her recliner like a track star pushing up out of the blocks. With her fingers working the control panel of the television she got the sound back on as the expert was giving the fortune seeker his final assessment.

“...certainly there is no doubt this is a painting in the Renaissance style, but clearly it was painted not too long ago, perhaps in an art class, presumably by a student of some kind,” was all they heard the expert say,

before they were leaning out of their recliners toward each other, damn near at each other's throats.

"The expert said it's in the Renaissance style," she hollered. "That makes our bet a draw!"

"Oh, draw squaw," he hollered back. "You're just tryin' to back out of givin' me the back door!"

"No, siree!" she howled. "It's a draw fair and square."

"What the hell do I get for a draw then?"

"You get the front door or nothin' at all later," she said, making him groan like a U.S.D.A. Prime Angus bull being turned into a steer.

During the Antiques Roadshow commercial break they each visited the bathroom. He snuck in first then as soon as she went in, she left the door open a crack and bitched at him for not using the air freshener spray and goddamn, she thought, whatever of his that was on its way into the trailer's septic tank had to be something that crawled up his ass and died during the week, because the noxious aroma in the bathroom was nothing like his usual Saturday night Jack-Daniel's-and-not-chewed-enough-and-still-sickly-fat-containing-porterhouse-steak kind of dump.

By the time the last fortune seeker was in front of the Antiques Roadshow expert the two of them were too far into the bottle of Jack Daniel's too early in the evening. The last fortune seeker was making an elaborate display of dialing the combination on his briefcase then producing a rather opaque box that looked to both of them like the box had held, at one time, before the box's emblem faded away, some Russell Stover candies.

"That dipshit looks like one of the poor bastards heading into the laundromat," he said. "Don't got shit from shine-ola."

"Don't be so sure of that," she said. "That's an old box he's taking those coins out of. Hell, the box is probably an antique too!"

"The fuckin' box used to hold his fishing lures till he left it out in the rain, dumb son of a bitch," he said. "Now he's using his simpleton tackle box to bring in some pieces of dog shit that don't amount to a hill of beans."

"You're a strange bird," she said.

"You're a strange bird!" he hollered back.

When they stopped bickering he remembered the remote control was working again. Fidgeting in the recliner and fishing around underneath his own ass, he found the remote control then turned up the volume just as the Antiques Roadshow expert plucked three coins out of the box. The expert stared at the three coins like a puberty-laden boy staring at a Playboy centerfold.

"Hush now, honey, the expert's gonna say somethin' finally," she said.

"Hush yourself, why the hell you think I've been turnin' the goddamn volume up!"

They were damn near levitating on the edges of the recliners, staying quiet as the mice they had set traps for under the trailer's kitchen sink. Then the Antiques Roadshow expert stopped drooling and started talking. "Well now, these three," the expert said, fingering the coins in a manner that made her remember the first time her Antiques Roadshow viewing partner had fingered her front door.

"These three coins are truly remarkable," the expert said. "They are from a special limited edition, a memorial tribute production, from the United States Mint in 1936. Battle of Gettysburg Silver Half Dollars. They are worth seven hundred and fifty dollars, each!"

"Well shit fire," he said, slapping the remote control on his thigh like a jockey whipping a horse to the finish line.

"Told you so, told you so, told you so!" she hollered. "What I wouldn't do right now for two thousand and two hundred fifty dollars!"

He didn't doubt her math. She was a cashier, after all. Seven-fifty times three, sounds about right, he thought. "What exactly would you do right now, with over two thousand bucks in your pocket?" he asked.

"Hell, I'd buy us one of those flat-bottom canoe boats," she told him. "So we could catch our fish out on the lake, instead of sitting on the shoreline in those old folding chairs, next to all the stumble bums from the other side of the tracks!"

"Bullshit to that," he bellowed. "I'd take us straight to Vegas for the love of Christ!"

"What the hell could we do in Vegas besides piss all that money down a slot machine drain?" she asked.

"Boss at The Handyman goes out there every year for a repairman's convention," he said. "Boss says they got flyers up all over town, for ladies of the evening that a couple can hire for a three-way."

"You're a strange bird," she said. "No way I'd ever mess around like that with a hooker. That's what it would be, a hooker. Lady of the evening my ass," she added. Then she wondered why she hadn't caught herself before saying ass. Maybe she had given him another opportunity to think about her marble peach.

"Well," he said, damn near growling. "You could watch me mess around."

THEY WERE DAMN
NEAR LEVITATING ON
THE EDGES OF THE
RECLINERS, STAYING
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THEY HAD SET TRAPS
FOR UNDER THE
TRAILER'S KITCHEN

SINK.

She snorted at him in response, and it was not the type of snort that made him think about her ass. “You tellin’ me you wouldn’t like to watch?”

“Hell no I wouldn’t want to watch,” she hollered. “But I’d listen to the two of you, maybe,” she cooed.

“Listen?” he mused. “What the hell you talkin’ about, listen?”

“Why sure,” she said, feeling the tingles between her thighs as she conjured the nasal sound of the butcher finishing his handyman business. “I’d just stay in the hotel room’s bathroom, crack the door a little, and I’d listen.”

“You’re a strange bird,” he said.

“No, you’re a strange bird,” she replied, hoisting herself out of her recliner and damn if she didn’t get her hand right there on his pecker and give it a good tug before he could block her hand. Then she was darting and dancing and tempting him to chase after her until he took the bait. He followed her around the trailer until she slowed her pace and headed straight for the bedroom because, after all, it was Saturday night.

wordmakers

Steve Biersdorf » *Lives and writes in Muskego, Wisconsin where he spends time on a return to writing literature.* [So much of what I really appreciate about solid, message-laced sci-fi, above all, a plot based in a plausible future society that still bears remnants of what came before it. This toys with nature/nurture, and the effects of an evolving culture on the potential evolution of we humans. I was not, of course, biased by the setting in Milwaukee... not that it is my home town...]

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).* [I have read several articles about man-made sea detritus that makes its way around the globe, but was taken by the twist of throwing in a human and a dash of Armageddon-ish-ness. This is a longer-than-typical piece from Every, and he uses every word to tell the tale.]

John Field » *Lives and writes in the Sonoma County wine country of sunny California.* [I was taken in by the parallels drawn between landscape and human existence. Terrific imagery to boot!]

John Grey » *Long-time contributor and widely published writer from Providence, Rhode Island.* [I suppose a theme has developed in this issue, as Grey's piece examines a departure/shift/transition, with a peculiar focus on what is meaningful... often not what is expected or promoted as the norm.]

Stephen R. Roberts » *Lives on eight acres of soil, pretending it to be Hoosier wilderness. He's been widely published and has knocked out five chaps, the latest being "Small Fire Speaking In The Rain."* [The last line of "Visitant" speaks volumes with regard to the views of many in our society. Different? Destroy it, then vindicate yourself. His second piece is a trippy bit of word-play whirling in absurdist imagery.]

Ashley Trace » *Lives and writes in Portland, Oregon.* [Two worlds collide and compassion begets calm until reality again rears its ugly head.]

roibeárd Uí-neill » *From Corydon, Indiana. His chap "A Cosmic Clown's Handbasket Blues" is now available from the author.* [A three-pack from a throbbing, beating, pulpy voice from Bible-thumpin' southern Indiana where not a damn soul sees his point of view. Although the consistency of critical thought, rejection of automata and quest for dignity make this a most human voice.]

James Valvis » *Winner of the Chiron Review poetry contest, this poet from Issaquah, Washington has three Pushcart nominations as well.* [Militancy and religion... ahhh, two fantastic themes. Line it up and shoot it down... but be clever about it!]

Christopher Williams » *Has had previous stories appear in Transfer and Verbsap while living and writing in Healdsburg, California.* [Seemless and dreamy peek into a melting mind. Or, is it a mind just like yours and mine, merely expressing itself more honestly? You decide.]

Robert M. Zoschke » *The author of "Door County Blues" and co-editor/writer for "Reflections Upon the 50th Anniversary of Jack Kerouac's On the Road." DCB was a best seller in the quirky-cool bayside/lakeside region of Wisconsin known as Door County, where he lives and writes.* [Terrific dialogue that could easily have slipped to hokey or sloppy, manages to keep the wit and realism at a peak. Grip your sticky little fly feet to the wall of this funky-but-all-to-normal trailer and check out the funky couple that are likely more honest and loving than the majority.]

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

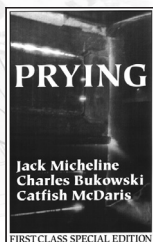
— Christopher M.

killer reads

Four-Sep Publications Chapbooks

PRYING - Prying is a special edition of First Class featuring the words of Jack Micheline, Charles Bukowski (unpubbed), and Catfish McDaris as well as images by Sinisa Dugonic (Belgrade), Jouni Vaarakangas (Finland), Carlos Serpas (Mexico), and Mike Tolento (USA).

Glossy cover/bamboo paper/28pp - \$5ppd



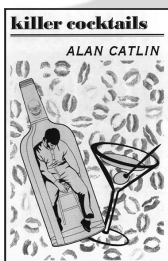
John Bennett

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

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

Alan Catlin

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



Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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

Alan Catlin

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

Stepan Chapman

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

Stepan Chapman

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

Christopher Cunningham

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

Ed Galing

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

Albert Huffstickler

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



Errol Miller

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

Michael Newell

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

Michael Newell

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

B.Z. Niditch

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

B.Z. Niditch

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

B.Z. Niditch

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

B.Z. Niditch

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

Charles Ries

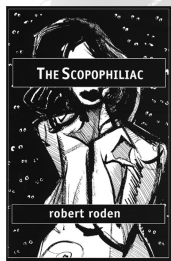
BAD MONK: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE - The Bad Monk, Charles Ries, marks shrewd, careful observations of the world around him, merging spirituality, a bit of beer, waffles and Milwaukee life. Bonus poem broadsheet! *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

Charles Ries

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

Robert Roden

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



Robert Roden

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

Spiel

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

Wade Vonasek

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

Wade Vonasek

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

A.D. Winans

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



cattle call



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

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

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

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

Send along a SASE.

Disposable/recyclable manuscripts are cool and mandatory.

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

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

www.four-sep.com

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

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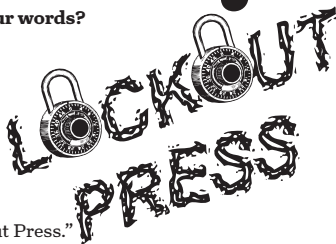
-Christopher M.

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) 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
100	24	24# White	329.65	3.30
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 and click on the "Lockout Press" link. Due to a serious prick out there, half-down is now necessary after the first proof.**