

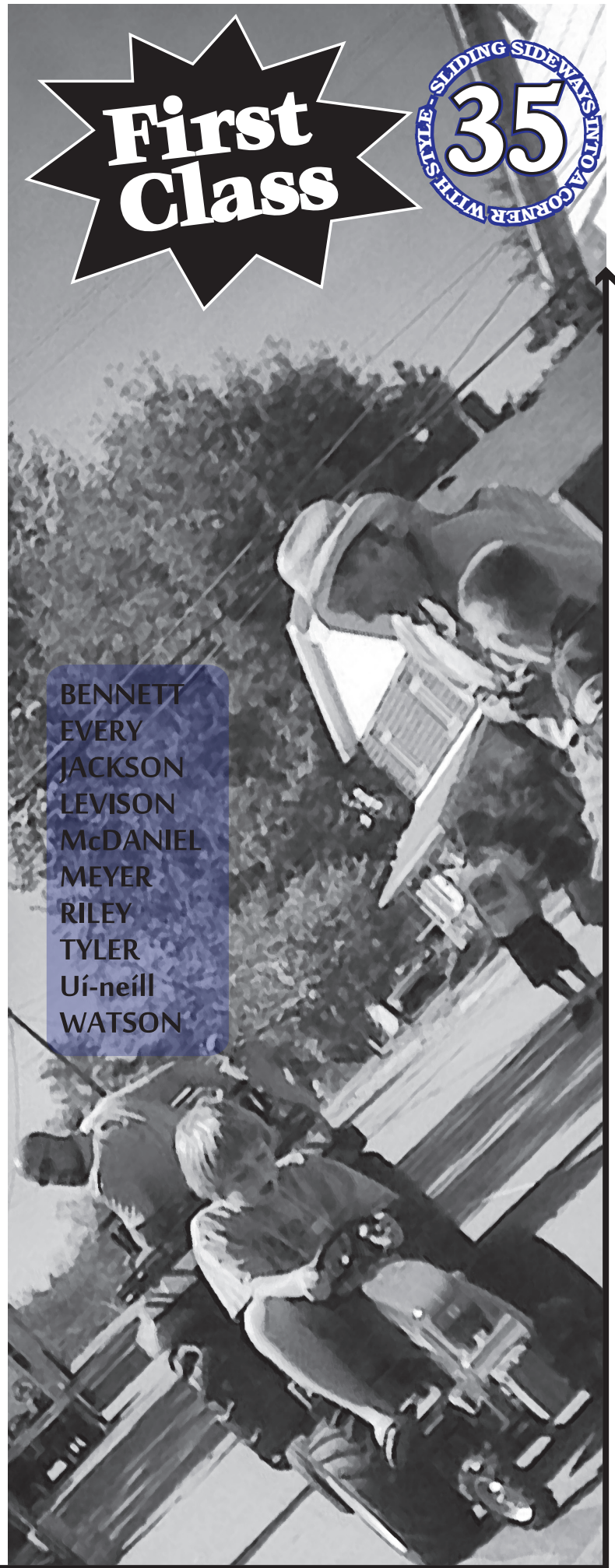
ISSUE THIRTY-FIVE
FIRST CLASS II of II.2010
SIX BUCKS

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and poetics – compiled with finely
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your back pocket...*

First Class

SLIDING SIDEWAYS INTO A CORNER WITH STYLE
35

BENNETT
EVERY
JACKSON
LEVISON
McDANIEL
MEYER
RILEY
TYLER
Uí-neill
WATSON





ISSUE THIRTY-FIVE
NOVEMBER, 2010



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Cover Art by Christopher M.

First Class #35 is chock-full-o-death. The figurative, the literal, the cultural – death, death, death! Is it my state-of-mind, which channels thematic similarities out of the submission pile, or is it the mood of the pile itself? How about all these death-obsessed writers out there, the best of which are all clinging to a common thematic thread? Whatever it is, its First Class, and I continue to be amazed upon the completion of each issue. Its got a mind of its own, and herein lies a piece of that pulpy consciousness.

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

Vanishing Point

John Bennett

It's snowing in Ellensburg. It's -2 degrees Fahrenheit.

It's not snowing in Sacramento, Prague, Hamburg or Athens. These places do not exist.

Wait a minute now, you say. Just hold your horses. I am in Sacramento. I am in Prague. And so you are.

For you, Ellensburg does not exist, and I am nothing more than a synaptic agitation in your brain that puts you in a foul mood with my cockamamie assertions.

This, of course, isn't all that important. I'm on my hill in my work van with darkness coming on, looking at a nasty day's work in the morning. Ellensburg is disappearing right before my eyes and taking Hamburg and Prague along with it.

If you're one of the few who reads these Shards instead of hitting delete you know which hill I'm on. Well, not really. The hill you're on is in Prague and probably looks very different. It's your hill, a transmuted gift from me to you. It has a view that's foreign to me. It's frequented by strange people who speak a strange language.

It takes an open mind to climb someone else's hill and make it your own. In this way people who do not exist tunnel thru invisible landscapes and breathe life into each other's mouths.

This has been going on since man's mind first stumbled upon language and will continue long after Ellensburg has vanished.

The Last Living Confessional Poet Sucks It Up & Gives Thanks...

John Bennett

This act is getting hard to pull off, driving up on the hill and slamming down words at the end of the day. Things are working against me, like the light, the weather and new configurations of everyday chaos that the weather brings on – freezing pipes, windshield wipers on the blink, the whispers and moans from the ghosts of Christmases past coming down thru the hatch I've pulled open to let hot air circulate into the attic and help keep the pipes from freezing. Overhead pipes, the Swede who built this place back in the 40s had a strange take on life.

But here I am with maybe ten minutes of light left. Haha! I wrote life for light and crossed it out. So here I am with ten minutes of light/life left and I'm trying hard to confess. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.* I learned to confess at an early age, one of the fringe benefits of being raised Catholic.

I stared at the thermometer outside the kitchen window from 8 a.m. until 9 this morning, and it never rose above zero. Got on the phone and called the help. Tagged two extra hours on their work week and gave them the day off.

This is not the season to be jolly for window cleaners in this neck of the woods, east of the Cascades in cattle grazing country. This is the season when we look into our hearts and wonder where we went wrong. At least my crew – musicians and artists and writers with bristly dispositions. We're a dying breed, the last of the John Henrys. We don't give a rat's ass for government programs, don't have health insurance, don't buckle up for safety. We work thru all kinds of weather and we work long and hard and lightning fast, but zero degrees Fahrenheit brings us to a halt.

Below me the streets of Ellensburg are now empty. It's a lonely scene, Wednesday night before Thanksgiving, and tomorrow it will be even more desolate, unless you're ensconced behind closed doors in a warm house surrounded by loved ones around a table heaped with food pretending over half the world isn't starving to death.

Meteor Shower

Gary Every

Sitting in a chair to watch a meteor shower
when a squirrel scampers up a tree
with an apple in his mouth
so much larger than his head
“Look there goes one!” the beautiful girl shouts
as a shooting star streaks the heavens
leaving a fiery trail across the sky
which quickly fades

Stella cadenti are the Italian words for shooting star
and I am reminded of a marble Renaissance statue
with two beautiful nubile nudes
twisting and spinning in a writhing spiral
of limbs, torso, and intertwining hair
the kind of beautiful loves a man wishes for
upon a shooting star.
“Ooooh” she points as an orange burst
burns brilliantly for a moment.
The Perseids delight us with a wonderful display
of meteor after meteor.

Estrella lluvia is the Spanish phrase
which translates literally as raining stars
as if this meteor shower is a storm of stars
falling upon the earth.
Quick better make wish after wish
as if we are bathing in dreams.
The squirrel rattles the branches and
the leaves above us
as he climbs to the treetop
still carrying the giant apple in his mouth
so much larger than his skull
and maybe the apple which bonked
Isaac Newton in the head
needed to be so much bigger to reveal
more than gravity.
Maybe the original apple needed to be bigger
to reveal more than temptation to Eve
needed to be so much bigger
to reveal everything the Tree of Knowledge
had to offer

Stella cadenti, estrella lluvia,
a storm of raining shooting stars
like bathing in dreams
“Look there goes another one,” she cries
with a voice like the song of a bird
as a path of fire temporarily burns the sky
like traces of heavenly lightning.

Bowie Knife Babble

Gary Every

They say that the original Bowie knife,
the one carried by the legendary Jim Bowie himself,
was carved out of a nickel iron meteorite.
That original massive Bowie knife must have been heavier
than a son of a gun
and all that crystallized space stone
held a sharp blade only microns thick,
cleaving through skulls, bison, renegades,
robbers and locomotives like they were butter.

I heard tell that Jim Bowie lent his infamous knife
to George Washington
who used it to cut down a cherry tree
and then murder Johnny Appleseed.
Then he baked a cherry pie
that was so gosh darned good
he just had to tell a lie
charming the flattery pants off
some beautiful girl named Eve

When the law got wind
of the death of Mr. Appleseed
the fugitive couple was forced to flee
the Garden of Eden
which was located somewhere in Virginia
and they ended up in Texas,
neighbors to General Sherman's renters
at the Alamo Hotel.
General Washington and his blushing bride
were so overcome with guilt
over the death of Mr. Appleseed
that they began planting apple trees
everywhere they went
little seeds of truth and liberty
sprouting all across the country

Well anyways, that ain't how they teach history in school
but its how they ought to
and I think about it every time I see a shooting star
blazing across the heavens
fire cutting through the darkness
like the blade of a knife.

I opened a book to this page

“Woodland Stream”

“City Trees”

“Work in the Woods”

I opened a book to this poem
the title, “Rupture”

“Untitled, No. 1”

“11:00 am”

“Forfeit”

its title, “Rupture”
yet no author.

“Plasma”

“The Suicide”

“End-rhyme”

but no author

“Untitled, No. 2”

“Rupture”

“Anti-Matter”

RUPTURE

I opened a book to this poem
its title, “Rupture”
but no author.

Then flipping forward and back
I found the other pages blank.

I was something of a miracle child, having cheated Death early; everything which came after that near-fatal mishap can be considered a dream, or gravy. You see, one day I put my tiny arm in a hollow log, and the venomous snake living there at the time bit me good. The head honcho in the emergency room said I’d never survive with all that rich poison coursing through my veins, but I proved that venal doctor wrong, to the point where he was the one who almost died – of shame.

rotting tree stump
rust-colored, burgundy-brown

Since I could memorize whole books of nursery rhymes, the adults assumed I was set for life. But the cow did not jump over the moon. It stepped on a landmine.

a bust: burgundy-brown
(Nature’s version of modern art)

In Catholic school we wore maroon jumpers and knee-socks; the boys, maroon blazers and ties. Yes, we were all little maroon mass-goers back then. Now we’re all atheists and divorcees.

(Nature an old hand at modern art)

Only when Death is breathing down our necks do we go scurrying back to religious rites. Except it's too little too late: no matter how fast we say the rosary, we're always one bead behind.

(Nature the oldest artist)
sketching silken lines

Anyway, we practiced the Palmer Method, indented margins the way Sister said, built up and broke down fractions until the bell, when we were free to go home and watch fifty hours of television after doing eight minutes of homework, as time in general passed slowly, oh so slowly. Now it goes by at a frightening clip, as if we were the subject of time-lapse photography.

WORK IN THE WOODS

From rotting tree stump
-burgundy-brown bust
(Nature an old hand at modern sculpture)
stretches sunlit cobweb
swath of silk fog
to the forest floor.

I did my chores, said my prayers, squandered my allowance, and swallowed live the platitudes foisted off on me, such as the one about someday having a spouse and a house. If my love of poetry came from nursery rhymes and illustrated classics, my love of Nature came from going out with my father (who'd wanted a boy) before dawn to hook fish and shoot birds.

stretch silk cables
to those below

In our house, the smoke alarm would chirp every thirty seconds, not because the battery was low, but to remind us that sin and consciousness were inextricably bound.

A single petal, stuck to the bottom
shines like a cheap medallion

Once upon a time, I was sure I'd arrive at the apex of my life, and that everyone would sense it from the serene look in my eyes. Yet decades have passed, and the windows of my soul, instead of glowing with inner light, are tired and bloodshot, warning other people to keep their distance.

my oily sweat attracts flies and ticks
birds screech indecipherable warnings

My heart began racing on borrowed time in one of those tangents when all I thought about was living comfortably ever after. I fell in love with a man who had similar illusions, who gave me diadems and took me out for prime rib. I was certain the royal treatment would last

I tightrope a file of wet, black rocks
I go from the outer to the inner dream.

forever, until he started cheating, coming around less, then disappeared altogether. My reaction was to sit

home alone in my apartment-islet, cringing and saddened, drinking canned beer, not bathing, getting itchy crabs. Yes, I was on the slow road to nowhere, right in my own living room.

My name I swear I hear
but once I'm sure I doubt again

Eventually I met someone else, and experienced married life, which included a mortgage that we couldn't have paid off in a million years and a husband who couldn't keep his dick in his pants. So I did have a house and a spouse, if that's what you want to call them.

WOODLAND STREAM

A petal, stuck to the bottom
reflects sunwater like a green medal-
lion

something of human value
a life held down by a few grains of sand.

Minnows gather to decide
which shallow to inhabit next
jackdaws in oaks and poplars
screech two-syllable warnings:
"tarry" or "carry" or "Mary"
I swear I hear
but once I'm sure I doubt again.

My oily sweat attracts flies and ticks
Fall replaces Summer
like one fish swallowing another
both youth is gone and my desire for it.

To cross stream and journey on
I tightrope a file of wet, black rocks.
Toeing glints of stonelight
I go from the dreamer
to the one being dreamed.

Then it was me who was late for an appointment in flammable Time, who swallowed epochal mists rolling in off the fields, who charted dark stars and secret fissures in the night, who incessantly yanks the lamp chain on and off, signaling who knows what to whom, and who—

"Who, who, who," you sound like an owl.

from the dreamer to the dreamed
through one veil of light

Who does?

There, you did it again!

sunwater erasing my tracks

And so here I am, another gal pecking away at a keyboard or cash register, scrounging for meaning in a reduced milieu, making piss-poor withdrawals from the ATM, barely enough to attend Happy Hour and belt down two dreams for the price of one, then stagger back to my apartment, where everything is drably realistic and positively absurd. By day, long

bodies sun themselves on narrow terraces; by night, feeble attempts are made at sleek seclusion and slow-strain excitement, as floor lamps stand guard over accoutrements, and lemon-lime spotlights burn in the courtyard. Then again, what else can you expect in the Country of the Ineluctable, where poets are suspended in formaldehyde after having written their Ode to Incomprehensibility.

There you go again

Sunday mornings you'll find me, not on the way to church, but condemned to another day of work, as I pour myself take-out coffee in a tall paper cup and snap on the plastic lid, thus sealing my fate.

There you go again
confusing feeling with being

Maybe one week a year I can make it up to Lake Insulin and watch the flat shadows made by bushy clouds race over acres of water. The other fifty-one, it's Point A to Point B, and right back to A again.

lamb intestines twined around a stick
soggy leaves stuck inside your gutter

Needless to say, out comes whatever cure that's handy: any pill, powder, or weed; the closest shot glass, needle, or spoon. Anything to attain that pliant state of mind, where everything outside looks like it's underwater.

houses hanging off cliffs
wait for the final tremor

Some say your life is a book, with you as subject, living out all 500 pages from Preface to Index; every scene, sequence, pattern and transition; each concise phrase and run-on sentence. And once all these invisible pages have been written, revised, read, re-read, and regurgitated, the theme becomes apparent: that we never got the embossed message, never fathomed the whole nor the sum of its parts.

near Cuenca
a limestone formation
called, "The Enchanted City"

And how could we, when individual and collective episodes no longer have the slightest relation? Evidently, this isn't the proper time to render meanings blow by blow and piece by piece; merely a time to walk the deserted streets, feigning indifference.... I could go on and on with these negative affirmations, and unfortunately, I do...

a limestone formation
called "La Ciudad Encantada"

I've tried to turn my trials and tribulations into a source of strength, but by all indications, I'm slipping: I have my first grey hair, and my natural part has changed to off-center, whereas before it used to divide my head perfectly.

UNTITLED

Does it all seem to make no sense, or does it just seem, period? Once I started to write a poem on that very subject, but my hand spasmed up into a claw. So then I fashioned a mask out of paper maché, complete with feathers that got ruffled for the tiniest reason. Except the mask was always sliding off, since my true nature is that of a bloodworm, squiggling in the mud, who would be gnashing its teeth if it had any.

UNTITLED, NO.1

There you go again
confusing “feelings” with your heart
when the two are far from lovers

Only neighbors’ leaves
stuck inside your gutter

Only lamb intestines twined around
a stick: *zarajos*, famous in Cuenca
where people live in houses hanging off
cliffs and a sickening sweet liqueur
...35 kilometers from town
a limestone formation called,
“The Enchanted City”

Only fingers holding up the head
of your decapitated story.

afternoon: orange tree limbs against a blue sky

twilight: black limbs on grey

midnight: car beams flash, revealing grey limbs on
black air. And the whole time my mind, that little two-
faced voice, chatters on and on...

a sickening sweet liqueur: *resoli*

How strange everything is... I mean my actually hav-
ing been born at all, and actually having eaten fish and
chips on Gibraltar...

your neighbors’ dry leaves
crusty inland conches

I used to follow swarms of lightning bugs like pillars of
fire, but they too led me back to this redoubt of a city,
where noble sentiments cannot thrive, only greed and
violence in their purest forms, as artificial moonlight
turns the streets to green cheese. Now I come home
every night, toss my change in a broken glue pot, and
lay me down on a bed whose slats are old gunwales,
after a day in which, once again, my a priori knowledge
was impaled by actual experience. There’s no such
thing as sleep, only the feeling I’m about to burst, with
no star or starfish to guide me.

alcohol, cigarettes, beer:
my three cheers!

So this is what happens when the right brain knows
not what the left is doing. Then you try to fill the chasm
with Buddhism, Impressionism, Existentialism, As-
trology, and Anthropology, any dogma or doctrine to

back up hindsight.

subways cars: mobile snuff boxes

Even when I manage to swallow my pride, I vomit it right back up, as I just can't live without it. Then a bony matron comes over her tray of wicked drinks and phosphorescent pills, who has half a mind to tell me I don't stand half a chance. I say it's not like I wanted the world on a silver platter, or even John the Baptist's head, only a chunk of Ahab's whale, grilled to perfection.

the dyslexic cat is out of the bag

Things might be better if they weren't so strangely familiar. Sometimes I swear the words I'm speaking aren't even mine, only phrases from a movie or commercial that I repeat unconsciously.

Maybe you said them in another life.

Yeah, right... Wait a second – I know where I heard all this before – they were practice dialogues in a foreign language textbook... *Easy Esperanto* I think it was called.

You speak Esperanto?

Not really. I took classes for a couple months, then quit. I got tired of studying a universal tongue that nobody speaks.

that rabid cat is out of the bag

Then I took to singing ditties about the price of salvation and the synthesis of opposites, hoping that somewhere in the cacophony there'd be ideas others and myself could semi-seriously entertain. But who was I kidding?

11:00 am

By the time I awake
the day is in progress.

Someone's torn open the envelope
millions are rifling its contents.
That rabid cat is out of the bag.
Subway cars: Pandora's boxes.

I guess it's up to me to put everything back.
Luckily, I have the materials:
Winston, Heineken, Absolut,
valium, lithium, coke.

There, that should do it.

The union of sterilities only made things more diffuse.
Then I found myself perched on a number line, plotting my distance from zero.

This is truth, and half-truth; and a hippopotamus pushing a pea covered with grandma's spittle.

Remember that April she was baking a pumpkin pie and the smoke alarm went off?

What, did she burn the crust?

No, it was because she was baking it out of season.

I don't recall that, I must have been too busy using my rosary as an abacus.

I think... I opine... I think... I opine...

As a matter of fact, I can't even remember the last time I prayed.

I think... I opine... I think... I opine...

Though everybody's saying that soon a savior will ride into town, if not on the back of an ass, then on a local commuter train.

Me, and I, we have these feelings...

In the meantime, some of our various selves have gotten a stipend for waiting around disoriented at the bus station. The rest of us didn't get anything for our dime store philosophy.

Me, and I, we have these feelings...

Trash blown up against a cyclone fence like a wave stopped dead. Tree branches nodding like horses' heads.

Me, myself, and I - Ha,ha, ha!

'Twere it all only a dream, it might start to make sense. For now, somebody pass me the skin cream for my chafed flanks.

Once upon a time, we vowed to turn this town upside down. But the town did it to us instead, lifting us up by our ankles and shaking all the money from our pockets, turning us into subsistence mannequins sprinting from door to door in Officeland, our heads jangling back and forth.

Ah well, time to point the crooked finger back at ourselves and plunge into rarefaction.

Wait, the bottom of the barrel might hold one more insipid lie.

Nope, all we have left are the serious misgivings engraved on faux marble facades and the derivative graffiti on mom and pop stores.

Where are the tonal and textural variations the chameleons promised?

Who knows... And by the way, Virgil sent us a telegram saying he won't be our guide, but that we can choose between Henny Youngman, Ida Lupino, or F.W. Dixon.

Terrific, in that case I don't know whether to grind millstones into rosary beads or worship the pus in my arm.

Well do something quick - Cinderella's credit cards all expire at midnight and chipped caryatids have already started singing The Supremes' *Greatest Hits*.

Oh Miss... Miss... Hey you, touched by your own pathos and bathos - that door leads to Hades, not the rest rooms.

That rabid cat is out of the bag, eating processed cheese

like placentas.

No one drop the ball now.

The egg-yolk light makes all our antics seem even more paradoxical.

No one drop the baby now.

Dreams and drugs haven't produced the desired effect.

One moment your life is a thick tapestry, the next, it's dangling by the thinnest thread. And this angry, tedious present keeps reappearing, like ground through melting snow.

THE SUICIDE

Street lamps buzzed.
Night asphalt retained
afternoon heat.

She flicked away her cigarette.

The wind took a few last puffs.

In medias resin: quicklime faces.

No such thought.

Only images dissolving, growing into others.

Only leering customers, food stains on their T-shirts.

Only...

Luckily, I have the immaterial

Mary Weiss

1944-1991

*Wind become word
word become wind
here lie my bones
in the pages I've sown.*

cu ne if or m de vo id
of fl es h me my se lf an d
I ha ha ha
su n wa te r
st on el ig ht
pr o
bo no
ch if fo n
ex pi at ed ch or us
bl ac k va ul t of be gr ud gi ng
es pe ra nt o
si ng in g
ca ry at id s
wo rd le ss fo ra y
in to me di um

bl ue sh ad ow
is th at de ep en ou gh
fo r yo ur re ve ri e
th e
ve ra nd ah
of co nc lu si on
s
be yo nd
be li ef
no me re
ex pr es si on
mx rx tx rx xm
xn
sc xl pt xr
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cx nk xr
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yx xr
sx rf xx t
xf
xx xx xx xx x
xx xx x
xx
xx
x
x

UNTITLED, NO. 2

My memory of Heaven:
A pallor, a lull
six naked pygmies
at the Dead Giants Ball.

Apple Pie

Judith Ann Levison

I iron wanting it to melt the cloth
Church is just a gulp I grip
With dice in my hands

You shouldn't demand a kid to kill

In his Sunday suit sliding down the stair
Rail I wanted to cry from childhood joy
I don't want to cry anymore for I will swell
The river
Put him in a canoe and shove it away
Forever
He always liked to pull the stem off an apple
Now he pulls something off a hand grenade

He liked poetry, brunettes, and snow

Do you think these will save him?
Hell no, my child is changed forever
He is now with friends picked off
Like leaves in the wind
Until as limbs they are gently laid together
Wrapped in blankets of odd comfort

And I am in fatigues running through rubble
With an apple pie

From the corner of his eye, Ron Sharkan caught a flash of movement. Hands, arms, and back pressed against the wall, he spun his head that way. To his left, a pigeon had just landed on the ledge, and two more sailed down beside it. Ron turned his head forward, and moving only the muscles in his neck, looked down, slowly. On the sidewalk five floors below, people crowded the pavement, like ants on melted ice cream. Probably, they all had their heads craned back.

It was three-thirty by his watch, and enough June sunlight fell over the buildings across the street to warm his balding scalp. To his right, a raspy voice spoke. “Mr. Sharkan, me again, Lieutenant Jaworksi.”

Ron turned his head. “Leave me alone! You start out here and I jump.” The cop, in his early forties, his black hair in a pompadour, was leaning out the window. “Nobody’s gonna come out there, Mr. Sharkan. I just want you to come back in.”

Ron shook his head. “No way! Leave me alone!” Lieutenant Jaworski leaned more in Ron’s direction, his jowly face somber.

“Let’s talk about this, Mr. Sharkan. You don’t want to do this.”

Ron sidled two steps further from the window, sending the pigeons fluttering away. He snarled at the cop, “You’re not helping.”

Thin lips pressed, Lieutenant Jaworski moved his head in a small arc back and forth. He pulled himself out of the window.

Staring straight ahead, Ron gulped. Yes, he thought, I do want to do this. If things weren’t fouled up enough before, how do I explain this crap to the kids and the ex?

Across the street, someone stood in a window on his level, moving a poster board up and down. It was hand-lettered:

CALL ME

312-879-0701

Call you? Are you kidding? His iPhone was in his pants pocket, though, as usual. The person in the window – a slim woman, he thought – moved the poster up and down again, then grasped it in one hand and waved with the other. She caught the poster in both hands again and shook it.

He shook his head. She bobbed her head up and down, then moved her sign the same way. He shook his head no again, but found his hand creeping into his pants pocket. He eased the iPhone out and held it in front of his pot belly. Resting it in his right palm, he dialed the number and raised the phone to his ear.

On the first ring, she dropped her poster board and

answered. "You're drawing quite a crowd." Her voice was young, halfway between chirpy and a ditzzy drawl. His daughter had a friend from rural Wisconsin, who sounded a lot like that. Not that he saw much of his daughter or her friends.

He cleared his throat. "What do you want?"

"What assholes. They'd all love to see you jump, am I right?"

He swallowed. "I guess. What do you want?"

"Fun-lovers." Her tone mixed tolerance and derision. "Here for the show. You really want to jump?"

He stared at her across the street "What do you care?"

"Oh," she chirped, "just curious. Like, why would a guy jump off a building?"

Good question. Because he needs to change his antidepressant? Because his kids have been strangers for a decade, and his wife has divorced him? Because twenty-two years as a commodities floor-trader feel like a wasted lifetime? Because he's 53, fears old age, and drinks alone nights, watching TV? Because back in his twenties, he'd eked out a living as an artist and turned his back on it? Because he hates The Chicago Board of Trade Building and the ground on which it stands? Because the human race wants to bury itself in garbage and sludge? Because the past five days' price movement in soybean futures has left him virtually bankrupt?

He cleared his throat "Oh, this and that. You know."

"No, I don't," she drawled. "Everything's fucked up, I know. Everybody's fucked up. But I don't get suicide."

"No?" he growled. "How old are you?"

"I'm thirty-seven. Why?"

He stared across the abyss at her. "Married?"

Her voice was matter-of-fact "I'm a lesbian."

"And?"

"I'm not married."

In his peripheral vision he noticed the pigeons were back, skittering along the ledge. He shifted the phone to his left hand. "What do you do over there?"

"Data entry."

"How long?"

"I've been here seven years."

"Christ." He lowered the phone, lifted it back. "You have no one. You work a dead-end job. You don't understand suicide?"

She chuckled. "I'm single. I didn't say I had nobody."

From Ron's right, Lieutenant Jaworksi's hoarse voice pleaded. "Mr. Sharkan, please. This has gone on long—"

Ron twisted his neck and glared at Jaworski's head

and broad shoulders protruding from the window. Ron shook his phone at the Lieutenant. "I'm on the phone here, all right? Leave me the hell alone. I see you again, I will jump, you fuck!"

He turned away and spoke into the phone. "Yeah, well, what do you have to live for?"

"I do art?"

He held up his right hand and looked at her in the window. "You asking me or telling me?"

He thought he could see her nod.

"Telling you. I do art. Maybe that's a reason to live."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

Her voice rose. "I'm gonna send you some of my art, from my blog. Can you receive it?"

"Sure."

In a few seconds, a series of paintings began to appear on his iPhone screen. To his eyes, they were ugly: a would-be Picasso's illustrations for Lovecraft tales. At the end of them, a photo appeared on screen.

"That's me." Her tone was self-deprecating.

She had brown hair in a bad pageboy, black plastic glasses held together on one side with tape, and a slightly wide jaw. Her mouth was stretched in a tight little grin, her eyes showing the slightest hint of sparkle, or were they just glassy?

"What do you think of the paintings?" she asked.

"Oh, interesting stuff." He glanced over at Jaworski's open, empty window. "Really...unique."

"Yeah," she said smugly, "I sell some of my stuff."

No accounting for tastes, he thought.

"Hey," she said, "how about you send me your picture?"

He drew back. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"So I can see what you look like?"

He held the phone away for a second before barking into it. "I'm trying to decide whether to kill myself. You want me to send you my picture?"

"What could it hurt? I'll put it up on my blog." He looked up at the sky over the street; it was split evenly now between fat, puffy clouds, grey at the edges, and patches of blue. "Oh," he snarled, "so that's what this is about? A story for your blog? You probably want me to jump, too."

"I'M TRYING TO DECIDE
WHETHER TO KILL MY-
SELF.
YOU WANT ME TO SEND
YOU MY PICTURE?"

Her voice was no longer a drawl. “No, no. Not at all. I don’t want you to jump. I mean, that’s your decision. I’m just curious. Like I said.”

He noticed that another taller person had appeared beside her in the window and seemed to be holding something pointed at him. A video camera? “What the hell,” he demanded, “You’re filming me?”

“Yeah,” she said, like a kid asking to stay up late. “Do you mind? It’s my friend, Carlos.”

He shook his head. All she wanted was a scoop for her pathetic blog. Like the throng on the trading floor and the fun-lovers down below him, she was out for hers. Well, what had he expected, a good Samaritan? He shook his head again. “Okay, I’m gonna send you my picture. For your blog. Aren’t you kind of old for that blogger shit?”

She ignored the question. “Oh, great. Thanks.”

He took his picture, sent it to her, and then asked, “Know what I think the last straw may have been?” He waited.

After four or five seconds, she said, “No. What?”

“I was a painter, too. We have that in common. I mighta been good, eventually, but bit by bit, I gave up. I never forgave myself.”

Her voice took on an edge. “That was the last straw?”

He glanced down at the crowd. “No, but at lunch time I ran into this guy Lloyd. A sculptor I knew from when I was painting. He stuck with it all these years, just getting by. Guess what? He envied me. Wished he’d done something to make some money.”

“Ohhh...That was it.”

“That was fucking it, yeah.” He used to fantasize about the happiness that might’ve been his. Seeing Lloyd had killed even that.

He glanced at the swarm down on the sidewalk and felt the air go out of him and his shoulders slump.

Once he saw a TV show about chimps. A troop of them on the jungle floor spotted red monkeys up in the trees and went nuts. Several males leaped up, after the monkeys. One wrested a baby monkey from its parents, ripped its head off, and began to feast on the carcass. The chimps on the ground all squirmed and quivered with bloodlust. Down on the sidewalk, the crowd reminded him of them. So what did that make him?

He looked up and with his free hand, pointed across the street at his caller. “How about we collaborate? Performance art.”

“What?”

“I’m going to do a genuine swan dive for you. I think I remember how. I’m gonna sail off this ledge like an Olympian. You film it. I’ll send you something good

from my phone, too.”

Her voice rose to a wail. “Oh, man.” She paused. “I’m not...”

He turned his iPhone onto videotape, sent the signal to her, and glanced at the pigeons still marching up and down the ledge. Maybe they’d rise up alongside him, when he flew out. Imagining his swan dive, he rose to his tiptoes and spread his arms.

From the window, Lieutenant Jaworski barked, “Don’t do it!”

Ron whirled his head and shoulders to glare at the policeman, and lost his balance. He tumbled from the ledge, arms and legs flailing. As he plummeted, he pointed his phone down. Pavement rushing up to him, he screamed, “Are-you-getting-this?”

The Old Bird Rages

Wm. Meyer

Sitting by himself
on the power-line
at Exxon #16 Speedy Stop

he begins to think
and thinking, squawk
softly, blinking

at his predetermined life.

The skies are filled with
gloopy glop, lost friends;
and streets are filled with

trash and cigarette butts,
potato-chip bags, foil-
shiny, reflecting now his

thin, stringy neck.

On top of that, he spits—
his feather-ruffling
never attracted a mate;

some sharp-beaked crows
drove him out of his
comfortable inherited nest

in Palestine, East Texas.

The only thing left is to
curl claws up, become a black leaf,
or fly, drop shit-bombs on

Am-flag pickups parked at the
Bayou Club Cock-Fights
in Vinton, Louisiana: then,

sign the black cross, rigor-mortis.

Julie was reading a magazine when someone near her croaked

Excuse me. I wonder if you can help me.

Julie glanced up. The woman standing on the other side of the desk had to be a hundred years old, maybe more. She was short, barely tall enough to see over the counter. Her scalp winked through a thin frost of white hair; her deeply-wrinkled brownish-orange skin looked like a city map, all tangled lines and weird blotches, her pale green eyes winking at Julie like twin ponds.

Smiling as she had been taught, Julie put down the magazine and said

I'll try, Ma'am. Have you lost something?

The woman looked around, as if what she were searching for might be floating in the air somewhere nearby. She asked

Is this the lost and found? A nice young man told me that this was the lost and found

and Julie said

Yes Ma'am, it is. What did you lose? Can you describe it for me?

but the woman said

I can't see very well anymore. But he said it was back here, by the drinking fountain

and Julie said

Yes Ma'am. The water fountain's right over there. This is the lost and found. My name's Julie. If you can tell me what you lost or maybe, like, describe it, I'll see if anybody's turned it in.

The old woman shuffled toward the water fountain, her baby steps covering only a few inches at a time. She spoke—perhaps to Julie, perhaps to herself—saying

These hot summer days, my throat gets so dry

and Julie said

Oooooookay

and shrugged. She glanced over at her sister Rita, who sat behind the refunds and exchanges desk. Julie rolled her eyes. Rita laughed quietly and shook her head, a gesture that might have meant

These old people, whatcha gonna do?

Julie envied Rita. Tomorrow they would exchange desks; they switched every so often just to make things more interesting without volunteering for any real work. But by tomorrow, the little old lady would be gone. And with Julie's luck, everyone from Pinedale to Mountain Home would stampede in and demand a refund or an exchange. At this rate, it would probably

take her all week to finish the magazine.

The old woman was making her way back to the counter, still shuffling along, saying

I love this store. I used to shop here when Titus Ludlow owned it. Handsome young man, he was. And very nice and Julie said

He was my grandfather. My Dad runs the place now.

The old woman's green eyes lit up, fiery and bright like emeralds. She said

Is that so?

She reached across the counter and touched Julie's hand; the old woman's skin felt cold and wet, in spite of the heat. Julie grimaced, but the woman did not seem to notice. She said

Wonderful man, that Titus. We courted when we were young, did you know that?

and Julie said

Uh, no, I didn't.

Yes, this was going to take all day. Julie pulled her hand away and produced a large cardboard box from under the counter. She said

Here's everything that's been turned in all summer. Maybe we can find whatever you lost?

The woman smiled and began searching through the box. She picked up each item, held it up close to her eyes, turned it over and over as if trying to memorize its shape, put it back in the box. Sometimes she picked up an item more than once, sometimes even twice in a row. As she examined a ball-point pen for the fourth or fifth time, she said

I've never seen you before. Did you work here when Titus ran the place?

and Julie said

No Ma'am. Grandpa died when I was seven. I only work here when school's out. If you'll tell me what you're looking for, I'll try to help you

but the old woman only said

It must be a very interesting job. Saving what other people lose

and Julie sighed, saying

No. It's really boring. When we're in school, one person runs both of these desks and the cash register too. My Dad just lets us work here to earn some extra money.

The old woman nodded and resumed her search, picking up the same items that she had already checked and discarded at least twice. Julie thought

This is ridiculous. I refuse to stand here all day. Whatever she's looking for just isn't there. And what's this courting stuff? Is she talking about sex? Because if I'm

gonna hear about somebody's sex life, it better come from that issue of Cosmo.

So she said

Ma'am? Excuse me?

but the old woman said

It was on this very counter, if I recall, back in the forties. Titus and me. A Saturday, hot like this one, and everyone else had gone home. He was closing the store and he said to me, Lola, you sure are a pretty little thing, and I said, Why Titus Ludlow how you talk

but Julie broke in

Ma'am, can you please, please tell me what you've lost? I've got other things to do.

The old woman smiled, her lips pursed together, so thin that they almost disappeared. She said

Why certainly, dear. I'm looking for my soul.

Julie rolled her eyes and asked

Can you be more specific, ma'am? You mean a shoe sole? Some soul music, like maybe a CD? Soul food? Oh-soul-oh-me-oh?

but the old woman laughed, a high cackling sound that reminded Julie of that witch on the old Bugs Bunny cartoons, and said

Why, no, dear. I mean my immortal soul.

Julie blinked, stared, swallowed. The old woman just watched her, calm and waiting. And Julie thought

Immortal soul. Right, of course. Obvious, really. Why didn't I think of that before?

She said

Now wait a minute. Let me see if I've got this straight. You're looking for your immortal soul

and the old woman said

Yes. You see, I took it out of my purse this morning when I paid for a pair of stockings. I haven't seen it since, so I must have lost it here

and Julie said

Uh huh. Dad!

Her father stood out front, chatting with Mrs. Layfield. If he heard her call, he gave no indication. Julie decided that she had better distract this woman until her father arrived. She said

IT MUST BE A VERY
INTERESTING JOB. SAV-
ING
WHAT OTHER PEOPLE
LOSE... AND JULIE
SIGHED

Okay, uh, well, what did it look like? Your soul, I mean.

She motioned to Rita and pointed to their father. Rita nodded and headed for the front. The woman was saying

I don't see it here. Is this all you have?

Believing that she was speaking to a lunatic, Julie said

Yes Ma'am. What did you say it looked like?

The woman smiled, her teeth painfully white and somehow wolfish, and said

It's a chunk of varnished oak, with a perfectly round hole in the middle. A square peg made of the purest birch is wedged in the hole and protrudes from both sides. Doesn't that sound wonderful?

and Julie said

Now hang on. You're telling me that your soul is a square peg in a round hole?

and the woman said

Why yes. Isn't everyone's?

Rita hurried back to the lost and found, their father in tow. On seeing the old woman, he forced a smile that looked as genuine as the mannequins in the display window. He laid a hand on her shoulder; she turned, looked up at him, and smiled again. The expression seemed to be her instinctual reaction to any situation. Julie felt sure that if a car exploded outside, the woman would smile and launch into a story about how many times she got laid during the Depression. Julie's father said

I see you found my youngest daughter, Mrs. Averrignon.

The woman nodded at him and turned back to Julie, saying

Actually, only women my age have souls that look like mine, and there are precious few of us left. I don't know why they take that shape. Did you know that the souls of men my age look like Dadaist paintings?

and Julie replied

Um, no

but Mr. Ludlow stood fidgeting in the background, frowning at Julie, an expression that meant he had other things to do and wanted to end this conversation as soon as possible. So Julie continued

My father here owns the store now. Maybe he can help you?

Mrs. Averrignon frowned suspiciously. She looked back at Julie's father again. Then her face brightened. She said

Oh! You're the young man who helped me find the lost and found!

and he said

Yes. I'm Trenton Ludlow, Mrs. Averrignon. Remember?

but the old woman said

It's funny how I was lost and you found me and took me to the lost and found. I guess you never know what you're going to lose, or how you'll find it

and Mr. Ludlow replied

I guess not. Exactly what have you lost?

and Julie broke in

What she's looking for is her immortal soul.

Mr. Ludlow's eyebrows raised; he glared at Julie for a moment, but then he saw that Mrs. Averrignon was nodding, as if Julie had just said the most sane, reasonable thing she had ever heard. So he winked at Julie and said

Well, I can't say that anyone ever lost one of those in here before. Did you look in the box?

and Julie said

Yes. But we didn't find any square pegs in round holes so Mr. Ludlow said

I see. Mrs. Averrignon, have you tried going to church? That's where most people with lost souls go

She narrowed her pale eyes, scowled, and said

Young man, there's a great deal of difference between being lost and being damned. My soul has merely been misplaced.

Mr. Ludlow's face turned red. He sputtered for a moment, as if he were trying on responses and finding them all too small for his tongue, and when he finally replied, all he said was

I see.

They all stood there, silent and uncomfortable, while Mrs. Averrignon picked through the box yet again. Eventually, she pushed it across the counter and said

I don't see it, but I'm positive I lost it in here. If someone turns it in, you'll keep it for me, won't you?

and Julie replied

Absolutely

so Mrs. Averrignon said

Thank you

and began shuffling toward the door, six inches at a time. Mr. Ludlow called out

Have a good day

but she did not reply or look back. Watching her go, he said

Lord give me strength. It's going to be one of those weeks.

Playfully elbowing her father in the ribs, Julie said

I think she loves you

but Mr. Ludlow said

She's been coming here since before I was born. That kind of loyalty deserves some measure of patience.

He stalked off, disappearing into the stock room. Julie watched Mrs. Avernignon's progress until the little old woman disappeared from sight. Then she picked up her magazine and tried to find her place, determined to finish the article before closing.

The next day Julie sat behind the refunds and exchanges desk, adding receipts. She had slept little and felt nasty, as if she could cheerfully slaughter anyone who so much as said hello. She had dreamed briefly and vividly, the kind that floats through the waking mind like fog even late into the morning. In this dream she sat behind the refunds and exchanges desk, exactly where she was sitting now. On top of the lost and found desk (behind which Rita was now sitting and working a crossword puzzle), Mrs. Avernignon and her grandfather Titus Ludlow were screwing their brains out. But neither of the lovers appeared as they must have on that long-ago day that Mrs. Avernignon seemed so anxious to revisit. Instead, Mrs. Avernignon still looked a thousand-and-something years old, and Titus was a rotting corpse.

Most horrible of all, though, was the sentence that the old woman kept repeating, over and over like a mantra: Good old Titus—it's no square peg, but it will do.

With the memory of this dream still clinging to her consciousness like fetid morning breath, Julie had come to work. She was adding the receipts for the fourth time, mainly because she had nothing else to do. She had no stock to put out, no customers, no magazine; Rita had even taken the morning crossword after trashing the rest of the newspaper. Bored, disturbed, needing a distraction, Julie wished desperately that she could forget the weird conversation with the little woman.

Then a voice said

Some people think that the shape of the soul is representational or symbolic, but I don't think so.

Julie winced. She recognized the voice, and she knew the owner of that voice stood to her immediate left. She kept adding the receipts, pretending that she had not heard, hoping that Mrs. Avernignon would go away. But when Julie finally glanced up, the old woman was standing there, thin as paper, as patient as time. As soon as they made eye contact, Mrs. Avernignon started up again, shuffling forward as if on cue, saying

No one really understands the shape. Nobody that I've ever met anyway. One of the most interesting things to do is ask someone to explain the shape of a soul. You never know what you'll hear.

Julie said

Goddamit

under her breath. Why was this happening to her? Rita was working the stupid lost and found; why couldn't the old woman go pester her? Still, her father would kill her if she just ignored the old bat, so she smiled as widely as she could, her mind screaming

FAKE! FAKE!

and then she said

Can I help you?

but Mrs. Avernignon ignored her and said

Oh, some smarty-pants have come up with fancy names for things that they only pretended to understand—oversouls and infinite-I-Ams and nirvana—but I don't think anyone on this earth really knows anything about it. Most people can't even recognize their own souls, and by the time they learn how, well, they're too old to care about theories.

Straining all the muscles in her face to keep her fake smile in place, Julie said

Mrs. Avernignon, is there something you'd like to exchange?

The old woman laughed and said

You can't exchange your soul, dear. I don't think this store carries my size

so Julie said

Gee, I guess you're right. And unless you have the receipt, I couldn't give you a refund. Store policy and all. Plus the item was lost, and we can't refund money or give store credit if the customer just loses whatever they buy

but the old woman quietly said

I didn't buy it here. It was a gift from God

so Julie said

Well, then, I guess you need to talk with Him. I'm sorry.

Mrs. Avernignon shuffled closer, reached out, touched Julie on the arm. Her dark, wrinkled face reminded Julie of the dream, of her grandfather's skull, his lips shrunken back in an unspeakable grin of ecstasy or pain, cheekbones peeking through the holes in his withering skin, his eyes sunken and insane. The old woman croaked

I've got to find it, dear

her fingers like talons, biting into the meaty underside of Julie's wrist, her age driving itself into Julie's bones

GOOD OLD TITUS – ITS
NO SQUARE PEG, BUT IT
WILL DO.

like radiation, rasping

I've just got to find my soul.

And as she looked into those deep green eyes, Julie suddenly realized that she was terrified. She yanked her arm away, avalanching her carefully stacked receipts onto the floor. She stumbled back and braced herself on the counter, her heart trip-hammering, her breath coming in ragged gasps. At the lost and found desk, Rita glanced up from her crossword and saw Julie stumble. She called

Hey, what's up over there?

Julie leaned against the counter, breathing hard. Mrs. Averrignon stood on the other side of the desk, hands folded over the head of her wooden cane, expressionless. She looked astoundingly old, fragile, her bright pale eyes the last vestige of a youth that had not died but was slowly fading, now pale as a cartoon phantom. She was just an ancient woman with some kind of pseudo-religious delusion, no reason to freak out. Rita called

I said, what's up?

and Julie said

Nothing.

She bent down and gathered the scattered receipts, piled them up neatly, sat them back on the desk. Then she took a deep breath and looked at Mrs. Averrignon again. Trying to muster her patience, she said

Listen, ma'am. This is the refunds and exchanges desk. I think you still need the lost and found

and Mrs. Averrignon said

Of course, dear. Let's go look again, shall we?

so Julie said

My sister Rita is working that desk today. She'll be glad to help you out.

The old woman did not even shift her eyes toward Rita. She said

I don't think she can help me. But maybe you can. Shall we try, dear?

Julie gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. She wanted more than anything to punch the old woman in her creepy-ass face. But she was willing to do anything to get the old lady out of her hair. So she led Mrs. Averrignon over to the lost and found. Rita smiled sadistically, enjoying the show. Julie stood behind Mrs. Averrignon and gave Rita the finger. Rita winked at her. Humorless, Julie said

Let's have the box

and Rita, agreeable and happy, said

Sure. Have a party.

She pulled the box from under the counter and plopped it on the desk. Julie glared at Rita, her nerves withering with every passing moment. Only wanting the whole stupid show to be finished, she began pulling items out of the box and showing them to the old woman. She kept forcing her smile, her cheeks burning with the strain, saying

Let's see. One beat-up and empty leather wallet. One pair of sunglasses. One shoe, red, laces tied in a big knot. No soul in here yet, ma'am . . . one key ring, no keys attached. One

Her hand closed around a shape that she had only seen in her imagination and in a dark corner of her dreams. She pulled it out of the box, a rectangular chunk of varnished wood with a round hole in its center and a second piece, this one square, forced through the hole. Oak and birch. Mrs. Averrignon cried

Oh, you have it! I was so worried!

and snatched it out of Julie's hands. The old woman turned the wood over and over, inspecting every facet. Its edges looked perfect. Even from a short distance, Julie could see no evidence that the peg had been forced into the hole—no chips, no scratches. And the shine—the finish positively sparkled, reflecting the light with every turn of the old woman's wrist. She could have stared at it all day, but Mrs. Averrignon was saying

Thank you so much, dear

so Julie replied

Sure. But Rita is really the one you should thank.

But Rita waved her off and said

Nobody brought that thing in. In fact, I haven't taken in anything at this desk all summer. You must have overlooked it yesterday.

Julie wondered if that could be true. She had seen the old woman pick up every last object over and over. Julie had not examined the box, and the old woman had mentioned her failing eyesight. So, she supposed, anything was possible, except that old women's souls were made of wood and magically appeared in department stores. So Julie said

I guess so.

Mrs. Averrignon smiled at them both.

Rita put the box back under the counter, saying

Well, you've already ID'd the thing, so it's all yours. You have a nice day.

She picked up a magazine and began leafing through it. Julie felt annoyed when she saw it was her copy of *Cosmopolitan*. Mrs. Averrignon said

Such a nice young lady. Dear, will you walk me to the door?

Julie sighed and said

Sure. Why not?

The trip took nearly ten minutes, Mrs. Averrignon shuffling as Julie tried to pull her along. On the way, Mrs. Averrignon disseminated much information that Julie did not care to know: how a pound of sugar never lasted a week anymore; how hanging sheets on the line made them smell so much fresher than using the dryer; how Titus Ludlow had really known how to nibble a girl's earlobe (and at this Julie groaned); and how she never watched television because today's trashy programs were nothing like that nice Leave It to Beaver and Andy Griffith Show.

Outside, Mrs. Averrignon stood in the sunshine, turning the chunk of wood in her gnarled and shriveled hands. And then, before Julie realized what was happening, she dropped it in the nearest trashcan.

For a moment, Julie was too stunned to move; she felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach and kicked her in the ass at the same time. She looked from the can to the old woman and back again before she could find her voice. And then she shouted

For Christ's sake, what did you do that for? I thought that thing was supposed to be your soul! Why would you throw it away?

and Mrs. Averrignon said

It was time. Isn't it hot today?

but Julie cried

I thought you were afraid! Of where it was when you lost it and what might happen to it or—or—whatever the hell it was that you were so scared of this whole time!

and Mrs. Averrignon, calm as ever, said

Whatever made you think that I was afraid? I was certainly concerned, dear, but never afraid. And anyway, my soul isn't lost anymore. It's willingly let go

and Julie, exasperated, snapped

Oh my God. What difference does that make? It's still gone. I'm going to dig through this trash until I find it, and then you are going to take it home!

She shoved one arm into the trash, all the way to her shoulder, her hand passing through unspeakable slimy muck. Mrs. Averrignon patted her on the back and said

When you lose something, dear, who knows where it might go? But if you give it away, it goes where it was intended.

Julie, her cheek pressed against the grimy lid of the trashcan, said

And just where is it supposed to be going from here?

The old lady smiled, one last time, and said

Now's when I find out.

And she turned and shuffled down the sidewalk, per-

haps to the bus stop to wait for a fiery pillar that would carry her to heaven. Julie cursed and yanked her arm out of the trash, trying to resist her urge to go throw the old woman into traffic. She turned to head back into the store, where she intended to wash her arm and hide in the back until closing. But then the old woman turned and called to her. She said

Dear, did you know that I'm one hundred and four years old and I can still remember the names of my great-grandchildren?

Wiping muck from her arm, Julie said

No. I didn't know that

and the old woman said

It's true. But sometimes my mind slips. Sometimes I say strange things or forget where I left my purse. But I don't want to forget their names. Do you understand?

Yes, Julie wanted to say, but the old woman was already walking away, shuffling toward the corner. Julie watched her, studied her birdlike shuffle and her shriveled frame, until she turned right onto Fourth Street. After she was gone, Julie went back into Ludlow's, named for her father and his father before him, determined to liberate her magazine from Rita, who never read Cosmo anyway and who had had a much easier day.

What do I do with this character? the writer says.

"I'm hungry," the main character says.

What's your name? the writer says.

"Call me Bernie," the main character says.

OK, Bernie, the writer says. *What would you like to eat?*

"I'll take a steak with a baked potato and salad," Bernie says. "And a pint of beer. I want my steak rare."

But Bernie doesn't drink, the writer says.

"He does now," Bernie says. "Bring me my food and beer."

The writer serves Bernie his meal, giving him a table in a kitchen of a one bedroom apartment, fully furnished. Bernie has a lot of work to do in his story, so the writer is obliged to feed him. Bernie eats slowly, savoring the steak.

"So, what's my job?" Bernie says, mouth full of steak.

I'll have to think about that while you eat, the writer says.

"Something that makes a lot of money," Bernie says. "I want to eat steak every day."

OK, the writer says, *how about an insurance salesman?*

"Real estate," Bernie says. "I want to sell houses."

What about cars? the writer says.

"No," Bernie says. "Real estate."

Fine, the writer says. *You'll sell real estate.*

Bernie eats his last bite of steak. He finishes off his potato and drains his beer.

"What about my personal life?" Bernie says.

You have a wife named Cassie, the writer says.

"But I don't want to be married," Bernie says. "I want a girlfriend. I'm not ready to be married."

A girlfriend then, the writer says.

There's a knock at the door. Bernie leaves the table and opens it.

"Hi Bernie," the woman at the door says.

"Cassie?" Bernie says.

"Of course," Cassie says. She's a tall blond and has a cluster of pimples on her right cheek. "You all right? It's like you didn't even recognize me."

"I'm kind of disoriented," Bernie says. "Come on in."

Cassie walks in and sits on the couch.

Sit by her and kiss her, the writer says.

Bernie does as the writer says. He kisses Cassie deeply.

Cassie welcomes the kiss and Bernie puts his hand on her breast.

Not so fast, the writer says. You're relationship hasn't gone that far yet.

"Jesus Christ," Bernie says. "Why the hell not?"

"Who are you talking to?" Cassie asks.

"It's a habit I'm forming," Bernie says.

"A very peculiar habit," Cassie says. "It's kind of scary."

Bernie begins to kiss Cassie again and puts his hand back on her breast.

"You don't mind that, do you?" Bernie says.

"I don't really want you touching me that way," Cassie says. "At least not yet."

"Sorry," Bernie says and removes his hand from her breast.

I told you so, the writer says.

"It's all your fault," Bernie says.

"My fault what?" Cassie says.

"Not your fault," Bernie says. "I'm thinking of something else."

"Please quit all this talking to yourself," Cassie says. "It's very awkward."

Do you want her to go? the writer says.

"I want to fuck her," Bernie says. "Let us go to bed."

"Fuck me?" Cassie says. "I don't think I want to be here anymore. You're being very creepy."

"Don't leave," Bernie says. "I won't try anything."

"I don't feel comfortable here," Cassie says. She gets up from the couch and heads for the door. "I hope you feel better soon. I just can't take this right now."

Bernie takes Cassie by the hand and she pulls it away.

"Go then," Bernie says.

"I'll talk to you later," Cassie says, opening the door. "I hope you get over this thing that's going on in your head."

"I'll give you a call," Bernie says and Cassie shuts the door behind her. "I want a beer."

You're not a heavy drinker, the writer says.

"Let me have a goddamn beer," Bernie says.

I'll let you have one more, the writer says.

"I need one after that event," Bernie says. He goes to the kitchen, opens the fridge, and pulls out a beer.

You've had a bad childhood, the writer says. Think about that while you drink your beer.

"Bad?" Bernie says. "Why bad?"

This is my world, the writer says.

“Why can’t I have a good childhood?” Bernie says.

Don’t you remember how your father whipped you with his belt? the writer says.

“He did, didn’t he?” Bernie says and sips his beer. “I remember that now. Most of the time I didn’t deserve it. Sometimes I did, and I accept those beatings, but I was beaten when he got drunk. I was beaten when he got home from work. I was beaten before dinner and bedtime.

It was awful, wasn’t it? the writer says.

“I’ll never forget it,” Bernie says. “If I ever have kids, I won’t beat them. I’ll spank them when they deserve it though. Some discipline is necessary.” Bernie drinks the beer.

You have a son, the writer says.

“No way,” Bernie says. “I don’t need any kids.”

The phone rings.

He’s calling you now, the writer says.

Bernie goes to the phone and answers it.

“Dad,” the voice on the other end says. “It’s Joe.”

“Hey, Joe,” Bernie says.

“Today’s my birthday,” Joe says.

“I know,” Bernie says. “I was just about to call you.”

“Mom doesn’t want you coming to the party,” Joe says.

“I wish I could,” Bernie says.

“Maybe I’ll see you on Saturday,” Joe says. “Will you come pick me up?”

“Sure,” Bernie says. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, dad,” Joe says. “My friends are here now. I’d better get back to them.”

“OK, son,” Bernie says and Joe hangs up the phone. Bernie sits at the table and sips on a beer. “I want a cigarette.”

You don’t smoke, the writer says.

“Let me have a damn cigarette,” Bernie says.

Fine, the writer says. *But you don’t smoke much.*

Bernie pulls a pack out of his shirt pocket. There’s only one inside and a book of matches. He lights one up and watches the smoke rise to the ceiling. He sips his beer and thinks about Cassie. Not a bad looking chick even though she does have an acne problem. Nice tits, too. He finishes the beer.

“I want another beer,” Bernie says.

No, the writer says. *Remember that your father was an alcoholic and you don’t want to become your father.*

“Just give me a goddamn beer,” Bernie says.

I run this show, the writer says. I can delete you in less than a heartbeat.

“Go ahead,” Bernie says. “I’m not scared. I’ll still be in your head. Let’s not argue. Give me a beer.”

No, the writer says. Make a pot of coffee.

“Ah, shit,” Bernie says. “I’m going to a bar.”

How will you get there? the writer says.

“You’ll give me a car,” Bernie says.

Well, what if I don’t? the writer says.

“I’ll walk,” Bernie says. He goes to the door and opens it. He steps out and walks down the steps that lead out to the parking lot. Once he gets to the sidewalk, he realizes that he doesn’t know how to get to the nearest bar. “Come on, let me go to the bar.”

Fine, the writer says. There’ll be someone there I want you to meet.

“Great,” Bernie says. “I need to be around some people, have a few drinks. I remember where the bar is now. Not a long walk.” He walks out of the apartment complex and down the sidewalk until he gets to the Highball. He goes inside and finds a seat at the bar. It’s fairly crowded and he has to sit next to a fat man with a stubbly beard.

“What’s going on, Bernie?” the fat man says.

“Not much,” Bernie says. “What’s your name again?”

The man laughs.

“I’m serious,” Bernie says. “I forgot your name.”

“You’ve known me for three years,” the man says. “How could you forget my name?”

“Just fucking tell me,” Bernie says.

“Jed,” the man says. “Jed, Jed, Jed.”

“I know,” Bernie says. “I was messing with you.”

“The usual?” the bartender says.

“Yeah,” Bernie says, not knowing what the usual is.

“Hey, Bern,” a woman says, coming up behind Bernie. He turns around and sees an older woman with huge breasts.

“Hey,” Bernie says.

“Why didn’t you say hello when you walked in?” the woman says.

“Oh, I have a lot on my mind,” Bernie says. “Good to see you.”

“How’s your son?” the woman says.

“Today’s his birthday,” Bernie says.

“Great,” the woman says. “How old is he?”

Bernie draws a blank.

“Don’t you know?” the woman says.

“Fifteen,” Bernie says, making up a number.

“Young one,” the woman says.

The bartender sets a beer on the bar.

“I just wanted to say hello,” the woman says. “Have a good day.”

“You, too,” Bernie says and the woman walks away.

“You’re acting kind of strange,” Jed says. “You’re out there almost. You high?”

“I’m high,” Bernie says. “Smoked a little too much before I came here.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Jed says.

“I’d like a cigarette,” Bernie says.

You don’t smoke, the writer says. I let you have one and that’s enough.

“Jed, you got a smoke?” Bernie says.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” Jed says. “I thought you quit.”

“Just give me a cigarette,” Bernie says.

I don’t like you making your own decisions, the writer says.

“Delete me then,” Bernie says.

“Delete you?” Jed says. “What the hell are you talking about?” He hands Bernie a cigarette and lights it for him.

“I’m thinking out loud,” Bernie says. He takes a sip of beer and a drag from his cigarette.

“I told you I didn’t want to see you in here again,” a man says to Bernie.

“What’s your problem?” Bernie says.

“You know,” the man says. “Let’s step outside.” He’s tall and has a muscle shirt on that exposes a well toned upper body.

“Very funny,” Bernie says. “You’re going to have someone kick my ass.”

Maybe you’ll come to respect me more, the writer says.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Bernie says.

“It’s either in here or outside,” the man says.

“No fighting in here,” the bartender says. “If you’re going to fight, go to the alley. I’ll call the police if there’s a fight in my bar.”

“Get off that fucking barstool and be a man,” the man says.

“If you let me out of this I’ll not drink and smoke,” Bernie says.

Too late, the writer says.

Bernie gets up from the stool and the man leads him

out the door.

“Kick his ass, Bern,” the woman says. She and a few others follow Bernie and the man out. They walk around the brick wall and into the alley.

“Very funny,” Bernie says.

“What?” the man says. “You calling me funny?”

I’d suggest you run, the writer says. *You’re a pretty quick coward.*

“Good idea,” Bernie says.

“Who the hell are you talking to?” the man says.

“Nice to meet you,” Bernie says and turns to run. He runs down the alley and onto the sidewalk. He looks over his shoulder and sees he’s not being followed, but he runs anyway, back home.

This isn’t going anywhere, the writer says when Bernie gets inside.

“What do you mean?” Bernie says.

I’m deleting you, the writer says.

“No way,” Bernie says.

O, yes, the writer says and the words on the page disappear.

soapbox simian cynicism

roibeárd Uí-neill

to Jordan “Hollister”

“The difference between individualism and individuality is the difference between selfishness and the Noble Self.”

- Frank Lloyd Wright

Yo,
monkey,
a silver spoon
in your mouth.

Oy,
monkey,
a fork in your ass.

Eh,
monkey?
Who pulled your string?
(It certainly wasn't Klaatu)

Oh,
monkey,
What Would Droid Do?
e-swap Ned's wooden shoes
for a blue tooth,
e-bubble cap & trade carbon,
e-mail a crude pictograph
featuring you
& the recipient's mother
in a compromising position,
e-ducation at the mercy of info overload,
e-mpathy monitored by stingy cyborgs,
e-cstasy coughing up spam-slathered viruses,
& e-everything is fucking touchy/texty lovely,
& i just want a Cro-Magnon to fall out of the web,
look me in the eye, & say e-nough is e-nough.

Uh,
monkey,
oysters & oil don't mix,
coal & mountains will separate,
agribusiness can't clone topsoil,
glaciers don't spontaneously generate,
stockholders lack the altruism of Bonobos,
the Dallas Cowboys & your daddy's wealth
won't save you once clean air is privatized,
after a flock of 1,000 year old plastic bags
smothers the last bristlecone pine to death.

Hmm,
monkey,
suck up to the status quo,
spurn a venerable book,
run from an original idea,
refuse a smidgeon of ambition,

never create something for the joy of it,
shrug responsibility off of your shoulders,
never stand upright & spare your knuckles,
believe all the toys you take for granted
are squeezed out of a fiberglass banana
instead of produced by the sweat & blood
of a disadvantaged uncle you'll never meet.

Hey,
monkey,
shame on
"enlightened self-interest."
So a maggot assumes an alias,
it can't learn table manners,
or repress its dietary inclination.

Ho,
monkey,
the little Dutch boy
should amputate
his offending finger,
permit the dike to collapse,
because he bloody well knows
a tide to lift all boats
doesn't trickle down.

Hell,
monkey -
(if it exists outside of
sick imagination)
this
emotionally-bankrupt absurdist
forced to man the barricades
alongside a flaming nincompoop
who loves the organ grinder,
who fails to comprehend
riot police & mercenaries use
rubber bullets of identical caliber.

Hah,
monkey,
since we're roasting together,
the only wounds
which distinguish us are

the hole in your head,

the hole in my heart.

Rapture

Greg Watson

My mother waited religiously for the end
of the world. Cursed with faith the way some

are cursed with wisdom, she brought God to our
table like the shadow of Kruschev's shoe.

I remember the day in early summer
when the clocks all ran backwards, and

the radio evangelist announced, with sweaty conviction,
that the end was near – the secrets had

at last been unlocked, the heavenly code deciphered
down to the last stitch of the needle.

My mother pinned a rose to her housecoat,
prayed in a deep whisper. In the kitchen

her Bible lay open with all the weight of law,
a casket full of words

whose darkest passages had been underlined,
like the lines of a map, in red.

My older brother sat on the front steps,
smoking with the sudden, paralyzing freedom of one

who has been granted his final sentence.
And what did I imagine in my child's universe,

dreaming of celestial travel, chariots
of immense sunlight, the world's electricity

suddenly uprooted by an unseen hand?
But of course, the world doesn't end

simply because we wish it so; and that day
no holiness came down, no kiss

of thunder, no death-salvation delivered.
We sat in dim silence, a silence gone numb

with its own perfection, breathing
as though breathing were in bad taste;

with a lifetime of days, ordinary human days,
open before us, from which

none of us could ever be saved.

wordmakers

John Bennett » *A prolific voice from the great northwest. Ran 'Vagabond Press' back in the day, and now runs non-stop 'shards' to his massive email list of readers. [I'm on John's e-mailing list which gushes forth a variety of poetics and "shards" as they are written. These two, culled from his vast outpouring of story and ideas fit nicely into First Class: they question perception and viewpoints, while reminding us to leap as far from possible from the train of narrow thought.]*

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 liked the wordplay and linguistic acrobatics in these two pieces, wherein you may learn a bit of history, while ambling down a twisted unversion of it as well.]*

William Jackson » *Lives in Parker Ford, Pennsylvania, and has a book of short stories out called "The First Step." [This piece toys with style and form, disjointed yet tight as a drum. Too well constructed to simply cast as a "mood piece" yet chaotic enough to demand a second read. I don't normally include pieces that get funky in their form, as this one does at the end, but the story is rife with fantastic phrases and tightly bundled imagery.]*

Judith Ann Levison » *Of Micmac Indian descent, she was published in the New Yorker at age 16. Destiny finally brought her to these humble pages! She currently lives in New Hope, Pennsylvania. ["You shouldn't demand a kid to kill" - what a simple concept. I love the marriage of warrior mayhem to apple pie. This should be a letter to every senator.]*

Kent McDaniel » *Chicago-based musician who also writes fiction. [This story caught me off guard as I normally roil back in aversion when product names (like iPhone) are dropped in a story, but I kept reading and found a fine plot pulling together our society's obsession with itself, reality, immediacy, and absurdity. Intense narcissism whether overt or vicarious permeates our current culture, and Kent nails it to the wall and hammers it to a bloody pulp.]*

Wm. Meyer » *Lives in Beaumont, Texas. [I get terrific pieces of art and writing from him on a regular basis, but this is the first piece that fit nicely into these pages. The old raging bird, cursing and embracing the existence he experiences. If only I could drop shit bombs on Am-flag pickups without getting my ass kicked...]*

Brett Riley » *Lives in south Louisiana after spending his youth in Arkansas. He teaches at the University of Alabama. [Yes, this issue is chock full of death, but here's a nice old lady looking for her lost soul - literally. The teens' flirtation with a fellow human's potential demise changes nothing about their world. Our aged and elderly are far less interesting than Cosmo and killing time. It's true. Why are we one of the first cultures in human history to disregard those with a lifetime of experience?]*

James Tyler » *He spends much of his time reading and writing in Nashville, Tennessee. [Is this what would happen if we had a running dialogue with our creator? Belligerence, helplessness, constant surprise? The voices in my head are far kinder than the "writer."]*

roibeárd Uí-neill » *From Corydon, Indiana. His chap "A Cosmic Clown's Handbasket Blues" is now available from the author. [Monkey, droids, man-monkeys, oh my! He's able to wedge a line like "agri-business can't clone topsoil" into a rhythmic, hectic blast, again cursing and pointing and laughing at our busted-up culture.]*

Greg Watson » *Lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and has several chaps out, two of which can be found on the four-sep web site. [And this issue closes with more death... though this time averted which, in this case, is a disappointment to the protagonists. The antagonist remains yet in his heavenly splendor, holding back the ejaculate. Funny how deflated we feel when rapture ruptures....]*

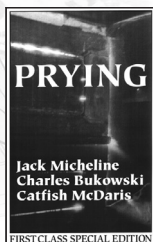
A booming thanks goes to all who have and continue to submit words on paper to First Class. I read every scrap that pries it's way into my pobox, and enjoy and appreciate the efforts of those who submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions.

— 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*

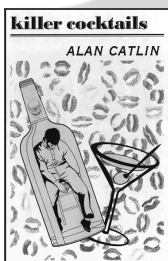


John Bennett

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

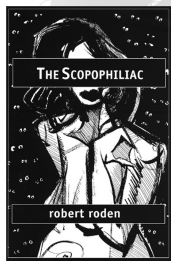
BAD MONK: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE - The Bad Monk, Charles Ries, marks shrewd, careful observations of the world around him, merging spirituality, a bit of beer, waffles and Milwaukee life. Bonus poem broadsheet! *2-color cover/24# paper/24pp - \$5ppd*

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

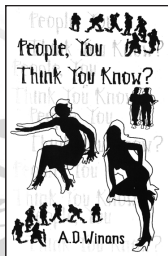
STARTING TO END IN THE MIDDLE - pulls together 30 pieces of Vonasek's best poetics revealing somber introspection, consistent speculation, and often a glimmer of hope. Featuring artwork by Lori Dale. Vonasek was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. *Slick cover/linen paper/32pp - \$5ppd*

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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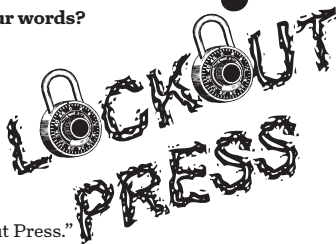
-Christopher M.

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.**