

ISSUE FIFTEEN » III of III.2000
FIVE BUCKS

First Class

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15

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**ISSUE
FIFTEEN**

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GREETINGS: This issue packs a heavy dose of short fiction. The only reason for this is that the pieces on these pages are the best of the nearly-two-foot stack of submissions that arrived in the pobox. I love variety. Please keep it coming. It's been almost 5 years now, and I've yet to receive any spite directed my way. Cool. As always, please enjoy! - Christopher M.

	PHOTO ON PAGE 15	Sam Bluefarb
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	COVER DESIGN and PHOTO ON PAGE 27	Christopher M.
	ILLUSTRATIONS ON PAGES 1, 20, 49	Jennifer Stanley
	PHOTO ON PAGE 7	A.D. Winans

The Saints' Chambermaid

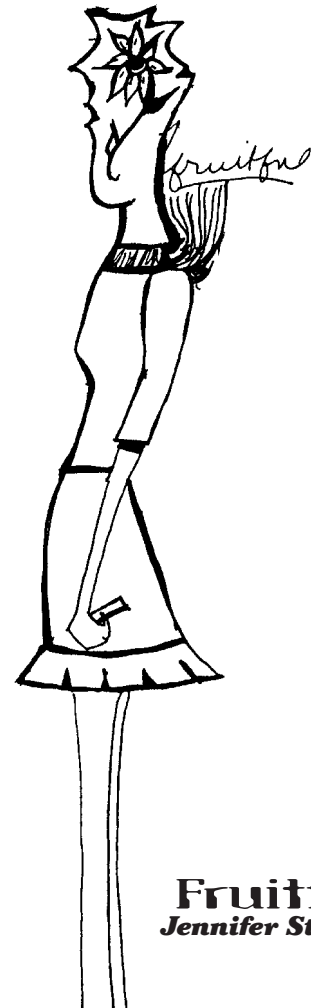
Rani Burd

We all listened to the tinkling of her stream,
how it opposed the thundering rush of our own torrents.
We thought about this beneath brown robes
and kept our hands clasped.

She cooked sensual dishes for us, chili,
and a bread stuffed with wild mushrooms she'd gathered,
a meal best eaten with fingers.
She learned we liked for her to taste
as she went, an act both maternal and sexual.
The sight of her making our narrow beds humbled us,
her oblivious ample rump bent as she smoothed far corners.
A blond braid dangled down her back.

Did she delight in the knowledge of our eavesdropping and spying?
Something in her was both private and revealing;
thus, we sometimes despised her, and always desired her.
She challenged us – without dramatizing – and
gauged our reactions with accuracy. Outrageous!
That is in part why we resented her. Maybe wholly.

But still, wasn't she good, wasn't she?
So brave and strange, this seer
with her benign featherduster.
We, her penance, offered her up to God:
our chaste thrill.



Fruitful
Jennifer Stanley

The Human Freak Show

Alan Catlin

I've seen lots of lounge acts in my time, more than enough to last two lifetimes though most of the really interesting ones happened far away from the stage.

Most of the lounge acts you get on the stage are wannabe somebodies or another backed up by guys waiting for a real gig with a real band doing something remotely creative in the music field.

Playing the kind of lounges we occupied space and time in wasn't what you'd call working in the music field.

Not really.

Dead ends of late nights I'd let them play what they liked doing best and it was just about always some of the most bitchin good jazz you'd ever want to hear.

Good thing I was the night manager in most of the lounges I worked in or I'd be shot for the kind of expressive music I let them play.

There isn't any room for creativity working back up to some guy who thought he was the next Tom Jones or a budding Engleheart Humperdick.

I'd waited on both of those superstar twits and let me tell you, it wasn't anything like a religious experience.

In fact, one of the most satisfying moments in my brief career in Hotel and Restaurant Management was denying Humperdick another "Bottle of the bubbly for me and my friends."

As the poet said, "Time and tide waits for no man," and the same can be said for last call.

That was one confused Vegas act in Albany trying to make sense out of what it all meant to him in real life.

He finally puzzled it out for himself in the sudden glare of the house lights.

Like Dracula and all of his undead clones, lounge acts hate the glare of the house lights.

It exposes the many layers of makeup they have to wear to look something like a human being and it means the show is over, an effective cancellation of their personalities or what passes for their personalities which is mostly the next tune they have written in huge letters on the floor of the stage if they're nearsighted and not the real thing like the man who named himself after a character in the Fugitive.

I can see him now with his own personal road show groupie for a little doggie action in the comp room of the Ramada we were working at the time. The groupie, less than charmed by what passes for his idea of charming flirtatious speech before the trip to the great penthouse in the sky.

All I could think of is saying, "woof, woof, woof Fido, how's the doggie action?" whenever I saw him thereafter.

That and the spike I threw in his special voice-saver concoction of his: oj and club soda, made life interesting for awhile.

But like all cheap thrills, the satisfaction is fleeting, ephemeral, and you are forced to turn your attention back to the book of life and all the torn pages it leaves scattered around the age in the form of middle-aged overweight, heavily made-up women dressed to the hilt with their platinum wigs, cowgirl rhinestone studded blouses, tight bulging jeans and leather coats screaming at the apparition on the stage wishing it wasn't just another Elvis imitator, and that they could afford the plane fare to Vegas to catch the ghost of the real thing crooning center stage in some wet dream of a better life.

And the men aren't much better, all the unmarried or newly divorced or single in their own minds on a Friday night, the wedding ring stuffed in a safe place in the glove compartment with the stash of high grade Acapulco Gold, the tan line or the impression left by years of wearing the ring so obvious, even the complete darkness of the black hole of the Ramada can't hide the obvious or the lean and hungry looks of the unfed jackals on the prowl for warm pussy,

bar scotch and sodas, hard packs of Marlboro Reds, with inscribed Zippo that says 'to Jack with all my love,' they try to pass off as a war relic presented by the guys in the platoon when he left stateside, his chump change rattling in his pocket when he walked to the gents or got down, mean and funky on the dance floor, some kind of middle-aged crazy cresting the limited horizons of a Saturday night.

After awhile, I feel as if I should take black and white photos with a subdued indoor flash like a Diane Arbus of the drinking set, chronicling the social habits of the fully mobilized tribes of human debris, imbued with hormonal needs cruising the outer limits of civilization, black holes of Calcutta with live music and a bright lit spot light like a bursting blood blister in the otherwise totally dark pocket of existence inside.

Instead, I'm left with what words cannot adequately describe, the balding hydrocephalic midget standing on his imitation dark leather captain's chair singing My Funny Valentine in rare combination of basso profundo and stinging alto to thunderous applause, the only song he knows, the only song he cares to sing, who knows?

The old drunk man with the black derby reciting the Battle Hymn of the Republic with a rising lift to his voice, a pulsing tenor growing stronger and more insistent with each verse so much so you can almost see the troops cresting the ridge at Gettysburg ready for a fatal charge, old Abe Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth with a gun mercifully putting and end to it all.

Or, you'll get to wait on a serious celebrity like Rod Serling, quietly drowning in rack vodka, orange mists in his glass for color and Vitamin C as he creates a personal twilight he can sign away with a room number and a twenty five per cent tip for being quiet about feeding him the necessary fuel and being prompt about it.

Mostly you feel like a later day man with a mental camera, son of Arbus, filing all the images away in a locked dark room, the face appearing at strange times like negatives achieving clarity in developing trays, dream images, dangerous when wet.

The Firebird

She was wearing
this amazing short
short skirt with a
low cut top to match
made from fabrics
so way beyond loud
it made you wonder
if she was cheerleading
for some spectator
sport organized in
another dimension
parallel to ours
and she was so
bubbling over, effervescent
trying to make whatever
it was she wanted
understood, she spoke
in a tongue not readily
recognizable as something
that was spoken here
on earth, her efforts
made more complicated
by her warp speeding
buzz and The Boss
screaming something
about being born in the USA
as if that was a big deal
in the background, so I

try hand gestures to help
out, pointing at items
behind the bar asking her
to select but it doesn't
work out, becoming more
and more like some colorful,
futile game of charades
conducted by two inmates
of a locked-in ward

A change of venue does nothing, becomes like another bad episode of Dragnet, the faces and the names change but the guilty are still guilty and the innocent are largely a figment of your imagination

As the girl with alternate layers of green and orange hair, tripping on acid, feet barely touching the drip dry carpet as she hits the kitchen door loaded down with prime rib dinners, baked potatoes and enough gravy to drown a desperate rat, said on mothers day, "they're all mothers and everyday is mother's day."

The Cuffer

It wasn't natural what she was doing
to her food. I'd never seen anyone
take a hamburger and abuse it the way
she did. There was ketchup from one
end of the corner bar to the other
and it looked as if she might be making
a move to cover the long end toward
the stage as well. She was long past being
picked up by the happy hour business
guy losers who would make anything
that sit still long enough not to throw up
which was why there was this beef on
a bun the kinder ones had wanted her to eat.
I should have realized long before death
to chopped meat that she was spending
the kids lunch money for the month.
It isn't often you get a pushing forty
stranger doing Manhattans with a bag
full of change, counting out the tab
as she goes into the ozone. Calling hubby
is worse than a wrong number, she doesn't
live here anymore, don't ever call here again,
I don't care where she spends the night.
Have some coffee, we say, in the lobby,
trying to bring her around. "Never,"
she says, "I'm alright. Where's my drink?"
When the cops finally arrive they know her
all too well. "Well, at least this time she's
not walking down the median strip on route 50.
The last time she was naked from the waist
up and no one stopped or called until we saw her."
She had twenty-five bucks on the bar I didn't want
that I passed over to the cops as they cuffed her.
"She's a hopeless case," the older cop says,
"Tomorrow we'll let her out and by Thursday
we'll be picking her up again." I had a feeling
I should have held onto her twenty-five bucks

for all the safe keeping she was going to get.

Some you can dress up but you just can't take out in public.

Money can buy you a lot of things but it can't change a deviant mind or a sick personality made worse by top shelf liquor and the best meal in the house.

They try throwing money at you as if that was what it would take to make you smile and give them the respect they thought they deserved just because they had the privilege of a seven figure bank account and owned half of the developed land on the right side of the strip between Albany and Schenectady.

But it never does, though you'll take the money anyway and say, "Thanks, Boss," whispering to yourself the real bottom line, "You worthless sack of shit."

Brass Knuckles

Their idea of Modern
Love with seven rounds
of bare knuckles boxing
in low-lit cocktail lounges,
phantom knock out punches
thrown from the hip, timed to
perfection, completely
unseen even in peripheral
vision by the barman
who turns as he works
or, later, in parking lots,
up-close body blows,
that first, stand her up,
stunned, and then, leave
her breathless, weak at
the knees, knocked senseless,
head hitting against a low
concrete abutment in February
cold, happy anniversary
of love left out well beyond
the count, a kind of serenity
descending amidst the silence
of the stars, the deepening
shadows, the burst nebulae
behind her eyes.

I took the money as part of my Hope Chest, I hope that if I drink enough or inhale enough smoke of many dreams all of the accumulating sideshow images will lay to rest instead of being some kind of untitled gallery of bodies left alongside of the genetic pool, mind's total erased, bodies functioning on impulse at a level that could only be described as minimal.

I could hope that but it would be just another futile pipe dream, something conjured by the black magician of existence, the ring master for all the spontaneous traveling road shows that inhabit my life.

Worked on by Professionals

They said they found her alongside
of a road with her friend sticking
their thumbs out for a ride.
I thought they were kidding until
I heard the blonde laugh. She sounded

like Mr. Ed with a bad case of drug abuse
it was the kind of laugh that made people
cringe and there was no excuse for how
she carried on with it. "Oh, we found
her alongside of the road. Hopefully,
she'll get over it." The more she drank
the worse it got. I thought about
handicapping her in the fifth race at Saratoga
before I remembered the track had closed
for the season. They were doing shots
of iced teas as if there were no tomorrow
and maybe there would never be
as she ran her six inch indigo nails
down the face of her new male friend:
"In jest. I tend bar in Rome."

I knew what that meant. Rome is
a little bit to the west of the end
of the world. I'd been there more than once
totally out of my mind and it seemed as if it
hadn't changed much if she was the leader
of the greater Rome chamber of commerce.
Women like her with a high class tattoo
the length of their backs like hers have
a lot of explaining to do and they never
do it with their clothes on. "Women who work
bars are kind of wild. Guess you know that?
Sure you do. I'm just your average working
chick who mainlines shots of tequila and chases
it down with beer." She wasn't wearing much
of a top for any time of year, especially
November which made me wonder if she ever
got cold or did she live by sucking the heat out
of others, it really didn't matter much at this
point. I couldn't make out what they had done
to her body but I could tell that it had been
worked on by professionals.

Maybe I really had missed my calling in life as had been suggested by more than one interested party over the years.

Maybe I should have invested in a white over the shoulder toga, hourglass and a newly sharpened scythe and rung out the old year every day of the lives of the possessed occupying space and time in all the dead-end lounges of my life.

Maybe I should have just bellied up to the nearest creature of the night, stuck a microphone in her face, pretended to push the recorder on to the 'Go' position and gotten her to reveal the inner secrets of her existence she wouldn't confess to her parish priest or nearest next of kin.

Maybe all I needed was a bottle of booze, the will and the power to pour and the presence of mind to maintain a warm body and a silent, calm demeanor.

Maybe all I needed to be was there and I would hear it all and add it to the growing collection of the secret gallery of human freak shows.

From the Life of the Poet

Five hundred pounds overweight,
she reclines in the high back bar chair

reminiscing of her days among freaks,
"I bench pressed my weight every
day of my life until I hit 50.
I added a hundred pounds then
and tried it one-handed." Sits
rubbing the scar on her right arm
where she tried to have a tattoo
of a bird of paradise removed,
"It belonged to a lover, that tattoo.
A thin man seven-foot-tall who
liked the circus, liked clowns,
wild animal trainers, high wire
walkers, anything that moved."
She sips a tall White Russian through
a flexible straw, says, "It's all there
in my backyard, all that's left
of the circus." Rusting chrome bicycle
frames scaled down for dwarfs,
hollow 50 lb weights, ventriloquist dummies
unclothed among weeds sitting in sand
boxes, mouths wide open, containing
spider webs that block in their voices,
tales of the tent scaled down to ruins.
"I'm 65 now, they paid a good buck
to see me in my prime. I'm the original
bearded lady, what do you think of that?"
She must have been 75, I thought, full of lies,
hearing side show barker voices filling
the hollow cavities termites leave in
the hard wooden spaces behind her eyes.



A.D. Winans

Sunday Visit

Tom Cody

He lingers at the coffee counter, pouring the coffee slowly, wishing it would come out from the urn drop by drop, delaying his return to the table, where she is storing up invective to release on him during his visit.

He returns to the table, carefully setting the coffee down, knowing the slightest spill could be the starting point of confrontation.

When he sits he smiles and says, "We have the place to ourselves this bright Sunday."

"That's because you're here before the fucking birds are up," she snaps, drool running crookedly down one cheek.

"Now you can have a cup of coffee with me and get the hell out of this dump before the normal people come to visit."

"Don't talk like that, Marg. I'm early because I was anxious to see you."

She ignores his comment and asks, "Who are you fucking these days?"

He breathes deeply before saying, "Come on, Marg, that's no way to talk."

"I asked you a direct question, who are you fucking these days?" Her tone is harsh, challenging.

He responds meekly, "No one, those days are far behind me."

She hoots and says, "You lying bastard, you'll never change. I remember how you were, pretending you were working every night playing piano. I wasn't fooled, you were really out fucking any bitch old enough to have hair on her pussy."

Her vocabulary has picked up since she's been in this place, he thinks. In sane days she was the height of propriety, an occasional 'damn' considered very strong language. Now a foulmouthed wretch with a guttersnipe vocabulary. And did I ever love her? Yes, loved her deeply from that first night she had the misfortune to come into that club where I was playing with a pickup band. I noticed her right away, the long shimmering blonde hair, the knockout figure that was so tempting I wanted to reach out and run my hand over the gorgeous body. During our break going over to the table where she was sitting with three girlfriends, introducing, myself and setting in motion the frenzied year until we went to city hall and then settled down to what was supposed to be a lifetime of happiness.

"Marg, are you doing any more knitting? I could use another pair of socks. The last pair were terrific, I had them on so often I wore them out."

"I'd like to knit your balls together." She laughs uproariously, spilling coffee.

He reaches over with a napkin, starting to wipe the table but she snatches the napkin from his hand and begins to rub furiously. She pauses and shouts, "You clumsy bastard," then returns to her task. Finally she stops and surveys her work. She smiles and says, "There, cleaned up your mess again. The story of my life, you make shit of everything and poor Marg has to come to the rescue." She points at the table. "How does it look, clean enough for you?"

He quickly nods his approval. "Perfect, great. You haven't changed, you always kept the apartment spotless."

She smiles and says, "I know I did, and fucking little thanks I got for it."

She picks up a clean napkin and renews rubbing, her motions almost gentle as if she's applying a final touch to her work.

It wasn't long before the signs appeared, he recalls. Suspicious a daily occurrence, and I became

a cheat and liar. That night I came home and she was crouching behind the door. Lunging at me and after a hell of a struggle and a slash on the arm I wrenched the knife away from her. And madness confers strength, one of the hard lessons driven home when associating with the possessed.

She finishes her work, pointing at the table and asking, "Well, it's as clean as can be, isn't it?"

"No one could make it cleaner."

"Damn right," she says and drops the napkin on the floor.

Suspicious and accusations intensified and I finally realized it was time to commit her. At the private hospital in the country she seemed to respond, and they sent her home after a few months, saying she was fine. But she was fine only because the money had dried up, the savings, my insurance policy, what I could borrow. The stay was a short one, and when I caught her sneaking into our daughter's bedroom with a pair of scissors she'd managed to hide she became a resident of this charitable institution.

"That daughter of yours," she says, "is she screwing yet?"

He tightens his stomach muscles in an effort to remain calm. "Our daughter Helen is fine. She enjoys living on the farm in Massachusetts. My sister and her husband are happy having her with them."

She emits a snorting sound. "Christ, you two were something, always against me, always planning some shit behind my back. I used to see you whispering together." Her voice becomes pitched, strident. "You didn't fool me for a minute, but now you've got me locked up in this dump with all the loonies. Well, you won't get away with it, I've got something going for me that you don't know about. You can bet your ass I'll do all right for myself."

"I know you will, Marg," he says softly. "You could always take care of yourself."

She acknowledges the compliment with a lowering of her voice. "I'm glad you know something, you shit. Listen, do you still play the piano?"

"Yes, still playing every night at Frank's bar. Do you remember Frank?"

Her brow furrows as she tries to recall the past. "Frank, that big Irish slob you were always hanging around with?"

"Yes, that's right," he says with forced animation. "You're doing great today, remembering everything."

She sits rigid, a childlike grin on her face. "Of course I remember everything. You think I'm a dummy?" The tone turns belligerent. "Do you, do you think I'm a dummy?"

"Marg, I know how bright you are."

The praise calms her. "O.K., but you better not be bullshitting. If I find out you're bullshitting I swear I'll cut your balls off."

"I'm telling you the truth," he assures her. "Now suppose you tell me what you've been doing. The last time I was here you were doing great with ceramics. Are you still making those artistic objects?"

"You ask too many questions, now I'll ask one. Do you still play the piano?"

"Yes, Marg, I still play the piano," he answers patiently.

"Christ," she says with contempt, "why don't you get a real job?"

"I guess no one will have me."

"I believe it. I wouldn't hire you to empty the bedpans in this dump."

“No, I probably wouldn’t be very good at that either.”

She points to the dust-covered piano in the corner. “Go over there and play something.”

He searches for an excuse to divert her. “Sorry, Marg, but I didn’t bring my sheet music. But the next time I come I definitely will.”

A scornful laugh echoes in the empty cafeteria. “You can’t play without sheet music! You’re really something, I swear to shit you are. Why in hell did I ever marry a jerk like you?”

“You must have felt sorry for me.”

“That was it, I felt sorry for you. So many nice guys wanted to marry me, and I ended up with a jerk like you. I should have listened to my family, they warned me about you. They were on to you from the start, but I thought they were wrong. And look at me now, here in this dump with nothing to show for my life.”

She stands up, running a hand through her unkempt hair while turning her head from side to side. “I could have been anything I wanted,” she says. “I could have been a model with my picture on magazine covers, I could have gone to Hollywood.”

He nods his agreement, saying, “The movies lost a star.”

She executes half turns, her breasts pushed out, her head held high as if she’s a fashion model on a runway. Finally she stops and bends down, her face inches from his.

“Men still find me attractive. Do you believe that?” The question is challenging, and he gives the proper response.

“Of course I believe it, you’re still a terrific looking woman. You put the rest of those I’ve seen in here to shame.”

She giggles and says, “You old bastard, get that gleam out of your eyes. You’re like all the guys they have working here, always giving me the eye. The horny bastards, I can tell they’d like to hop into bed with me or get me outside in the bushes. Some of them practically wave their big things right in my face. You’ve got that same horny look right now. I can tell you’re thinking about fucking me. All right, let’s do it, right here on the table. Here I’ll help you.”

She reaches down, trying to unzip his pants, but he grabs her hand, pulling her face close to his.

“Stop it, right now,” he shouts, all patience gone. “Don’t spoil things, let’s have a pleasant visit.” He gets up and eases her into her chair.

She looks at him puzzled. “Shit, what’s wrong with you? You used to have a good sense of humor. Hell, you don’t have anything to be grumpy about, I’m the one who’s locked up in this dump.”

Jesus, the transformation is scary, he thinks. What do they do to them that turns them into lewd animals? They enter, tame as rabbits, cringing in corners, wanting only to be left alone. Then with each visit the meekness vanishes, the crudeness comes out. They’re caught up in a foulness competition, who can spew the most obscenities. The last time, with this place filled, I was warned when getting coffee to keep my fucking hands off the girls. Then accused of giving the eye to an old hag sitting at the next table. So, yes, I do come early so I can escape before the floor show starts.

The puzzled look is still on her face, and he says, “I guess I am a little grumpy today, but we had a rough time in the bar last night. There were two fights and Frank had a hell of a time breaking them up.”

Her lips twist back and forth as she formulates a question. “Frank, your Irish pal?”

“Yes, that’s right, Frank, my Irish pal.”

“I always figured he had his eye on me, but he didn’t make a play for me because he didn’t want

to hurt your feelings.”

My Irish pal Frank, who lays it out for me every night, urging me to give it up, call it quits, space visits, a little more time between each one. Soon she'll forget who I am, and I'll be free to take up my own life.

But would she really forget? Even with the peanut brittle brain, would Sunday come without her sensing something was wrong, someone was missing?

“Marg, I hope you still like those caramel candies, I left a box for you at the desk.”

“Doesn't make any difference if I like them or not, I won't see them. The help they have working here are all thieves. The stories I could tell you about them would shake you up. And not just the men either, the women are the worst. They'd steal the eyeballs out of your head if they had a chance. And they'd be hopping into my bed if they had a chance.” She leans back in her chair, cupping her breasts and shaking her head. “It's a wonder I still have my looks with being picked apart by everyone.”

He reaches over taking her hands in his and says, “I know it's hard, Marg, but the doctor says you're coming along nicely.”

She pulls her hands away, waving one disdainfully at him. “That no good fuck,” she snaps, “he doesn't know anything. All he thinks about is touching my tits.” She leans forward beckoning him to move his head close to hers. When he does she whispers, “He's not even a doctor, he doesn't have a medical degree.”

He feigns surprise, “Really?! How did you find out about that?”

“One of the guys who cleans the wards told me, in confidence. So keep your big mouth shut. If I find out you told anybody I swear I'll cut your cock off.”

“Don't worry, I'll definitely keep that a secret,” he says in exaggerated tones that seem to satisfy her.

“Good, nobody's supposed to know. Now, tell me what he said.”

“Well, that you're doing nicely.”

“Shit, you said that, you jerk. Tell me more, I want to know everything he said. Don't leave a fucking thing out. It's important I know everything.”

He searches for something to satisfy her. Finally he says, “He thinks if you keep progressing nicely you'll be able to come home for a visit soon.”

“What a crock of shit,” she spits out. “I know you, you lousy creep. You're not fooling me, you'll never let me out of this dump. I'm in here and you and that shit kid can do whatever you want.”

“Marg,” he speaks slowly, “I want you to get better, our daughter Helen wants you to get better.”

“What a crock of shit,” she repeats.

She picks up her cup with both hands and holds her head back, coffee streaming down the sides of her mouth. She holds the cup out to him.

“Get me another cup of coffee,” she commands. “Let's see if you can do that without my help.” He takes the cup to the coffee counter, where he again pours slowly, wondering what further indignities are in store before it will be time to leave.

When he returns to the table she says nothing until he sits, then blurts out, “You've got syphilis.”

He's so startled he spills some of his coffee. “What did you say?”

“Syphilis, syphilis, do I have to spell it for you?”

“Marg, why did you say that?”

“I can tell from the way you walk, bowlegged and hesitating, like you want to stop to scratch your balls.”

He lets out a sigh to overcome his surprise. Thinking of a suitable answer he says, “That’s my sailor walk from my time in the Navy.”

He sneaks a glance at his watch. The train doesn’t leave for another hour, he thinks, and the bars still not open. Should be a law, bars near mental hospitals allowed to remain open all day and night. Humane law, necessary to keep visitors from becoming patients. Should have rented a car, should have gotten more sleep, should have skipped a visit. All the should-haves and what do they amount to? A man guilt-ridden because he’s sure he’s somehow responsible for a deranged wife.

“Some savior,” she says. “Shit, I wouldn’t trust you in a rowboat like I was dumb enough to do one time.”

Again she startles him. “Marg, do you really remember that time we rented a rowboat in Central Park? It was a beautiful day, the lake was so clear you could see the bottom.”

“Shit, I remember all right. I should remember, you tipped the boat over, and I almost drowned. You did it on purpose, you wanted to get rid of me. You tried it other times too, like when we went to the Bahamas on vacation.”

“Marg,” he says patiently, “we never went to the Bahamas, all our vacations were spent at my sister’s place in Massachusetts.”

“You lying fuck,” she says with vehemence. “I remember the Bahamas, you tried to drown me there too. Every day at the beach you tried to hold my head under water. You’re some slick son-of-a-bitch all right. Hell, I should have let you drown me, I’d be better off than I am in this dump.”

“And did we stay on this mysterious trip for a long time?”

“When it was time to come home you wanted to stay longer, you wanted more time to try to drown me. Good thing I was stronger than you, I probably still am.” She stands and approaches him, her fists held out. “Come on, I’ll fight you now, show you I can still kick shit out of you.”

She strikes out at him, but he wards off the blow. He stands, puts an arm around her and moves her back into her chair.

“No need to prove anything Marg, you’re still the champ.”

She beams at the compliment and when he’s seated she says, “You’re damn right I am. Now give me more remembers.”

“Marg, I don’t think...”

She doesn’t let him finish, shouting, “More remembers. If you don’t I really will kick shit out of you.”

She starts to get up but he waves her back into the chair. “All right, you want more remembers.”

“You’re damn right I do. Places we went, what we did.”

He tries to think of imaginary trips. “I have one, our trip to Paris. What about that?”

“You tried to throw me off the Eiffel Tower. It was lucky for me a guard came along and stopped you.”

Her ingenuity forces him to smile, and he feeds her another remember.

“Our trip to California.”

“You left me stranded in some goddamn desert with no food or water. But I outfoxed you again, and when I walked out of the desert everyone said it was a miracle.”

“What about our weekends in Boston?”

She answers immediately, “You ditched me on the streets, with no money. You thought I couldn’t find my way back to the hotel, but I surprised you. A good thing too, you had some bimbo in the room, some pig who would have given you syphilis if I didn’t stop you from fucking her.”

She smiles broadly, happy with her performance.

“Come on, birdbrain, more.”

Her quick responses irritate him, and he’s determined to stop her. “All right, how about the safari we went on.”

“Shit, that’s easy. You tried to kill me every day. You were supposed to be shooting at animals, but you were really aiming at me. Good thing you were such a lousy shot. Christ, you can’t do anything right.”

“All right, Marg, you did great. Now let’s stop.”

“One more,” she says, a hard look allowing no argument.

He knows she’s determined to have a final remember, and he searches for a topic that will give her difficulty. Finally he says, “Here’s one for you, our trip to Spain to watch the bullfights.”

She jumps up shouting, “Ole! Ole!” Then she pulls a dirty handkerchief from her pocketbook, holding it like a cape and waving it in front of his face.

“Come on, let’s see what you can do. You’re the bull, I’m the matador.” She hits his face with the handkerchief, continuing to taunt him. “Come on, charge me, charge me. If you don’t I swear I’ll cut off your balls.”

“Marg, please sit down,” he pleads.

“Up, get up, you have to charge me. You’ll see what a great matador I would have been when we were in Spain.”

Realizing the futility of arguing he gets up, puts his head down, and does a slow pass. She pulls the handkerchief away and says, “Shit, that’s not a bull, that’s a goddamned lamb. You’ve got to put something into it, a real bull, a real charge.”

“Marg, let’s sit and talk.”

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” she screams. “Stop giving me fucking shit and do what I tell you.”

He tries to control rising anger, she’s pushed him further than on any previous visit, and he feels the need to retaliate. He lowers his head, shuffles his feet, and places an index finger on each side of his head in imitation of a bull’s horns. He charges, intending to make contact, but she deftly steps aside and as he passes she kicks him in the buttocks.

He’s sent sprawling on the cafeteria floor, and says, “Shit,” while she laughs hysterically. She sits, pointing at him while he gets up from the floor.

“Some bull, more like a frightened rabbit.” She finishes her coffee and holds the cup out. “More coffee, bull,” she says.

He obediently takes the cup and heads for the coffee counter. When he returns he says, “Marg, I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me. All those stupid things I said, trips to Europe, safaris, bullfights. I’m a terrible liar.”

“You’re a lying bastard.”

"I know, Marg, I just said that."

"No, you're a liar when you say you're a liar. I remember all those places. You want me to think they didn't happen because everybody liked me, nobody liked you. That's because I have class, you're a complete shit."

"You're being pretty hard on me today, Marg."

"Ha, you deserve it. You had me locked up in this dump." Her voice takes on a soft quality as she asks, "When can I go home?"

He's touched by the pathetic plea. "You were pretty sick, it takes time to get back to where you were. It can't be hurried."

"But I want to go home. I want to go back to our house. We have a house, don't we?"

"An apartment," he answers. "Cosy, comfortable. Because you made it that way."

"I know how to take care of a house. My mother taught me, I listened to her. I should have listened when she told me about you. You tried to feel her up. She wouldn't let my father feel her up, and you thought you could get away with it."

He ignores the insult and says, "Marg, walking up from the gate I was surprised how beautiful the grounds have become. Everything is in bloom, lovely colors."

"I lived in a big house with my mother and father."

"Yes, it was a lovely house."

"I think I had a brother."

"Whoever did the landscaping," he continues, "had to be an artist, flowers arranged in interesting, patterns, circles, hearts, ovals."

"Maybe it was a sister." She reaches over and touches his hand. "My mother was a beautiful woman. Everyone always said I looked just like her. My mother loved me."

He looks at his watch again. "Marg, let's take a walk. I want to show you some of the floral arrangements."

"My father was a kind man. He loved me, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"I had a dog when I was small, white, furry. What was his name?"

"I think you told me it was Snowball."

"Snowball liked to snuggle in my lap. He liked to lick my fingers."

"I remember you telling me about Snowball, how much you loved him."

"Snowball woke me up every morning. He jumped up on my bed and licked my face. Snowball loved me."

"Yes, Marg, I'm sure he did."

"Whenever I got hurt my father made me feel better. He patted my head and said I was special, I was his special girl."

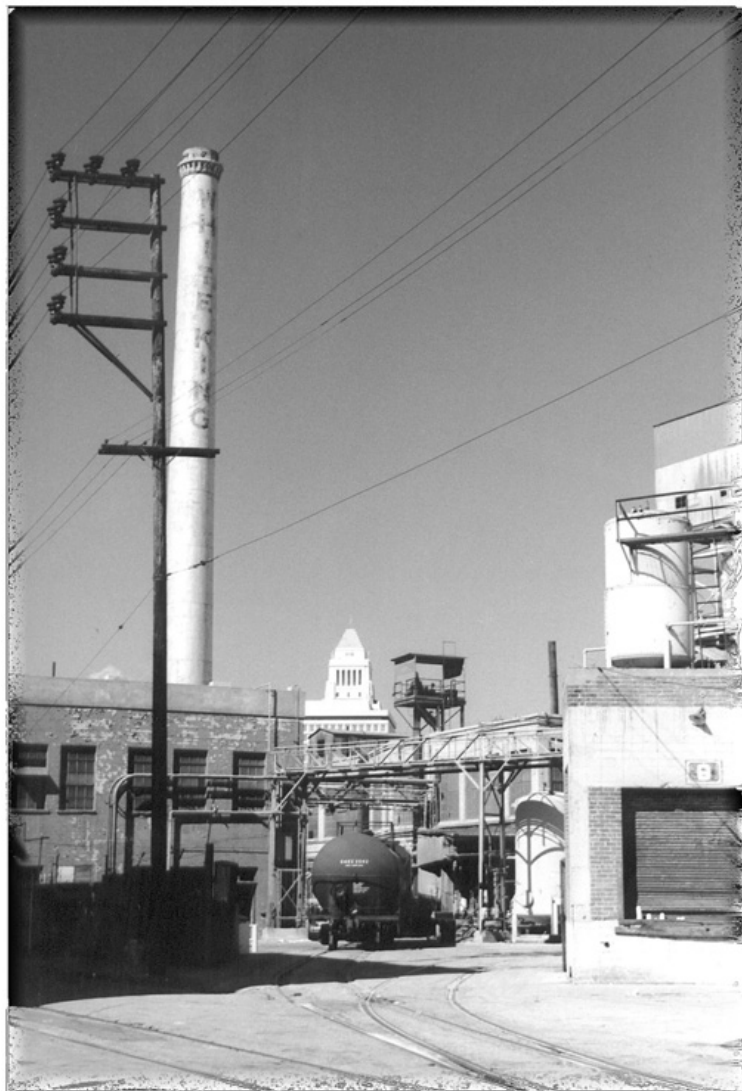
He hears muffled voices outside the cafeteria, and he stands, hoping to come through the final phase of the visit without a major eruption.

"Marg, it's time to go."

He holds his breath expecting resistance, but she stands, holding onto his arm as they head towards the exit.

“I want to go home now,” she says, the words spoken softly. “I want to see my mother and father and Snowball.”

At the door she stops, looking at him as she adds, “I hope they’re not out, I hope they’re waiting for me.”



Sam Bluefarb

Women Who Lost Their Farm Kill Themselves

Robert Cooperman

Never trust a banker's handshake,
a scythe's hidden up his arm.
No matter how many chickens
or eggs we crated to market,
we could never make a dent
in the principal on the loan
he smiled to extend to us.

For the last two years
we made do without electricity,
stored vegetables in the root cellar,
hauled water that tasted
of the alkali that killed
emigrants on the Oregon Trail.
Finally, with the marshals driving
out to throw us off
like Okies in Dust Bowl days,
we wrote the note, locked
the garage, and ran the pickup.

Rawhide goes limp
as a dish rag in my arms.
I cry through the blur of fumes,
but the pound will kill him,
at least all of us are together.

I kiss Maureen,
like she's my daughter
and needs a reassuring peck
before going to bed
with the night-light on.
But her eyes don't flutter no more.

Preacher'll say we're hell-bound,
but I'll bet Jesus is waiting,
especially for Rawhide, bossy
as a top-hand on a cattle ranch,
when open range was for the taking.

Dottore Luigi Falcone Awaits Juliet's Visit to the Cavalcanti Mental Asylum: Verona, Italy

Robert Cooperman

Her visit is most certainly
not a social occasion,
merely my proving to her
that my patients are not chained
to dank walls, my orderlies
laughing like Dr. Frankenstein's Igor.

I will wear a white dottore's coat,
my pipe wafting scholarly aromas.
But what if the smoke makes her
wheeze and cough, cast glares to confirm
I'm a brute, poisoning the planet?

This is ridiculous! I should just delegate
her visit to Dottore Castagno,
who'd charm the harpy
and leave me free for my patients,
poor Signor Colucci twittering
like a canary ever since some fool
of an orderly gossiped Mistress Juliet
will be paying us a visit.

I had to promise the hapless man
a brief audience with her. Let's hope
he doesn't spontaneously combust
from the ecstasy of his obsession.
At least he'll be mildly sedated,
and may not rave his delusions out loud.

I feel like a frantic Shakespearean,
afraid I've forgotten my cues.
Hell, the woman's probably one hundred.

Ah Signorina Giulietta,
a pleasure to meet you at last!

(When the Verona, Italy, post office became inundated with mail addressed only "To Juliet," it hired a young woman to answer all of it. So much is fact, the rest of this poem is pure invention.)

Silence

Dave Dreher

Silence: She goes into her room and closes the door behind her. Firmly, but not a slam. She stands there for a while, looking out the window. It is hot and green outside. The air conditioning is going. Central air conditioning. The rock stars on the posters on the walls are staring at her carefully, seriously. Her bed is made and her mother has laid out tomorrow's school clothes on the bedspread. She wonders what her mother thinks when she goes into her room to clean and put her clothes away, and what the posters are all about. She watched her father at dinner tonight. He poked with his fork, chewed, and talked. She talked too, but watched more than she talked. She couldn't decide if he was more the work-guy who was her dad or her dad who was the work-guy. And her mom, was she the work-guy's wife or her dad's wife? These thoughts no longer just came up at dinner time but started to cross her mind when school let out, sometimes earlier. Other kids had moms and dads who seemed happier with them, warmer. They talked about things. She felt slight embarrassment in their homes, the parents who were so overflowing with kindness that she felt almost a part of the family wherever she went. These kids were different, they were going to be different. And they would look at her differently, if they did not already. She felt as if their friendship just might be charity. /And what did they talk about when she was not there./ She would imagine walking up to them and then they would automatically start in with the bland, overly-friendly chat, their mothers already having told them to be nice and smile and laugh if they think she is telling a joke. It was horrible and she felt horrible about it. Like she was imposing, always. There was no way to get past that and make things normal, like with everybody else. She goes over to the wall and disconnects the phone, taking the jack out of the wall. She ties one end around the door knob of the closet and sits against the door. She reaches back and pulls the dangling cord over her shoulder and winds up something resembling an old-fashioned noose, making a large loop and wrapping the slack around the top of the loop several times. She curls the remaining slack under one of the small winding loops and places the large loop over her head, around her neck. She sits there with legs straight out and arms by her sides, palms flat on the floor and wonders if she feels bad enough to do something like this.

Silence: She is smoking a cigarette, watching him lie there. He is breathing. She thinks he is breathing. She sits up in her chair and looks again, for the twentieth time at least. Yes, he is breathing. He is still face down, in the same position as yesterday. She caught a few hours sleep on the couch. She did not want to be near him when he woke up. Not /at that moment/. That's also why she only slept for a few hours and not very well at that. She leaned over to the right and saw that the blood had dried. It had dried since yesterday and there was a small brown stain on the bedspread, near the back of his head. The cut had coagulated and it was beginning to scab over, but it was stretched over the swelled lump that was the point of contact. Around the cut the hair was matted and looked like some kind of fur or wig hair. She had washed the underside of the pan this morning, fried some eggs in it, washed it again, and put it away. She skipped lunch. There were some donuts, but she didn't want any. She wondered if he would ever wake up. Somehow it seemed inevitable. It just had not happened yet. He'd /better/ get up. She dug a fingernail in between the curlers with her cigarette hand. There was no fucking way he was going to walk out in the middle of an argument just so he could get drunk and pass out on that good bedspread.

Silence: He opened his eyes and realized he was awake. He never really slept well after having drunk so much the previous night. Just lying there, exhausted from staying up all night and the booze having left a toilet ring of dull pain around his head. One beer and he slept like a baby. More than a six pack or twelve and he slept like shit, body trying futilely to sweat. The alcohol forced so much fluid out of his body, encouraged hangovers to start quickly and then clammy all over and with a major headache. It had been like this and especially so since he had hung up the phone four hours ago. He looked at the clock, 12:15 p.m. in red digital. When the call came he forced out some alertness, agreed to meet at a certain time, 3:00 p.m. Then, exhausted, he closed his eyes and tried to log some more down time. He'd need it. Now it was 12:15 p.m. in red

digital. Worry crept into his belly. Jesus, the call /had/ come. He peered over the sheet which was drawn up to his nose while lying on his side. She had cried. That's why he was scared. If she hadn't cried, physically cried, then maybe a discrete apology would have covered it. After all, he didn't go through with it, couldn't. Too drunk. That's /right/. But she was upset enough to cry and she would remember that – forever – and it wasn't so much that she had been upset enough to cry, it was that she actually cried. He remembered her face from last night, wet and unhappy. That was the reason, the actual reason. After that, he did not remember much. But what happened before, he tried to put it together like a lawyer would. He would need a lawyer.

Silence: He is sitting on the edge of the bed, near the pillows wondering if he will want to go peepee when Mommy comes in the room. He does not feel like he has to go peepee right now. He feels a little sleepy and lies sideways against the pillows at the head of the bed. He made his bed and cleaned his room this morning. The pillow feels good against his face but he keeps one foot on the floor. He should be sitting up when Mommy comes in to take him to the bathroom. He does not think he has to go peepee right now. Then the door knob rattles slightly and Mommy comes in the room. He sits up quickly and looks at her. It's time to go peepee, Mommy says, come on, and she claps her hands. Mommy smells like alot of perfume. Mommy follows him to the bathroom and tells him to go to the toilet and put up the seat. Mommy tells him to pull down his pants and underpants and pull up his shirt and go peepee. When he has his pants down and shirt pulled up, Mommy stands very close and tells him to go. Nothing comes out. He says he doesn't have to go peepee right now. Mommy says, why, but does not wait for an answer. She grabs his upper arm and takes him out of the bathroom quickly, before he can pull up his pants and tuck in his shirt like he is supposed to do. Mommy is pulling his arm hard and then some peepee falls out and goes on her leg. Mommy looks and sees what has happened. She says, What the hell do you think you are doing? And then a lot of peepee comes out very fast onto the carpet, so fast he cannot stop it. Then it stops. Mommy looks at the dark spot on the carpet and then points and tells him he is going to clean this up right now. She looks real mad and squeezes his arm very tight. He looks up at her, arm raised in her hand and feels like more peepee wants to come out but nothing else comes out. He feels like he wants to go No. 2 right now.

Silence: He is sitting there at the kitchen table, listening to it, and trying to find some voice-thought of consolation. Or apathy. That is because she is standing across the table from him, screaming. She says FAGGOT/LOSER/PATHETIC/MOTHERFUCKER/COCKSUCKER/FAILURETHATSWHATYOUARE. She is drinking, is drunk. Her face is contorted and ugly. Her hair is partly matted down and partly sticking up. Her eyes are bloodshot and she is slurring. It is not the words, he thinks, it's that shrill voice and that vicious face. He rests his forehead against the butts of his hands, elbows on the table, trying not to look or listen. She continues inexorably. She is getting in some good digs, stuff that he really cannot respond to, partly because she is shitfaced. The rest was true, depending on your perspective. Frustrated, he slaps his hand down on the table, harder than he intended. She stops yelling immediately and stares at him, looking scared. He'd almost forgotten about that. He pushes his chair back away from the table and stands up. With as much deliberate patience as he can muster, he walks around the table toward her. She takes a step back. She asks what he is going to do, really asking. He moves in front of her with his hands by his sides. Her hands are down by her sides too, but she does not look at ease that way. He looks at her and can tell what she is thinking by the way her lower lip is trembling, eyebrows furrowed. It is a face he likes even less. He finds he likes her voice even less, too, when she cries out. It makes him hit harder.

Silence: He had stopped because he thought he heard something. He is standing in the hallway, in front of the bedroom door. The door is closed and from behind it he just heard someone

**there was a small
brown stain on the
bedspread, near the
back of his head**

say 'sshh,' deliberately quiet and what sounded like the bedsheets slowly rustling. He opens his mouth wide in order to breathe as quietly as possible and hear something else. There is nothing for the moment, a long moment. He realizes that the light is on behind him and that it is probably dark in there. That means they can see the shadows of his feet under the door. He stands there, open-mouthed, letting his ears fine-tune the silence even more. He thinks he just heard someone say I don't know! He is looking at the door and remains motionless. There is an itch on his face but he does not scratch because his jacket will make a noise. He wants to clear his throat but only swallows instead. He listens and hears nothing. That means that they are also being still and quiet and listening. They know. They see his feet under the door. Two of them. That means that one of them is on his side of the bed. Maybe they are propped up on their elbows and watching to see if the shadows under the door move. He backs away from the door, keeping the shadows in line with the original position, and turns, walking softly away from the door on the balls of his feet, avoiding the soft spots on the floor. He stops, turns and looks. The door is still closed. He hears nothing. He goes to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator and sees that no one has touched the beer. He pulls one out, twists the cap off and stands there. He drinks it in long pulls, remaining in the same position. When he finishes, he decides to not throw the bottle away or even to take it with him. Before leaving out the back door, he puts the empty bottle and cap on the kitchen table. That way she will have to say something.

Silence: He is lying on his back, eyes open. His eyes have adjusted to the dark and he can make out the ceiling and the dresser. He is awake, but not up. He looks over. She is lying on her side, facing away from him. Her side of the quilt is moving up and down in a slow rhythm. He slowly slides out of his side of the bed. He goes to the door, which is half-closed, pulls it open and goes out, replacing it to the original position. The hallway is dark. He makes his way to the kitchen. He goes to one of the drawers and pulls out a large, sharp knife. He closes the drawer and brings the knife with him back to the bedroom. He pushes open the door and goes in. She is in the same position as before, lying on her side. He walks up and places the sharp side of the knife just barely against her windpipe. He wonders if it is touching. He wonders if she will wake up right now. He takes the knife away from her throat and stands there over her with it at his side. Again he waits and wonders if she will wake up, if she can /sense it/. After a while, he goes back to the kitchen and puts the knife away. He returns to the bedroom, putting the door back to the position it was before. He slides back into bed slowly, watching her at the same time. He lies on his back, pulls up the quilt lightly and looks over at her. He watches for the same rhythm. After watching for a while, he begins to feel safe and drifts off.

Silence: He is sitting in his chair, upright with hands on his knees. Like a Japanese ambassador or something. Before sitting, he had stood in front of the television with the remote control and adjusted the volume to a moderate setting, not too loud but loud enough so that he could hear everything clearly and without missing anything. Then he pressed another button to find something worth watching. A movie he liked was just starting. He sat down in his chair and placed the remote on the stand next to the chair, pointing forward. He pushed himself against



**Jennifer
Stanley**

the chair's back and placed hands on knees. The opening credits were going. If she asked a reasonable question, he would respond as briefly and efficiently as possible, but nothing more. Let brevity be the courtesy. She will come in and he will do nothing. He noted what could be seen in his peripheral vision; the curtains, the bookshelf, some light coming in from the kitchen, his hands on his knees. He wonders if he will say anything at first, if she said something. She will say /something/, no matter how subtle or cute she thinks she is. But he will not instigate. Do not start, he thinks. Don't give her anything. Do not give her the satisfaction. You are just sitting here and watching television. She will be back soon. He bears down on the screen. One word and he will rip her goddamn throat out.

Silence: The three of them are sitting in the front room. They never really use the front room, but it is where the front door opens and that is the reason. She had considered dressing up the kids. It crossed her mind, that's all, but it would have been too much. She brought them in here ½-hour early, just in case. Then she got up to get them some fruit juice and some little trucks and dolls to keep them occupied. There was a board game, but she thought twice about the sight of him coming in and seeing the three of them preoccupied, no, /excluding/ him somehow. She sits on one side of the couch that is positioned against the front window, so she can see. Now and again, too frequently really, she pulls aside the translucent white curtains to look, stretching her neck a bit in order to see down the street. Then she looks around the room. She gets up and stands with her back to the front door. This is what he will see when he comes in. The kids seem OK, content. She will be on the sofa when he comes in. She walks to the front hall mirror, checks herself, then returns to the couch, thinking maybe the three of them should be waiting in the TV room. She decides against it. The two of them had talked about it last night, sitting up in bed with the lights on. Had they really talked though, she wonders. This was new territory, sure, so it was hard to really get /into/ it. And yet a talk, /the talk/ had happened. Little trucks roll over the tan carpet, little dolls are propped up in chairs. There is just no way to tell who the psychiatrist was sending home to her.

Silence: This is it. And no first thoughts were coming to mind, either. Such a simple mechanical/ physical process. A bolt goes through a fitted hole and that is all there is to it. No ominous symphony music. Just one little view, a two-second event. It happened, has just happened. He looks around. Small. He does not bother to go to look to see what is beyond the bars. It is important to develop an M.O., a sense of how to feel about all this, somehow get a handle on it. Nothing comes to mind except a sense of the weight of it all. Emotions, no, the /possibility/ of emotions cross his mind – sad, passive, rage, etc. But they seem somehow petty and useless, thinner than water, perpetually being steam-rolled in his mind by an omnipresent iron jaw. In a cage, in an institution, a subindustry of life, grey, ugly and too real. Try to relax. He sits on the mattress. His shoulders curl in towards his knees. He closes his eyes. /Okayokayokay/.

**They know. They see
his feet under the
door. Two of them.**

Silence: The bathroom door is still closed, but no one at the table will admit that they are /listening/. There is simply a lapse in the conversation, you see. It is also the third time that conversation will have to be struck up again, and it is only midway through the main course. Three other couples are sitting at the table, waiting, sipping at their wine, fingering the embroidery of the table cloth, smoothing the napkins in their laps. It just would not be polite to continue with everything while those two were in the bathroom. Now and then the rustling of clothing, a muffled word, or a light clink of metal can be heard underneath the humming of the bathroom fan. Still waiting, it seems even a little longer this time. A woman at the table exhales loudly through her nostrils. The man sitting across from her looks up and makes eye contact, raising his eyebrows and pulling in the corners of his mouth. /There/. It's all out in the open. They all shuffle in their seats, feeling a little more free to be impatient, if not outright irritated. Lord only knows why he insists on bringing her out when he knows that this sort of thing is going to happen. I mean I feel sorry for her. And for him. But /this/...

Silence: The car is stopped in front of her house, rented. This is a moment that is worth enjoying, because she is so tired. And it is late. Between the two, she can relax. Tomorrow is another day but for now she can relax. This day is over. It hardly mattered that she made very little money tonight. There is a bed waiting for her right now. It will feel good to get in, feel the cool smoothness of the sheets, and drift off. She will shower first. There was a guy who spat as he talked to her cheek. Another guy seemed to use her as a towel to wipe off the condensation from his beer bottles. Not to mention the smoke and not to mention the hand grease on the poles and the guy who stretched out his neck to lick one of her nipples and the drunk, fat lesbo

who kept hitting on her and not to mention the general filth of the place. Bar rags and floor-lint collectors weren't good for much. She realizes her ears are ringing. Goddamn DJ had it cranked up too loud again. Could bad breath actually leave a film on the skin? It felt like it. Or maybe it was the thick makeup. Her hands felt dirty, still wrapped around the steering wheel. Her eyes are closing. Oh shit, she says, remembering. She starts the car again and reverses out, hoping that the sitter isn't too pissed off that she is late and that the kids didn't give her any trouble.

Silence: Except for the dribbling of the aquarium. It was a pleasant but not quite musical sound. There were plenty of fish in there, maybe two dozen, tiny and tipped and striped with blues, yellows, orange, red. Their fins flapped and rippled slowly as they hovered over the gravel at the bottom. They always seemed to intend to go somewhere, with those eyes wide open, but they would only dart and glide to the flickering shade of some plastic treasure chest or plant. Fish really are magnificent creatures. Only when you watch them for a while do you really get a sense of it. Such graceful efficiency. People are much more awkward, even out of the water – gangly, fragile. There is just no comparison. And when a human panics, screams, face contorted, arms and limbs flail. When a fish panics, it quietly gives a flick of the tail and darts off, expressionless. But there was nothing to cause the fish to panic just then. One of them could have gotten up and tapped on the glass, but no one did. It was a big glass tank. They were all tired. It was hard to concentrate on anything. It was going to be a long morning and a long day. The couches were soft and comfortable. Not like at home, but nice just the same. It would have felt good to get out of the suits and ties each of them were wearing. The owner would be back just now. They agreed on it and then they told him. It would be better that the casket be closed.

**Not to mention the
smoke and not to
mention the hand
grease on the poles**

Silence: He has left, gone to the TV room. She gets up off the floor and goes to a cabinet to get a zip-lock bag. She goes upstairs, slowly, because movement makes the ribs hurt and brings blood pressure to her face, swollen and cut. She goes into the bathroom with the plastic bag and closes the door behind her. She takes off her robe, leaning backward slightly in order to avoid contact with her body as much as possible. She hangs up the robe on the hook on the door. She goes over to the toilet and stands with her back to it. She pulls down her panties, holding them in place when they reach her knees, and steps out of them. She turns and holds her underwear by the elastic over the toilet, turns it inside out and shakes it gently. Then she flushes the toilet. She reaches for the bag and puts her underwear in it. She zips up the bag, puts it next to the toilet, and starts the shower. She gets in after letting the water heat up, but not too much because it will make the cuts on her face sting if the water is too hot. She gets in and cleans herself up, cleans the fecal matter and urine out of her groin, rinses thoroughly, and gets out. She dries off, blotting her face and ribs on the left side and puts on her robe again. She looks in the mirror and touches the cuts lightly. She slicks back her hair with a brush. She exits the bathroom and goes to the bedroom for a new pair of panties. She finds them, pulls them on and then goes to the closet for her house slippers. She goes back to the bathroom to retrieve the bag. She walks down the stairs, slowly, holding on to the rail with one hand and the bag in the other. She goes to the back door, opens it and goes to the trash can and throws the bag in. She walks back inside, finds some ibuprofen in a kitchen cabinet and takes three with a little water. She sits down at the kitchen table and pulls a pack of cigarettes and an ashtray toward her. She pulls one out and lights it. She wonders what she will do when this pack runs out.

Silence: He is looking at the floor. It is much closer to his face, now that he is bent at the waist, instead of just looking down with his neck. The tiniest veins of grey in the white marble can be seen with resolute clarity. Even that means something, the detail. The pain is in his stomach, but it is pushing through his eyes. Yes, it is going down, but very slowly. Breathing is important now, deep relaxed breaths. The pain is subsiding, but too slowly and he realizes that he is trying to catch his breath. That panics him, especially because his father is still there, waiting

for him to straighten up. He sees his father's shoes, one in front and one behind, ready. They are brown shoes with darker flat brown laces. The leather is flexed and creased and still shiny in someplaces. No plan is coming to mind. The floor has no answers either. Just 12"x12" white marble tiles, with grey veins, polished to a high sheen. His father's shoes have dark rubber soles. It was rubber versus socks.

Silence: Watching the deformed walk down the hall.

Silence: When the television is shut off.

Silence: Watching the cops hover around the slob they just pulled over.

Silence: After the dog is put to sleep.

Silence: Underneath the rock music turned all the way up.

Silence: As thoughts of suicide creep in.

Silence: Watching your fighter go down.

Silence: Being projected around your rage.

Silence: When the jury door opens.

Silence: When the cell door closes.

Silence: Watching a 65 year-old man with a 19 year-old chippy.

Silence: As panic hits your belly.

Silence: After the phone rings five times.

Silence: Hoping that something will happen.

Silence: Hoping that nothing will happen.

Silence: While lying in bed awake and alone on a rainy night.

DADS' Day

Eugene C. Flinn

Cast thy bread upon the waters
For thou will find it after many days.
Ecclesiastes 11:1

Once upon a time, way back around 2001, there was a Prince of Business named Vernon Schaffner. He wasn't a real prince, of course, at least not like the princes in fairy tales; some of his enemies said he wasn't a real fairy, either. But there was no doubt that he was called Prince.

He got that name from an editorial writer on the Wall Street Journal. When Mr. Schaffner saw the editorial, he had his pilot fly him to the newspaper office at once. The writer was a little frightened when he saw the Schaffner entourage coming down the hallway of the editorial office, but all Mr. Schaffner wanted to do was present the writer with a check for \$50,000 because he liked the name. The writer, honorable journalist that he was, accepted it under the proviso that he could donate it to his favorite charity. The Prince smiled amiably; he was a man of the world.

Almost from that point on he was referred to as Prince Schaffner. You see, he didn't have any title, not having gone to graduate school, studied medicine or law, or run for public office. He was too busy making money with his disintegrating aerial diapers, better known by the trade name of DADS.

It was really a simple invention. He got the idea from a toy boomerang his parents had given him when he was a kid. Boomerangs go out, then come back. All he had to do was eliminate the second part. With DADS, one didn't even have to dispose of diapers any more. Schaffner's diapers were treated with a special chemical, making it possible for Father to simply hold the soiled diaper over his head in a stiff wind and it would dissolve right in front of his eyes. Convenient, and not at all messy unless Father (or Mother, for that matter) grabbed the diaper in the middle rather than at the edges, as the instructions on the box advised. But even in extreme cases like that, the damage was usually limited to the inside of the fingernails.

Of course, a package of DADS wasn't cheap, but that didn't hinder its marketability. The rich and middle class gobbled them up, and many of the poor postponed payments on their cars and VCR's to keep their homes stocked with DADS. The American people liked convenience and there was nothing more convenient than getting rid of excrement by simply waving it at the sun. Rumor had it that Prince Schaffner was instrumental in having legislation passed that permitted the poverty-stricken to purchase DADS with food stamps. In some cases it meant cutting down on potato chips and hot dogs; thus in an indirect way it educated the impoverished on the value of eliminating saturated fats from their diet.

As you must have guessed, Prince Schaffner's success with DADS soon led to even better things. After all, once he had established the principle of merely sticking something into the air and watching it disappear, you can imagine how the Prince revolutionized the waste disposal industry. Here in the twenty-first century the word garbage has become almost as obsolete as 23-skiddoo, hula hoop, and poetry. It wasn't long before the Prince applied his patented chemical process – more closely guarded than the secret for Coca Cola – to just about anything that could be held up in the air. For sentimental, and perhaps marketing, reasons he retained the name DADS for his new disappearing solution, which he sold by the tube, spray can, and in some cases gallon jug. Deposit bottle and cans became a thing of the past. All one had to do was drop a dab of DADS formula on a object, open a window, and stick it out. How fast people began getting rid of plastic containers, old newspapers, magazines, boxes, paper bags, broken toys, outdated telephone books, and, obviously, garbage cans!

It was wonderful on the Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays. No more hours of clean-up in the kitchen for Mother. As soon as dinner was over Father usually summoned the whole family outdoors with the dirty paper plates and turkey bones. A little squirt of DADS all around. Hands

up in the air. Poof! All Mother had to do was put away the leftovers.

It wasn't an unfamiliar sight to see men, women, and children in front of their houses holding up their old radios, cassettes, waffle irons, and TV sets. Once in awhile you might have spotted two or three men struggling to lift up an old washing machine or refrigerator. It usually took a little longer than your simple toaster or microwave oven, but with a bit of patience and three or four guys with linebacker physiques and mentalities, a family could get rid of a freezer, baby grand piano, or Honda Civic in a matter of minutes.

Commodes came back into fashion again. This time disposable, of course, and in high fashion colors and stripes. Obviously there was no need to go through all that trouble of flushing toilets any more. It certainly was fortuitous since the water supply was low, what with so many reservoirs and wells drying up. Generally speaking, it was not the best idea to stick your commode in the air early in the morning, the most popular housecleaning time in the western hemisphere. The disintegration was still as rapid as ever, but with a few trillion commodos aimed into the air at precisely the same time, the atmosphere for those who still had partial use of their olfactory nerves was a tad stifling.

**there was nothing
more convenient
than getting rid of
excrement by simply
waving it at the sun**

Oh yes, the Prince was international. His DADS were the electric light bulb of his generation. What a job they did in Venice. Let's face it, even the most chauvinistic Venetians admitted their city had been a walking sewer since the Renaissance. And still the tourists kept coming. With DADS the smell had abated somewhat. The Prince devised a machine that was a cross between an armored tank and the street sweepers that towns used before double and triple-deck parking tiers were installed on most of the streets of the world. When it was late at night and the tourists had spent all their money, the city fathers turned the machine on and aimed its gun at the center of St. Marc's Square. It sucked up all the pigeon droppings in less than a minute. Then they would pour a half-gallon of DADS into the cannon and shoot it off into the night. Voila! Early morning tourists could stroll along St. Marc's Square in their bare feet.

What a medley in the skies on some days! Empty vodka bottles from Russia, old teabags from England, cartridge shells from Israel, and throwaway cameras from Japan. A journalist on the now defunct New York Times dubbed the phenomenon "the United Nations of the heavens." Yes, every country in the world was represented by some type of airborne garbage.

Of course, the airlines didn't like this very much. Visibility was zero more often, not only from the smog and pollution, but from high-flying debris. Special radar had to be designed just to avoid an occasional mid-air collision with an old dishwasher or Corvette that had taken too long to dissolve. The excrement that lingered on before becoming part of the atmosphere wasn't as dangerous as it was messy. An early-morning encounter with a trillion pounds of slowly dissolving waste could be upsetting for businessmen on the shuttle flights. That's why they discontinued the practice of serving a light breakfast on the executive specials.

Like everything else, there were debates on the use of DADS. The old chestnut about "the greenhouse effect" didn't get very far since most people had already become used to wearing oxygen masks nine or ten hours a day anyway. Besides, the department stores that had invested trillions in designer masks were foremost among the lobbyists for DADS. The airlines would have squawked more about clogged engines, glop on the windshields, and a few dozen fatal crashes a week, but their cargo planes were making a fortune freighting DADS, a truly American product when you come to think of it, to the seventh world countries, who paid for their supplies from funds they acquired from 100-year loans. Incidentally, the nice thing about a plane loaded with DADS going down was that as soon as it crashed, the DADS were released and the giant airplane, cargo and crew, soon became a part of the never, never land of space, a new version of the good old reliable self-destruct of bygone years.

There was a story, which might be apocryphal, that in the latter part of the twentieth century a garbage barge left New York and sailed pretty nearly around the world looking for a country that would accept its load. Back in the Prince's time that would never have happened. His men would have just poured two gallons on top of the barge and it would soon be sailing around among the stars.

The trouble with checking out the barge story and others like it was that ever since they started applying DADS to the libraries to make more space for parking lots, jetports, shopping malls, and condominiums, there just weren't that many books around. But we do know that there were lots of oil spills and nuclear waste back in the twentieth century because there were some in the twenty-first until Prince Schaffner gave us DADS.

Word came slowly and inconspicuously. It began as one of those tiny items that the New Yorker magazine sometimes carried to fill up the space at the end of the page when the rerun of a John Updike story didn't stretch out to its usual ten pages. It read:

Beans in the Windy City

Mrs. P. O'Leary from Chicago told police that she had been attacked by a can of Bile Beans while she was strolling along the shores of Lake Michigan last month. She was booked for questioning and later released of her own recognizance.

The following week a man in Étretat, France, reported that his German shepherd had been laid low by a set of pink hair curlers that dropped from the sky. Then the next day came a story out of the Gaspé Peninsula in Canada of a truck driver who narrowly escaped getting hit by a sewing machine. By the end of the week a woman in Athens, Georgia, was smacked on the back of the neck by a bag of fish heads, an old ammunition box dropped at the feet of a monsignor in front of Sacre Coeur in Paris, and a Mack truck landed on the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville, Tennessee.

And still they kept coming – beer cans, old tires, half-eaten spaghetti dinners, outdoor plastic furniture, prune pits, transistors, hypodermic needles, the works. All one had to do was look up in the air and something was raining down, from lingerie to lawn mowers, from radios to wrenches. The wonder was the casualties were relatively small, when you consider all the stuff that was flying around up there. To be sure there was considerable property damage. The world grieved when it learned that 17 freight cars loaded with truck parts, old generators, and shredding machines leveled the Pentagon on the same day that a carton of assorted trash including slot machines, No-Nonsense pantyhose, poisoned grapes, and black shoe polish exploded in front of 10 Downing Street.

But there were occasional bits of good news. A considerable amount of living waste landed on the Sahara Desert, causing scientists to speculate that it might fertilize the hot barren sands. Although most of the libraries that sailed back to earth had half their books missing, all of the works of Danielle Steele, Stephen King, and Richard M. Nixon landed unscathed. On another happy note librarians reported that most of the missing books were by obscure, little-read writers—Swift, Camus, Dickinson, and Rabelais were among the names they recalled—so the loss was minimal.

Meanwhile the Prince was naturally upset by the sudden turn of events. DADS had made him the richest man in the world, but his fortune was quickly dissipating. The day a dump truck loaded with used condoms splattered all over the Vatican DADS dropped 1,000 points on the stock market. At first he had his people reapplying DADS to the returning objects and sending them up again, but they came down once more within the hour, and even sooner if they had midair collisions with the steady rain of furniture and appliances that were descending every minute.

Even though Prince Schaffner was a businessman, he was not without imagination. From his penthouse office in Rockefeller Center he looked up at the heavens through the debris and began to discern a pattern in the skies: his boomerang had discovered its missing part. Everything DADS had sent up was returning in the reverse order that it had been launched. That left only the diapers. Oh my God, he ejaculated, the diapers! The Prince looked at his watch. There wasn't a moment to lose. He summoned his pilot and raced for the roof where his helicopter was waiting. He would fly to Bayonne. Everyone was safe in Bayonne. The pilot and the Prince raced across the roof like frightened rats. But it was too late. The diapers, soft and fleecy, soft and soggy, had already begun to fall on the Twin Towers, on the Empire State, on Rockefeller Center. The Prince looked up and closed his mouth just in time. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the diapers falling faintly on the streets of New York and faintly falling through the universe on all the dead down below.



So Very Shy
Christopher M.

Between the Acts

Ed Galing

the house lights
were on

when the irish tenor
came out of the wings

to sing a medley

while the girls
backstage

took a breather

he stood there,
while the orchestra
played

and he sang
and sang

and never missed
a note

and it was a time
when burlesque
had decided

to put on some
vaudeville acts

but it was
not successful

and after a while
the lights dimmed
again

and we settled
down

to burlesque.

Piece of String

Jay Gray

The time is 1:20 p.m.

“Hurry, Phil!” Clay’s voice holds all the urgency of an eight-year old who knows it is much later than the time he is supposed to be home, although he doesn’t exactly know how much.

Philip hesitates. “My string. I left it!”

Turning, he runs back through the old drainpipe, abandoned now and filled only with dust and dry leaves. He scuffles the leaves with his feet as he goes. The drainpipe is beneath the road he has been forbidden to cross. He uses it all the time. His mother doesn’t even know about the drainpipe. In any case, he is not crossing the road; he is going underneath it.

Philip loves the drainpipe. It is his friend and every time he uses it he feels a tremendous sense of adventure. It takes him to the woods on the other side of the street where he and Clay go crawfishing. But this time he has forgotten his string. Breathlessly, he reaches the stream. A quick, bright glance. Here? There? No...almost at his feet. He grabs the string, turns and races back.

The time is 1:22 p.m.

Clay, on the other side of the street, is jumping up and down. He has just remembered it is Saturday and his father will be home. His mother he can persuade, but not always his father.

“Phil-lip!” Clay starts to back along the sidewalk.

The time is 1:23 p.m.

The wide open street is an invitation. Philip doesn’t even hesitate, musn’t hesitate if he is to catch up with Clay. This once he won’t use the drainpipe. Philip is an explorer. He loves to plunge into the unknown. Even so, he knows to look both ways before crossing the street, and the fact that he has many times successfully crossed the quiet street on which he lives now gives him confidence. Accordingly, in spite of his haste, he looks both ways. The road is clear. Par away on the left he sees a car, but it is still a long way off and he will have time. Philip is seven. He has blond hair, blue eyes and a quick, ready smile. Philip starts to cross the street.

The time is 1:24 p.m.

Clay is practically out of sight. Philip’s darting feet have almost reached the white center line when his ears become aware of a strange, sharp screeching, which grows louder and louder. Out of the corner of an eye, suddenly alert, he glimpses a dark solid mass like a cliff towering over him. A quick extra spurt and he’s across the center line. But so is the car, in a curving skid that has already carried it thirty feet, or more, beyond the moment the driver has slammed his foot hard and fast on the brake.

At the point of intersection, at right angles to the center line, the right front fender of the car connects with Philip’s left temple.

The time is 1:25 p.m.

Clay continues walking home.

The car ceases skidding and the horrified driver brings it to a quivering halt against the sidewalk on the left-hand side of the road. Hurling himself through the door, which he leaves open, he starts to run back up the street. His footsteps are the only sound in the sudden intense silence.

Philip is limp and still in the street, like a butterfly at rest.

“God, he’s hurt!” says the driver, and looks around helplessly.

The time is 1:20 p.m.

Howard Jordan is in a hurry. He is driving a borrowed car and has to return it to the owner no later than 2:30. He calculates once more. Twenty minutes from here to town, five minutes at least to find a parking place, fifteen minutes in the store, say forty-five back home again. As he calculates, his foot instinctively pressures the accelerator lightly, then more firmly as he realizes chances are he'll be late.

The time is 1:22 p.m.

Howard likes this highway. It's a good straight run. No traffic lights till you pass the city limits, he has \$20.00 in his pocket. He starts to worry whether this will be enough to buy the pair of shoes he has to have for the job he is starting Monday. He was lucky to find work. He has been without a job since April. He should never have left school when he did. It's always the same now. They only want college men.

"What education?" they ask. "Oh, yes. Did you graduate?"

"No? College? None. You say you didn't graduate from high school?"

"That's right." Now he is becoming belligerent and they are distinctly cooler.

"If anything develops, we'll be in touch." He knows what that means.

Unconsciously, his foot tightens on the accelerator. He passes the city limit, but does not notice the sign - 35 mph.

The time is 1:23 p.m.

Looking down the road, which is straight and fairly free of traffic, he sees a light up ahead. It is red. Then it changes to green. He is still a long way from the light. He won't make it before it changes again; but he does, with a second to spare, as it flicks amber, red.

His speedometer registers 55 mph, which is not fast, except in a residential area. Howard does not see the houses though, only the woods which mean country to him, and does not notice at all the small figure in green shirt and shorts which emerges from the woods, but is almost camouflaged against the background. Howard's foot is again on the accelerator.

The time is 1:24 p.m.

Then the child is in front of him, blond hair gleaming in the sunshine. The face a glowing healthy pink, a little startled perhaps, but full of self-confidence. Howard doesn't think. He can't. There is no time. His foot leaps from accelerator to brake and slams hard. Then he is in a skid and fighting the wheel.

For an instant he loses sight of the boy. Something bumps, but still he does not believe what he sees as the child's body is thrown high into the air and out of sight.

The time is 1:25 p.m.

The skid is endless to Howard. His hands are shaking and his mind is empty.

The time is 1:20 p.m.

Mary Burns looks at the clock for the fifth time in five minutes. How tiresome of Philip to be so late. She had distinctly said 12:30. Of course, she knows where he is and she doesn't mind as long as he is at Clay's, but she wants Philip home for lunch, not over at Clay's all day.

A warning sizzle from the stove and she is just in time to rescue the potatoes from burning. Good, they're done. She'll just mash them, then call Clay's mother.

"I want a drink of water," says four-year old Joanne.

The time is 1:22 p.m.

"Not now, darling, lunch is almost ready." She begins to whip the potatoes, at the same time

opening the oven door to glance at the meat.

“But I’m thirsty,” complains Joanne.

There is movement outside. That must be Philip now. She waits for him to come bursting in, full of joy and conversation with the doings of the morning. But the door remains closed. She looks out the window. It is not Philip, but George, and home for the rest of the day. Good.

“I want some water. Mummy, give me some water,” Joanne bangs on the stove with an empty can.

“Don’t do that! I can’t stop every time you want a drink. Here.” She fills a glass at the tap and begins planning the afternoon. George can stay with the children while she goes grocery shopping. There’ll be time to make a cake and she must get out and weed that flower bed on the side. George can cut the grass in the back and bring in the laundry.

The back door opens and George comes in. Joanne hurls herself towards him with a squeal of delight.

The time is 1:23 p.m.

“Hello, darling. Had a busy morning? So have I. And Philip not home yet. I wish you’d go over for him.”

“Busy enough. Up went the aeroplane high in the sky,” he lifts Joanne over his head. “Where is Philip?”

“At the Bradshaws. I told him 12:30. It’s really very naughty of him.”

“You’ll just have to make him understand he can’t go over there unless he comes home when he’s told. Just let me change my shoes.”

He goes in the bedroom.

The time is 1:24 p.m.

Joanne says plaintively: “I’m still thirsty.”

Five minutes pass.

“George, I do wish you’d go over for Philip.”

“Can’t find my other shoe,” the voice is muffled since George’s head is far back in the closet. “Here it is. I found it.”

There is a ring at the front door.

“Oh no, not now!” exclaims Mary.

George says: “I’ll go. I’m on the way out anyway.”

He is somewhat surprised to find a policeman standing on the step.

“Mr. Burns?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a son, Philip Burns?”

“Yes.”

“There’s been an accident. Will you come with me.”

“What is it?” Mary calls.

“Some sort of accident. Philip’s in it. Be back in a minute.” George leaves with the policeman.

Mary hurries to the front door and watches them till they turn the corner. How could Philip be in an accident?

“Joanne!” she says sharply, suddenly afraid.

She leaves the front door open and with quick, light steps follows her husband and the policeman.

Joanne is happy. Any change in the daily routine suits her.

Mary turns the corner and stops. The road is filled with people, cars are parked all over the place. Taking Joanne’s hand, she starts to run. In the distance, a siren wails urgently. She pushes into the crowd.

“Let me through. Please. Let me through.”

It’s Philip on the ground. “Philip!” She starts towards him, but the policeman holds her back. “That’s my son.”

George’s hand is on her arm. His face is stiff and strange. His beard is so dark. Odd she has never noticed before how dark his beard is, yet she knows he shaved only that morning.

“Better not,” says George. “There’s an ambulance coming.”

This is a fresh shock. “Better not! But I must. He’s hurt.”

The distant wail is louder now, swamping the sympathetic murmur of the jostling crowd. The policeman urges them to move back.

“He was hit by a car,” George says quietly.

Mary cannot believe this. “Here? But he’s not allowed to cross Southview.”

“He’s unconscious,” says George.

Joanne begins to cry and he picks her up. Mrs. Bradshaw struggles through the crowd.

“I’m ever so sorry, Mrs. Burns. Clay saw it. Philip ran out of the woods in front of the car.”

Mary sees a young man staring at her miserably. It is not until later she discovers he is the driver of the car.

The ambulance arrives. The stretcher bearers are quick and efficient. Philip, who has not moved or made a sound, is loaded swiftly into the back of the ambulance.

“Do you wish to go with him?” the policeman asks Mary. Numbly she nods and the ambulance door closes behind her.

“Leave Joanne with me,” offers Mrs. Bradshaw. George hands her over and joins his wife.

Howard Jordan gets into the police car. The crowd wanders away. Cars start driving off. Philip Burns is very close to death. The time is 1:50 p.m.

Soon there is nothing left in the street but a piece of string.

Getting Mr. Gills

Richard D. Lorber

I'm Barry Greene, 13 already, and just another Jewish kid off the streets of Brooklyn. But if I'm up early, like now, I always get in some traveling. It's not First Class, but it's definitely faster. It's called "DXing." I'll grab my trusty little Emerson, fire up all 9 transistors, spin that AM dial, and I'm off. And now there's Boston, WBNW strong and clear, no surprise, at 40,000 watts. And here's Philly. What a signal! And now Chicago, good old WLS, a real powerhouse, 50,000 watts, I think, and—Wait. Where the hell is this one? That nasal southern twang— I've heard it before. Where exactly? It's almost 6 a.m., on the button, any second they'll announce their call sign. Would you listen to that self-important schmuck! This high-falutin yokel thinks he's a commentator. I'll turn it up so you can hear—

"Coming to you this glorious morning of March Three, 1963, out of Greater Beaver Pond, the undisputed Tri-City hub of southern West Virginia, this is Radio Station WFIC, the Voice of the Appalachian Valley..."

Whose voice? Not his, I hope. Now there's a place I'd never live.

"...broadcasting at 50 watts..."

Hold on. Did he say 50 watts? 50? My gooseneck lamp is 75. It's not even possible to hear 50 watts—not unless you live there. And now my high-flying fantasy takes a big nose-dive, and then totally shatters, as it crashes head-on into Greater Beaver Pond. Which is obviously where I live. Shit.

By the way, there's nothing great about Beaver Pond. And there are no beavers in Beaver Pond. They're supposedly extinct for the last hundred years. The big shots who run this town—and couldn't care less about those founding beavers—still like to "honor" them by calling themselves "Good Old Beavers." They also claim to be "pillars of the community." Why? Because they own and operate the community. Herb Kaehler, my best and only friend, and amazingly smart for 13, calls these very elite Good Old Beavers our "hicktownfathers."

And now I got problems, 'cause this is a town that doesn't like Jews, and when I say "town," I mean the Good Old Beavers. And Number One among them is "the great," but not so great, Frank Irwin Crick, who owns the local TV and radio stations, both humbly named WFIC, which really stands for, according to Herb, Who the Fuck Is Crick?

And things were even worse, 'cause Crick owned the town paper, the backward, right-wing Beaver Pond Gazette. And his Number One Henchman, his malicious nephew, the Jew-hating George Gills, who proudly told his cronies that his "last house was haunted" so he'd "sold it to a fool," also wrote outlandish anti-Semitic editorials that actually ran in the Gazette.

And this Mr. George Gills, who believed in ghosts, was himself that same frightening apparition who haunted Fairfield Junior High as its somehow appointed, brutal and sadistic, hardass principal.

Herb and I called ourselves the "Two-Man Triumvirate." We thought it was funny, but no one else seemed to, no one, at least, in the 8th grade. Kids were afraid to laugh at our jokes, since the principal hated us, which made it even funnier, almost as funny as the 8th grade and our self-important, dubiously "gifted" class, the "8-1's"—who wore their labels like elitist badges, which they flaunted at the "8-2's"—who were often even smarter, but less often "gifted"—specifically with parents who were friends of the principal.

Herb and I said that Fairfield Junior High was a "very fishy" place, which we thought was funny, since our very fishy principal was named Mr. Gills, and we christened him "The Fish." And the name quietly caught on—so we knew it was funny—but no-one would laugh, 'cause "The Fish" was a mean sonofabitch, who looked for excuses to paddle you black and blue with his custom-

made, bat-sized paddle, this flat-nosed Louisville Slugger, that “loved to hit homers.”

The “homers” he hit were usually me and Herb, specifically our asses, that he steadfastly refused to autograph, even though we’d asked him. And though not a single signature would ever be forthcoming, courtesy of “The Fish,” we did have lots of calluses, specifically on our asses, and because we had our calluses, we also had the irredeemable balls to actually fight back.

Herb had become unstoppable, arguing that the first Rotary Woman, was not a real woman, but in fact, a gear-driven ballerina

There were 600 kids at Fairfield. Three Jews in the whole school, I was the only Jew in the 8th grade. Herb was my classmate. Gills hated me, mainly for being Jewish, and also hated Herb, mainly for being Herb.

Herb was from Pittsburgh, and I was from Brooklyn, and through some unlucky quirk of fate, we both ended up in Beaver Pond. How?

Herb’s dad, Karl, a civil engineer, transferred in as new president of the local Potawatomi Coal Mining Corporation. My dad, a onetime street-brawler in New York’s Lower East Side, learned his trade in the Garment District, and now ran his own mill, Mort Greene Sportswear, in the nearby town of Bastian. Both our dads made good money, both liked “to keep a low profile,” and so, both families lived on the same block in a modest, blue-collar neighborhood. Our dads were friendly,

and our moms were best friends. Herb and I met in the 6th grade, and immediately developed a mutual respect for our equally warped minds. We’d been buddies ever since.

I was an absentminded daydreamer, who lived in my head, so much so, I was always in trouble for breaking all the rules, since I’d never really heard them in the first place. And when I had heard them, I’d still forget to follow them. My parents understood, but teachers never did, especially not in this town. And Mr. Gills was my current, unsalaried spokesman. I’d even heard him once—“Barry Greene is a wayward little Jew”—who needed to be “paddled black and blue.” And I was. But I happened to be a “smart little Jew” and too absentminded for my own good.

Herb, however, was simply too smart for his own good. He had a 153 IQ, and was this outrageous, imperturbable, human logic machine, who always spotted bullshit, and insisted on commenting on it, regardless of the consequences.

In the Beaver Pond District, “The Beaver”—either in word or symbol—reigned supreme and attached itself to everything. Good Old Beavers went to Beaver Pond High, better known as “Beaver.” Fairfield Junior High was nicknamed “The Little Beaver” and by a bizarre coincidence, so was Herb, who was a startling look alike of Jerry Mathers, the star of television’s “Leave it to Beaver.” So striking was his resemblance to Theodore “Beaver” Cleaver, rumors circulated in this self-important town that Jerry Mathers was really Herb Kaehler.

Herb really liked beavers, they were “great engineers,” but he hated his nickname, hated the show, and hated the town even more. Herb said that the “cutesy idea” of this “Little Beaver” student at his “Little Beaver” school was enough to make him “puke on Mr. Gills,” which was “easy to do,” and his “best idea yet.” But he despised the town so thoroughly, especially the Good Old Beavers, and especially Mr. Gills, he thought it was worth it to let the rumors circulate. “Let ‘em wonder,” who was Herb Kaehler really? He played it like a master, and kept people guessing, usually the ones he had it in for, which was “a smart idea” since “anyone dumb enough to believe a really dumb idea, deserves to believe it in the first place.”

Herb and I would cruise around town on our snazzy Schwinn 10-speeds. His local celebrity status was wearing thin with Herb he hated being recognized and would groan at the sound of “Hi, Little Beaver” since he was usually greeted by nickname, or else by an idiot who’d “spotted” Jerry Mathers.

Some of these idiots were proud Good Old Beavers, who adored the idea that an all-American TV star would reside in their Jew-hating hicktown. We'd pedal over to meet these rubes, since we never missed a chance to provoke Good Old Beavers. So now, "hicktownfathers," it's time to meet Jerry Mathers up close.

Stored in Herb's basket was an orange rubber Devil's mask, which by now he was wearing. And Herb would introduce us with, "I am the Two-Wheeled Antichrist, and here is my business partner, Barry Greene, the Jewish Capitalist from New York."

And those Righteous Old Beavers would be appalled. Their all-American Jerry Mathers was so sacrilegious! –and also hung out with a Jew. Which Little Beaver was this, anyway?

And then Herb would demand to know–Why had they followed him "all the way from Hollywood?"

And very suspiciously I would inquire–Were they the same Beavers who'd been "tapping the phone of Mr. Mathers' publicity agent?"

Whenever we happened on proud Good Old Beavers, and whichever Little Beaver they thought Herb was, the Two-Wheeled Antichrist would then proceed to chastise them just like little children. They were not Good Old Beavers.

They were "bad bad" Bad Old Beavers, since the "real" townfathers were the bushy-tailed natives, the industrious "Founding Beavers" of the community. And with the authority vested in him "by the Schwinn Bicycle Corporation," these "Impostor Beavers," these "quack beavers," would now "burn forever" in "Bogus Beaver Hell."

Herb and I were real popular with these guys. Did they still watch "Leave it to Beaver?" Who knew? We couldn't be helping its Nielsen ratings. And we certainly weren't helping our own. Forget about my ratings, my show was canceled the week I moved in. Did anyone ever see "Leave it to the Jew?" See what I mean?

When Herb got sick of being recognized, he'd often wear wraparound sunglasses, and sometimes even smoke Camels, which he didn't really like, but which really had to be the ultimate "fuck you" to Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver. It didn't work. His idiot fans were convinced even more. It had to be Jerry Mathers. Why else would he be in disguise?

Herb and I were getting jaded, and feeling like idiots, and calling everybody idiots, and even calling each other idiots, since you had to be an idiot to live in this town. Then, of course, we qualified it, since at our age we really had no choice in the matter. But there were choices we could make, like not joining the Glee Club, not because we were tone-deaf, which we were, but because the very idea of a Glee Club in a town like this was enough to make you puke– on Mr. Gills, if possible. But really, a Glee Club? There was nothing here to be gleeful about. If you thought so, then you were an idiot.

When we'd first moved into the Beaver Pond District, things had started out innocently enough. Both families went through the same routine, greeted by the Rotary Women's Welcome Wagon, and presented with: one rhododendron, the state flower, one roast tom turkey, courtesy of the Crick Turkey Farm, and one copy of the self-aggrandizing, self-published autobiography of "the great" Frank I. Crick, ghostwritten by Mrs. Crick, a manic-depressive, unpublished poet.

So I went out on my bike, and yes, "the beaver" was everywhere. First thing I notice is the bizarrely named city bus-line, "Beaver Pond Traction." Most reassuring, since any bus without traction either got you nowhere, or killed you on the way.

But in a contest for local gross-outs, Herb and I agreed. Nothing came even close to the long-established company named "Beaver Pond Meat Packing," whose fleet of 6 trucks all bore the astonishing slogan, "You Can't Beat Our Meat."

The disgusting imagery of both name and slogan made you ask: Where exactly did the meat come from? What exactly did the meat come from? And what exactly are they doing with it?

Now there were a number of nice folksy people in this Appalachian metropolis of 15,000. But they never seemed to be your “official” Good Old Beavers, the “aristocratic” southern bigots who really ran the town.

The state of West Virginia offered only a rear-end license plate. In lieu of a front plate, the cars and business vehicles of proudly bigoted Good Old Beavers typically displayed a tri-color Confederate flag, telling me and Herb to “Remember the South” and tacitly reminding the local descendents of slaves to “stay on their side of town.”

On occasion, more “eloquent” Good Old Beavers, speaking euphemistically, referred to these folks as “those of the Negro persuasion.” More often they called them something else. They were also called “uppity,” since they could not be persuaded to be caucasian. Incidentally, these folks, as well as “those of the Jewish persuasion,” were all persuaded not to join the Beaver Pond Country Club, and not to even try.

The Rotary Club, whose members were called Rotarians, was also everywhere. There were Rotary Men, Rotary Women, and Rotary Children. The sole purpose of a Rotary Child was to go on the Children’s Rotary Hayride, sponsored jointly by the Rotary Men’s Horse and Mule Auction and the Rotary Women’s Drive to Repave the Beaver Pond Highway. The word Rotary preceded the name of virtually every local event and community project, and its ubiquitous, meaningless logo, a concentric gear inside a wheel, seemed to emblazon everything else not already emblazoned with the words Beaver or Beaver Pond. The Rotary was so deeply embedded in the local consciousness, some folks automatically assumed that most things were sponsored by the Rotary.

It was right around the second month of the 5th grade that things for me and Herb took a turn for the worse.

We were browsing Walpole’s Hardware the Saturday it ran a huge ad promoting a “Special Sale on Rotary Lawnmowers.” And there in the garden department stands Mr. Gills, our cretinous principal, outraged and squabbling with the manager. The Fish had rushed over, expecting bargain-priced, conventional, push mowers, courtesy of the Rotary Club.

When the manager sneered at such stupidity, Herb and I, always the devil’s advocates in preposterous arguments like this, immediately sided with Mr. Gills. His Reverence, The Fish, whose humongous paddle had already blessed us twice, clearly didn’t like us. And here was our chance to score precious points. But it was a stupid argument, and as a matter of principle, we sided with our Principal – cretin or not. Mr. Walpole, himself a proud Rotarian, had decorated his storefront with a Rotary logo. Pointing at the meaningless gear-decal, we convinced the skeptical manager, with bizarrely convoluted logic, that the Rotary, more than just a club, was an international society of mechanical engineers, who had designed, developed, and patented all things rotary, including the helicopter, the Wankel rotary engine, and of course, the rotary lawnmower. At this point, Herb had become unstoppable, arguing that the first Rotary Woman, was not a real woman, but in fact, a gear-driven ballerina. The manager of Walpole’s turned to Mr. Gills. They exchanged knowing glances. The Fish glared at me and Herb, and proceeded to call us “anti-social little bastards.”

Feeling totally stunned, we turn for the door, and the pissed-off Fish passes us to make his own very dignified exit. We watch as he heads down the sidewalk, accidentally walks under a painter’s ladder, and to undo his bad luck, he backs up, and then goes around the ladder. The painter shakes his head at this superstitious crackpot – who happens to be our principal!

We hopped on our 10-speeds, parked outside Walpole’s, and then we just sat there, leaning on the kickstands. And now we’re getting steamed and indignant ourselves about the very indigent and obviously “very dignified” Fish. Yes, okay, maybe we were “antisocial” – but we were not about to join the Glee Club. And certainly not the Country Club. I couldn’t even try. And Gills was such an ingrate! We had just tried to help him buy a lawnmower! And as a member of the Rotary! And this is how The Fish thanks us? To be called “little bastards” – not just by a first-

class son-of-a-bitch – but by a pillar of the community! Okay, technically he wasn't a pillar, but he was in fact our principal, and technically the idiot nephew of the biggest pillar in town. And technically, he wasn't a real idiot, since technically an idiot has an IQ of less than 40, and Gills was certainly smarter than that. We weren't sure how much, but he did go to college – Beaver Pond State. And yes, that is a college. Good ol' "Fifty Watts U." What'd he major in? Paddling? He actually played baseball there. And he kept playing baseball, at Fairfield Junior High. Ten "homers" a day, that's what they said. Fifty "homers" a week? Seriously? That was a lot of kids, who all hated The Fish. How many repeat offenders? 'Cause it didn't take much to offend him.

Through the 7th grade, by a run of good luck, we'd managed to stay clear of The Fish. But by the the first week of the 8th grade, Herb and I had offended him. Popping a balloon in the school cafeteria – is that so offensive? The pop of a balloon? What's the big deal? Was it filled with some kind of lethal gas? Of course not! Hydrogen sulfide's not lethal. So it smells like rotten eggs and makes kids vomit.

No one puked on Mr. Gills, which was Herb's idea, but it failed. We didn't kill anybody. You can't kill kids with a chemistry set, not a set made by Gilbert. It says so in the manual. And lots of things smell, there's chemicals in everything. And yes, hydrogen sulfide smells. If you do it right, it smells like diarrhea, which is what we tried the second week. And Herb was really devastated, 'cause still, no one puked on Mr. Gills. But that second balloon, in a very literal way, put us high on the Gills Shit List.

Getting paddled was a given, but a "great idea" had to be tested. And so many kids despised The Fish, Herb and I wanted to make history. Why was Herb so devastated? We had an accomplice, a kid we'd paid five bucks, to "accidentally on purpose" puke on Mr. Gills. Hey, he was puking anyway, give him a worthy target. The kid came close, claimed that he missed, but probably chickened out. Who could blame him? Gills was scary, and easily offended.

Forget about stink bombs and major infractions – kids he didn't like, for whatever arbitrary reasons, had "attitude problems." Once you had the "wrong" attitude, you were "marked." And then, a misspoken word, a too-cheeky smile, even a cockeyed smile, and God help your ass. No slap on the wrist from The Fish. Nice teachers often balked at turning in offenders.

So how did he get you? Who knew for sure? But not only did The Fish patrol the cafeteria and hallways, he occasionally sat in on classes "to observe" and it was a known fact that he even monitored the teaching by invisibly eavesdropping through the classroom P.A.

So there we are, proudly and righteously "antisocial," still on our bikes at Walpoles, fuming and steaming about The Fish– that ungrateful, insulting, clod-hopping, lawnmowing hayseed! The Rotary should take that shifty eavesdropper and hang him, not by the balls, not by the gills, but by his own fucking lawnmower! – assuming it's in stock. And see, for Herb, it's the idea of the insult, it's not the insult per se, 'cause for Herb, "little bastard" vs. "Little Beaver" is really like a toss-up.

And then we look up, and who do we see? Right across from Walpole's, it's Gills The Fish, leaning into a big, black, shiny Lincoln Continental, the 2-door job, back-bumper "Continental Kit," Limited Edition– you know the model. And you-know-who, the Number One Pillar, 'cause that, folks, is the "Crick Car"– no fucking Caddy for this guy, not for "Mr. WFIC" himself! I'm with Herb on this, 'cause "Who the Fuck Is Crick?"

Who in the fuck is he? "Mr. Fifty Watts"?! I can't even hear him unless I live here! "Mr. Radio and TV"! I gotta hear him, and I gotta watch him, 'cause I gotta live here! I even gotta read him, 'cause he's "Mr. Gazette"! He can't even spell, and I still gotta read him. I even eat his turkeys, 'cause he's "Mr. Turkey Farm"– Why am I eating his turkeys? I don't have to, but I am anyway. I can live without turkey, but how much longer can I live in Beaver Hell? My only way out is to fly my way out in my 9-Transistor Emerson, one hour per morning I'm "Captain DX," but these crash landings are murder.

Maybe I got a concussion. Is that why I'm crazier than Herb? Herb even says that I'm crazier than he is. My dad says "it's a tough call." Why? 'Cause that's how Dad talks, 'cause he's a tough guy, and he doesn't just look tough, he is tough. This is your official, barrel-chested, Lower East Side New York street-fighter, who actually knows how to break noses, usually the noses of anti-Semites. Mort Greene is not to be fucked with, not in New York, not in Beaver Pond. And people know it. Barry Greene, they fuck with.

Mom warned me – "Never tell Dad about Mr. Gills, and never ever show him your black-and-blue behind, 'cause if your father puts your principal in the hospital, where you gonna go to school?"

Not exactly, Mom. If Dad puts Gills in the I.C.U., I'm the next class president. And then I get expelled. All the way out of town, if I'm lucky.

And then I just like – snapped. Suddenly I was "tough" – this little Jewish thug with a Brooklyn accent, which I never really had, but now I got one, just like my dad's. I'm glaring at The Fish and that shiny black Lincoln he's standing at. I glance at Herb, who's now "Hoib" – and he's glaring too. And then we cruise our Schwinn's over, we'd be swaggering over, but we happen to be on bikes.

We roll up to the Crick Car. I hop off my 10-speed and – get ready – I give the Lincoln a slap on the hood, and now I'm a 13 year-old Mort Greene. I say – "Hey, Crick! Numba One Beava! Wha' kinda Caddy is dis? I don't see no fins! Looka dis, Hoib, Mista Fifty Watts is too fuckin' good for Caddies, and too fuckin' good for fins! And Da Fish over dere, he ain't got no fins! What kinda Fish is dat? Maybe Da Fish and his Uncle Frankie, dey both too good for fins!"

Gills whispers to a Number Two Beaver, riding shotgun, and The Fish is like startled, 'cause – Is this that same "little Jew" he paddled? – the same "little bastard" he just saw at Walpoles?

Crick leans out of his Lincoln and says with a drawl, "Big shot! Get back on your bike," and I don't budge. Crick may own the town, but he sure don't own the sidewalk.

Herb's taking all this in, he thinks I'm crazy, but knows me like a book, and he's seen me this crazy before. Now Herb's as pissed as I am, but he stays cool 'cause Herb is unflappable. Herb hops off his bike, gathers his thoughts, marches over to the Number One Pillar, and very formally lectures all three of them.

"You see, Good Old Beavers, you have been the victims of Brain Drain, which is just what happened when the Founding Beavers left. And no, they were not killed off. They were hired away as civil engineers, 'cause these Founding Beavers had logical minds and excelled in all they attempted, unlike you Good Old Beavers, who are selfish, rich, and stupid, and have totally fucked up this town, and couldn't build a dam if your worthless redneck lives depended on it."

They'd never heard insults like this before! We could tell by their faces, Crick and his crinkled-up nose, The Fish and his open-mouthed stare. They were all staring. And then, we hopped back on our bikes and more or less rode off into the sunset. Less, actually, since it was 2 pm, Eastern Standard Time. And we were both already thinking, "What in the fuck did we just do?"

Herb and I were about to become real "whipping boys" and in more ways than we anticipated. We'd already known, and the Junior High grapevine confirmed it, that The Fish had it in for us. But even more ominous was the Good Old Beaver grapevine.

One of the grapes was trying to do us in.

First, an article appeared in the Beaver Pond Gazette, indirectly referring to me and Herb, variously as "13 year-olds" who were "troublemakers," okay, even Dad called me troublemaker; "malcontents," how insulting, were we really that bad?; "dissidents," this sounded cool. And older than our years.

And at least to the credit of the staff at the Gazette, someone there owned a thesaurus. Best we could tell, it was Roget's. We were waiting for "hellion" – or maybe even "agent provocateur" – which we really liked the sound of. But then an editorial, written by a rotten grape, the

rottenest grape of all, actually appeared, and titled in bold capital letters, but so as not to offend– **COMPLAINTS RECEIVED ABOUT “ANTISOCIAL LITTLE BASTARDS.”**

Sure they were received. Guaranteed, and with 2 asterisks. What was Gills doing? Complaining to himself? So, we passed The Fish in the school cafeteria and asked him, Did he ever get his lawnmower? And naturally, we got paddled for asking.

And then Gills the Grape, with thesaurus still in hand, started going after “the Jews” by writing about “young Jewish dissidents: agitators and rabble-rousers.” Couldn’t he be more specific? I was starting to like the publicity. I so much wanted to see – **13 YEAR-OLD JEWISH AGENT PROVOCATEUR.**

And then Gills the Grape put away Roget’s, since he couldn’t read it anyway, and actually got down to business, citing “so many Jewish merchants in town.” Yes, and if they couldn’t be merchants, they would leave this shitty town.

And more editorials stating “so many Jewish Communists, especially in this country.” And another titled “A Commentary on Jewish Values,” with thought-provoking questions from a thought-disordered mind like – “Why is Communism a Jewish value, with so many Jews in Cadillacs?”

Herb and I were waiting for – “Why are all these Communists driving Cadillacs?” (Jews in Cadillacs are a problem. My Uncle Dave drives one, and he’s an asshole. Watch out for a Jew in a white Fleetwood Eldorado– the worst kind of Jew in the best kind of Cadillac.)

There was a rule at Fairfield: “No eating ice-cream on the 2nd Floor.” But the old wooden floor was replaced with tile, so the rule was not enforced. After his “Commentary,” The Fish spotted me and Herb on the 2nd floor, each with a grape popsicle. He decided to enforce the rule, and then beat the daylights out of our antisocial little asses.

Kids at Fairfield now never laughed at our jokes. But, heading back to class with our very numb, very incorrigible little asses, we started trumpeting in the hallways, “The Fish rules Fairfield with an iron fin.”

The first time we said it, it wasn’t that funny, but it sounded so stupid that we said it again. And apparently, we’d struck gold. For whatever dumb reason, when Fairfield kids heard it, they went into hysterics, they couldn’t resist. Herb and I were flabbergasted, because we hadn’t just struck gold, we’d clearly struck a nerve, as this idiotic catch-phrase traveled through Fairfield like a cathartic firestorm, fanned by the private rage of all these other kids, who lived in fear of the tyrannical Mr. Gills. And all day long, all we hear is, “The Fish rules Fairfield with an iron fin!” Even the faculty thought it was funny.

And little did we know that we’d clearly struck a nerve with the despotic Mr. Gills, who was, by the way, very tight with the Beaver Pond County Board of Education.

Next day, during Fourth Period, History, the P.A. crackled on, and the voice of The Fish summoned me, Barry Greene, and my compatriot, Herb Kaehler. We exchanged wary glances, but we had little doubt that our calluses could take it.

And so, we enter the principal’s office, and wait our turn, since the “paddling line” is already six nervous kids long. One by one, Mr. Gills whacks the daylights out of them. Each one leaves, almost too numb to walk. So now it’s Barry and Herb. And His Reverence, The Fish, already smug and vengeful, once again sanctifies us with his hallowed Louisville Slugger. Our asses are more numb than ever, and The Fish says, he is happy to announce that the Board of Education is about to give us an award, designed for “antisocial little bastards” like me and Herb, who are, by the way, “worse than juvenile delinquents.” Why are we worse? Because at least the juvenile delinquents that The Fish knows still have “recognized extracurricular activities” which Herb and I honestly don’t have, and which is, let’s face it, definitely “antisocial” and certainly more antisocial than, say, armed robbery of the Fairfield Glee Club.

There we were, two verifiably antisocial 13 year-olds, in suspense, to say the least. And what exactly was this honorary Board of Education brainchild, this Antisocial Little Bastard Award?

A mandatory tour of the nearby Bland Correctional Farm, a residential complex divided into cell blocks, housing antisocial little bastards who had grown into sociopathic big bastards. And so we accepted our mandatory award.

The complimentary dinner, served up in high style in the farm's cafeteria, provided a memorable experience for visiting, antisocial little bastards. The ambience was best described as soothingly punitive, "harsh, but not too harsh." Cinderblock walls painted green pastel and flickering, fluorescent light bulbs accented an eminently forgettable home-cooked meal, prepared and served with impressive conviction by resident chefs, who were, in fact, convicted felons.

The Bland Correctional Farm was technically a minimum security prison, centered in an agricultural community across the border in Bland County, Virginia. Many of its residents were downright dangerous, and escapes were not uncommon. On any given day, inmates, who hadn't escaped that morning, toiled in the fields, growing the farm's crops and raising the farm's cattle. Rustling the neighbor's cattle was frowned upon by the warden.

Before our tour we were given an opportunity to peruse a prison pamphlet listing a crime-by-crime breakdown for its various inmates, "identified" only as four-digit numbers. Why, we asked, was a convicted murderer residing on the premises of a minimum security prison? A correctional officer informed us that this particular inmate was not considered violent or "high risk." This sounded plausible, since the man had merely poisoned his wife and mother-in-law. And who knows, there may have been mitigating, extenuating circumstances, as well, i.e., an unfaithful wife and a nagging mother-in-law, or even worse, a nagging, unfaithful wife and a nagging, faithful mother-in-law. What, I wondered, entitled a "high risk" murderer to occupancy in the more prestigious Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg? The officer gave us an answer not easily forgotten: "He has to commit a more serious murder, for example, an axe murder" – or even more flagrant – "the axe murder of a Federal employee."

Presumably, hatcheting the mailman for, say, delivering too many bills, was even more serious than hatcheting a UPS driver for delivering the wrong package.

And then came our supervised tour. What did we discover that was notable? The most common name of residents at the Bland Correctional Farm seemed to be "Chigginvuggah" – a name they called each other, and also called me and Herb.

One cellblock after another, we kept hearing "Hey, Chigginvuggah!" There were Chigginvuggahs everywhere. (Obviously one big family, maybe Slavic, with a bad, criminal element.) If the resident Chigginvuggahs had simply called us "Muthavuggahs," we'd have been quicker on the uptake.

And if that family of Chigginvuggahs were doing to the chickens what we thought they might be doing, we wondered what the warden thought about that. We also wondered what the chickens thought about it. Were they offended? Herb said to "cut the inmates some slack" – they were simply – "showing the chickens a really good time."

We had to admit that thus far, the day was a truly all-around edifying experience. We enjoyed it, the guards enjoyed it, and the inmates enjoyed it, and if you believed Herb, so did the chickens.

Our lesson for the day? That cardinal sin called Antisocial Behavior puts one on the path to something far worse, that cardinal sin called Sodomizing Poultry.

This was the World of Bad Boys, and that was our whirlwind tour? We thought it was over, but the highlight was yet to come. The guard invited us to personally inspect an empty jail cell. Hey, why not? We step in, and the barred door closes with a loud – CLANK! The guard chuckles and walks off. Herb and I are really shook up. We're in prison? Is this for real? It can't be exactly constitutional. Thirty minutes later the yokel guard returns, with a malicious look. Did we learn our lesson, courtesy of The Fish and our moronic Board of Education?

Now we're driven by "the authorities" back to Fairfield, to be de-briefed by the principal. Herb and I are seething. We enter the office of The Fish, and he's waiting, no doubt, for something like: "We the incorrigible little bastards have now been rehabilitated. And please, Your Reverence, enroll us in the Glee Club." But Herb and I know the very simple truth, he's just a mean, brutal, sadistic sonofabitch. Speechless with rage, we don't say a word. Nothing. I guess we got an "attitude problem." Right. What does The Fish do? After adding insult to injury by sending us to prison, he decides to add injury to insult by paddling us again, "just for good measure." And he does.

Herb has that look on his face – no emotion, but his eyes say, "I'm gonna get you."

Gills says, "Whoever you are, Kaehler, I'm not impressed." I'm shocked, and I gotta control myself not to laugh. The Fish thinks that Herb Kaehler actually might be Jerry Mathers? He's really that dumb?

Herb is deadpan – "Have an autograph."

Gills snarls, "I don't want your goddamn autograph."

Herb says, "I'll give it to you anyway." Herb grabs his pen, reaches over, and scribbles his signature across The Fish's white notepad. The Fish stares at Herb's scrawl.

It reads "The Antichrist."

The Fish is startled. And amazed. He can't believe the balls on this kid, whoever he is.

Herb, now boiling inside, calmly says, "Now you know who I really am." The Fish glances down at that signature, and gazes back at Herb.

When Herb is this mad, madder than mad, his eyes become like lasers. And with glaring, laser eyes, The Antichrist says "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko. I summon against you the mighty ones of the East, South, West, and North. Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko."

What'd he say? And then Herb says – "Now hear my assistant, the Warlock Jew."

Herb took me by surprise, but Gills looked sort of worried, and Herb's last line really sounded cool, so I said to the Fish "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko."

As we turned for the door, Gills said nothing, but really looked worried, and more than a little bit rattled. Out in the hallway, I whispered to Herb, "What'd you say?"

Herb replied, "How the fuck do I know? I heard it somewhere. But now we got an edge. And we're gonna keep it."

An edge was important, especially as "protégés" of a character we called "the great Horatio Hornblower Hatchet" – Distinguished Professor of Vendettas at the prestigious University of Spite, Malice, and Revenge. We weren't so much into spite and malice, but we were definitely into revenge right now.

That same afternoon, we were up in Herb's room – to brainstorm our revenge. Nobody, and I mean nobody, got away with putting us in prison. This town was enough of a prison. Pacing the floor, Herb passed a shelf of childhood memorabilia. He absentmindedly picked up his old violin. Herb had taken lessons, which he hated, since he was even more tone-deaf than me. I chuckled, "We could always serenade The Fish. That'd teach him."

Late that night, as far as getting our revenge, we were basically up a tree, up a real tree, a big, sprawling elm tree. A micro-thin wire pulled taut ran from a branch to the eaves of a house. Who lived in this house? The Fish. "Eureka!" we'd said. We could serenade him! No violin, all we needed was a bow, now held by Herb. The tone-deaf maestro, who was about to become a one-man orchestra, with harmonic vibrations, which multiply themselves with "just the right stroke."

The superstitious Fish honestly believed that his last house was haunted. He'd soon find out

that this house was haunted too, and I mean Haunted. As Herb began to play, and that house began to groan, someone cried out in horror. It had to be The Fish 'cause we knew he lived alone. And then The Fish began to groan, groaning so loud we could hear him from the treetop. See, Mr. Gills, this is what happens to an anti-Semitic, ignorant sonofabitch, when he's cursed by The Antichrist and a Warlock Jew.

And the very next day, in the Fairfield cafeteria, as a dozen kids watched, Herb and I passed The Fish, and we once again chanted "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko."

The Fish swallowed hard, and more kids watched as The Fish turned kind of pale, and kids thought this was great, 'cause they'd never seen The Fish turn pale, maybe even white as a ghost! And a dozen more kids echoed our chant with, "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko!" And the accursed Fish, trying to look calm, hustled his damnable ass right out of that cafeteria.

And late that night, in our self-commanded performance, Herb and I returned to that tree to give His Reverence an encore, and Herb and I proceeded to serenade The Fish, playing what we called "The Gills Harmonica" and the house began to groan. The Fish, once again, groaned along with it. The Fish sounded great, impressively harmonizing with his newfound haunted house.

And the next day in the lunchroom, as we passed The Fish and began our chant, a hundred other kids all chimed in with, "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko!" and a hundred more kids then yelled out, "The Fish rules Fairfield with an iron fin!"

And The Fish began to shake, and turned even whiter than a ghost, as the chant turned into one mighty cheer with, "Eko, Eko, Azarak Eko! The Fish rules Fairfield with an iron fin!"

It sounded just like a Junior High Chorus – and hey, this was really great – Herb and I had finally joined the Glee Club! So mighty was this cheer, that it drove the evil Fish and his diabolical ass way the hell out of that lunchroom.

That night again, we serenaded that Fish and just for good measure, played the living hell out of that Gills Harmonica. And Gills was so hauntingly good that his pitch was damn near perfect!

And then one morning, Herb and I arrived at Fairfield, and the mood was jubilant, and kids were even celebrating. The Fish was gone! He'd left school, left home, and even left town. Where had he gone? No one knew where. And no one knew why, except me and Herb.

We didn't make history but we sort of felt like heroes. But even without The Fish, Beaver Pond was not for us. And then, before we knew it, my dad and Herb's dad really did something incredible. The Two-Man Triumvirate received a one-way ticket out of Beaver Pond. The following September, Barry Greene and Herb Kaehler entered the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts.

Contagious

Benjamin Newell

The black birds swooped down to the grassy surface in battalions, massive sheets of ebony diving to the turf dispersing like troops blanketing enemy territory, all of them looking for crumbs dropped by generous patrons, thoughtful citizens strolling through the park on a cloudy Sunday afternoon, some of them with the sole purpose of feeding the creatures, others as an afterthought, something to keep them occupied, the hands busy, like a smoker who's addiction to nicotine plays a secondary role to the physical movements of the process, the touching, flicking of the lighter, striking of the match – the hand moving from mouth, then down to rest on a thigh or table.

An erect figure sitting on a bench, his black trench coat buttoned up, hands clasped around a spread newspaper, eyes peering at the print with the concentration of a surgeon manipulating a tumor embedded in brain tissue, staring at it, studying the malignant mass with a delicate balance of respect and disdain, desperately desiring a successful extraction, yet careful, ever so careful, not wanting to underestimate the cancerous lump.

Or, so it seemed, at least, to anyone walking by, that the man was engrossed in the article before him, scrutinizing the lines like a mindless robot, an editing machine designed for one specific purpose, all the humans with their susceptibility to error eradicated long ago, a black cog in a futuristic, machinated publishing house.

But the man hadn't come to the park to read. Not the article before him. He'd read it at least a thousand times, studied it, memorized every word. It was just something to look at until the time was right.

And as the birds pecked around the field, a tier of about ten meandering close to the man's feet, their beaks rapidly falling and rising, a collaborative frenzied jerk for grounded morsels, the man calmly closed his paper and placed it on the unoccupied plank at his side.

Then he picked up one of the birds, no effort whatsoever of deception or coercion, the act so natural, the bird cooperating wholeheartedly, without the slightest struggle, that it looked like he was picking up a dropped coin or a peculiar rock that caught his eye. And looking at the bird's head, sizing up the feathered knob for a brief second, he shoved it into his mouth, pushing it all the way in, his cheeks bulging like a kid blowing out candles on a birthday cake, and chewed, a feather snaking its way out, hovering in the air, swaying gently like an empty hammock on a breezy day. He chewed and chewed until his mouth's contents were pulverized into a mushy consistency, then swallowed with one massive gulp, the meal working its way to his stomach as he picked up the paper, rolled it up, and walked away, slowly, whistling, the tune bringing a slight smile to his face just before the floating feather made contact with the grass.

The first thing he noticed upon entering the men's restroom in the atrium of The First Savings Bank was the strong, bordering on overwhelming, scent of pine cleaner, the interior walls of his nostrils burning from the chemical induced stimulation. He stood above the sink, studying his face as he turned the cold lever toward his abdomen, a stream of water flowing from the spigot, smashing into the enamel basin with the force of a waterfall, a force much too great for the purpose of cleaning hands. It seemed as if the pressure had been altered for some other purpose, something requiring more power, a greater cutting ability, the cleaning of some industrial machine perhaps.

As he reached for the fresh, unblemished bar of soap, the door swung open and two men entered, both of them dressed professionally, conservatively, black suits, black tie, white, heavily starched shirts, black wingtips shined to a glimmering sheen that radiated from the bright lights affixed to the ceiling. They didn't acknowledge the man's presence, or, if they did, there was no outward indication, no sign of recognition as they both stood, side by side, each of them claiming a wall

urinal as they stared at the sparkling, white tiled wall.

“So, where do you want to eat today?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” one of the men said, slightly exasperated, as if the effort of such a decision required too much energy, or perhaps that, the question itself, its repetitive hold on his life, the dealing with it everyday was becoming too tiresome, annoying. “Let’s just go to Tony’s. I don’t feel like waiting for a table today.”

“Tony’s is fine.”

He stood at the sink, frozen, a petrified statue, as if the slightest movement would result in detection, the discovery bringing harm to himself.

But when they finished, the pair swiveling around like synchronized dancers in a Broadway show, there was no dash to the sink, none whatsoever, as if the thought to wash their hands hadn’t occurred to them. In fact, so deliberate, so swift and sure was their path to the door, the man imagined the two had never established a connection between the two acts.

Then he listened to the clicking of their heels on the corridor floor, a rhythmic *click-click-click* that faded to silence.

He peered down at the smooth, ivory bar—unused, unmolested by the hands of others. And ever so slowly, as if he were an unfortunate member of the terminally ill reaching for the cure, the last vial of life-saving elixir left on the planet, he retrieved the soap and raised it to his mouth, cramming it in with the same force he employed with the bird, but there was no escapee this time, not even a microscopic sliver of pulp avoided the interior of his mouth. He chewed furiously, smacking, savoring the snack with a greediness, an abandonment bordering on maniacal.

And when it was done, all the goodness devoured, he quietly walked out of the room, whistling again, the same tune, an ingrained ritual to him no doubt, like the neurotic who places his shoes perfectly together at the edge of the bed before retiring for the evening.

Beatrice Parker sat on the divan, her legs crossed, two, slender crochet needles in her hands. She worked the sticks with such mastery, her eyes, concentrating on the TV, rarely peered down at the nearly completed oven mitt in her lap. Anyone watching her, observing the movements of her fingers, the manipulation of the sticks, would’ve guessed she’d been crocheting her whole life, from the womb, a freak of nature born with the implements, an extra, deformed finger on each hand.

“It’s almost done Gina,” Miss Parker said.

Gina walked down the three steps leading to the sunken living room and sat next to her mother. She was a slender seventeen year old, slightly homely, with long, red hair that she pulled back in a ponytail. She wore nothing but dresses, long, flowing sun dresses that her mother made for her. She’d never been on a date because her mother forbid her to do so. Once, on her fifteenth birthday, she tried to persuade her mother to teach her to drive, but much like dating, Miss Parker quickly shot the idea down, telling her only daughter that driving was dangerous, that there were too many maniacs out there, and it wasn’t worth it. She rarely drove herself limiting her trips behind the wheel to her weekly trek to the supermarket, and an occasional excursion to the liquor store for a fifth of bourbon. She didn’t need to work, no, not Miss Parker, not since the tabloid people got word of her eating habits, all of them, a crew with their cameras, pulling into her driveway, an army flooding out of a white van, knocking on her door, asking questions, snapping photos, snooping for a story.

And she gave them one, with stipulations of course, two actually, the first being that she be paid a monthly check, nothing extravagant, she’d never been one for extravagance, but enough for her daughter and herself to live comfortably. The second being this – that a story, or progress report actually, be featured in the tabloid, a monthly article devoted solely to Miss Parker’s

eating status, the crux of each journalistic piece being how close she was to reaching her goal.

Her neighbors, for obvious reasons, had long since pegged her an eccentric, the freak of the block, and avoided her, not out of any fear or hatred, but more from an uneasiness, a reluctance to engage her, for what would they say? What does anyone say to a lady who makes her living eating handmade oven mitts?

"It's beautiful," Gina said, smiling at her mother who continued to watch the six o'clock report.

"You like it?"

"Oh yes, very much. I think it's the prettiest one you've ever made."

Miss Parker turned to her daughter. "Gina," she said. "Do you want it?"

"No mother I couldn't. You're so close."

"There's no rush. You can have it if you want it. If you really want it."

Gina stared at her mother, a mixture of fear and uncertainty dancing in her head.

"Do you mean?"

"Most certainly," Miss Parker said, nodding her head. "If you think you're ready."

The girl looked down at her lap, silenced, wishing the question hadn't been asked, desperately desiring her previous state of comfort, the ease of life she'd grown accustomed to.

"If you have to think about it that hard, then you're not ready," Miss Parker said. "Maybe some other time. Maybe never. That's OK too you know. I just want you to be happy."

Gina said, "I'm sorry."

"What a fat ass."

"Dude, if I was that fat I'd kill myself."

"Just look at him. He's a fucking slob."

"Damn Jeff, check this one out."

"Wow."

"Look at that ass."

"I'm in love."

Sitting side by side on stools behind the two-way mirrors, Jeff and Phil satisfied their voyeuristic appetites legally. They saw it all and got paid for it. It was empowering, made them feel somewhat elite, chosen, appointed, to watch people, people who didn't know they were being watched, or if they did, couldn't do a damn thing about it. It could get boring, but for the most part they enjoyed their work, the hours of sitting, two friends together in a cramped cubicle, the two of them staring through the glass, observing the shoppers, most of them scrutinizing each item, holding it, feeling it, caressing it, sometimes smelling it...the crazy things humans do while trying to pick out a sweater or belt.

Jeff sat still, watching a mother and her two young sons, the youngsters wrestling on the carpeted floor, not the least bit interested in mother's plea, two shirts in her hand, school clothes for the upcoming year. He remembered it, how it was, just like the show before him, but now he was out of school, now he sat behind glass eight hours a day for six dollars and fifty cents an hour. Christmas aside, his mother hadn't bought him a shirt in over eight years.

But he couldn't dwell too much on that, no need in getting depressed on the job. There was

really only one thing that kept them going – shoplifters. They lived for them, yearned for the few and far between deviant patrons who waltzed into view, examining merchandise, acting normal, disinterested, they watched them stroll through the aisles, around the displays, they watched and watched, all the time itching for an attempt, slipping a pair of socks into the purse, a three pack of t-shirts under the shirt, secured between the abdomen and belt, they'd seen it all, no doubt about it, and they wanted to see more. It's a long wait, an excruciating interval of nothing, sometimes lasting for days, weeks even, but when it happens, when the offense occurs, it's well worth it, all the boring hours blasted to dust.

"Jeff, check out that guy."

Phil had seen the guy walk in, his steps slow, his path unfocused, as if he didn't know what he wanted, where he was going, a wanderer maybe, some sap just killing time while his wife shopped in another area of the store, or maybe, just maybe, he was going to make their night. "The dude in the overalls."

"Yeah."

"Ah, man," Jeff said. "I don't think so."

"I don't know man. I'm getting that feeling."

They watched the man as he stood at the wallet kiosk, turning shelves, picking up a leather square here and there, smelling it, running his fingers across the smooth surface, his head down all the time, never a check for other shoppers or salespeople.

"He don't look shifty to me," Jeff said.

"Maybe not."

Then, just as the two began to divert their attention elsewhere, the man shoved an eel skin money clip into his mouth and started chewing.

"Holy shit man," Jeff said. "Did you see that?"

"What?"

"That dude's eating a money clip."

"Bullshit."

"No man, look. He's munching down on the damn thing. Shit, look at him. Look."

"Well I'll be a son of a bitch."

As soon as he'd tossed it into his mouth and began pulverizing it with his teeth, it was gone, safely eradicated, all evidence of anything tunneling to his stomach.

"I don't guess there's anything we can do about that," Phil said.

Jeff said, "That nut ate a money clip."

Dr. Carson and his wife stood patiently in line at a convenience store somewhere in Destin, Florida. It was close to the condo they were renting, the one they claimed for two weeks every Summer.

The gastroenterologist held a six pack of Budweiser while his wife, the lovely Rebecca Carson, exasperated with boredom and impatience, thumbed through a copy of The National Examiner Gazette, a paper she regularly read at home, much to the dismay of her husband.

"Look honey," Rebecca said, pointing to an article. "It says here that that Parker lady is causing all kinds of trouble around the country. Says several cases have been reported of people trying

to eat all sorts of things – Samuel Newcomb, 33, of Nashville, had to be rushed to the emergency room after trying to consume a golf ball. How horrible. Isn't that just terrible honey?"

Dr. Carson turned around and looked at his wife.

He said, "My God, Rebecca. You don't actually believe that rag do you?"



Dusk
Stepan Chapman

Women

David C. Orsheski

Women women women
sketched naked figures
on the covers of poetry magazines
Bikini-clad clones
selling me beer and shampoo
Anorexic lingerie models
helping me spice up my sex life
Billboard blondes
chasing men of little character
on the seven dollar silver screen
Women women women
Women I've known
and have not known
their bathrooms
each distinctive in smell
and appearance
each of them harboring
their own distinct dreams
and the fashions magazines
piled in corners
or underneath forgotten chairs
those glossy pages
with photos of women
wearing clothes too expensive
or too tight
for any validity
Feminists with copies of *The Second Sex*
and the latest issue of *Vogue*
together in the same purse
Good time girls
with hundreds of lipstick shades
Down-and-out alxies and druggies
with not a care in the world
and a fire between their legs
Women women women
Lesbian poetesses
wearing leopard-skin coats
and oceans of patchouli
Gray-haired grandmothers
burying their husbands
and baking pies
Working mothers
too busy too care
Disgusted housewives
that wait for the mail
Young girls blowing it all
to a cute guy with a Camaro
Women women women
idolized in paintings
created by madmen and drunks
Women who complain too much
Women with dainty fingers
pointing at me

One for Dinner

Mark Wisniewski

a loser

of 7 straight
at a nearly

abandoned OTB
at 9:42 p.m.
I decided
I was hungry

parted with
the video screens
& studied the candy
machine's
offerings
all the black
coils were empty
indicating earlier

losers had
made the same decision
or maybe
someone had won
big
bought
every-
thing &

parted with our
sour faces
nurtured
by that seemingly

permanent
wealth

of sugar



killer cocktails

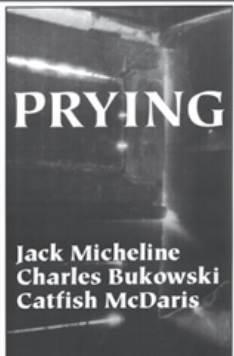
ALAN CATLIN



KILLER COCKTAILS is the latest collection of poetics by the well-known Alan Catlin. 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....Fully worth the \$5ppd./offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp/FS#104

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Errol Miller

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TERMS: CASH IS GREENER, BUT CHECKS TO CHRISTOPHER M. ARE OK.



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REVIEWS



That Bit Me

by Alan Catlin

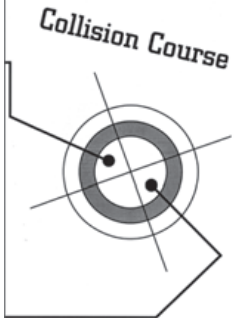
HAIR OF THE DOG THAT BIT ME is what you get the morning after indulging in Alan Catlin's earlier release, Killer Cocktails. Once again, plenty of deadly drink recipes that are indicative of the accompanying poetics. Another killer collection that belongs with the pleasure inducing prequel in everyone's bar (or bathroom). Just \$5ppd./high-end slick cover/linen paper/32pp/FS#109

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Miles of Highways and Open Roads

poems by Michael L. Newell

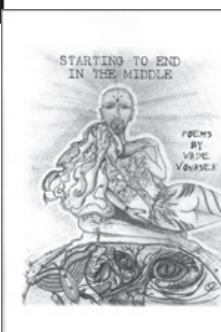


poems by Michael L. Newell

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. Your passport just \$6ppd./high-end matte cover/linen paper/46pp/FS#111.

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THE SCOPOPHILIAC

robert roden

THE SCOPOPHILIAC is 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'. Just \$5ppd./ high-end slick cover/linen paper/24pp/FC#112

REVIEWS

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. I don't pay myself, so I certainly won't pay you, but you will receive at least one copy, maybe more.

There are a few important things to make sure that you do when you submit your work. Please, please, make every attempt to print/type your copy as dark as possible. Also, for the computer users, please do **not** justify or force-justify your text. Left-justification is preferred by my scanner and deleting all those extra spaces created by justified text sucks. Name and address on the first page of each piece only. Send along a SASE when appropriate. 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.

Speaking of technology » » » stay up to date at : www.execpc.com/~chriflor (don't forget the tilde)
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Christopher M.

see below » [NOW IN EFFECT] « see below

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The editor of the lit-mag known as "First Class" is overjoyed to announce that Four-Sep Publications will now be able to produce chaps-for-hire under the new imprint "Lockout Press". There are several options available as to paperstocks and quantities, but all include full layout and design with the option for partial distribution through Four-Sep/First Class. The foremost concern in this venture is to communicate your work with the layout and design matching the scale of your message. Professional layout software 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, and I assure you that you will reel in amazement. Drop me a line and I will work up a quote based on the info you give me.



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Annamarie Revisions by Greg Watson

26pp/Ivory Linen/\$5ppd to author: 608 Lincoln Avenue #100, St. Paul, MN 55102



contributors

SAM BLUEFARB *Living in Diamond Bar, California, with thirty years of writing under his belt. This is his first photo in First Class.*

RANI BURD *ushes out the poetics from Minot, North Dakota. After a few years of factory and service jobs, grabbed an MA in English and teaches at a small four-year institution.*

ALAN CATLIN *Barmaster in Schenectady, NY. An oft-published and award-winning poet with several excellent chaps. Published in "Press" and many others. His "Killer Cocktails", an)ism(Quarter Book, is available from Four-Sep, as well as it's fine successor "Hair of the Dog That Bit Me".*

STEPAN CHAPMAN *Lives in Cottonwood, Arizona and his illustrations have appeared all over the small press. He also writes short fiction, appearing in The Baffler, Analog Science Fiction, and The Comics Journal.*

TOM CODY *Published in a number of reviews, this is his first appearance here. Calls Little Neck, New York his home.*

ROBERT COOPERMAN *ives in Denver, Colorado, this is his second time in First Class, and the piece here proceeds from two in FC #14.*

DAVE DREHER *Lives and writes in El Paso, Texas.*

EUGENE FLINN *as appeared in numerous national magazines (including LIFE), 100s of literary mags, as well as in newspapers on both coasts as a drama critic. New Jersey is home.*

ED GALING *The famed Poet Laureate of Hatboro has appeared all over the small press with a dozen chaps under his belt.*

JAY GRAY *Lives and writes about tragedy in slow motion in Shreveport, Louisiana.*

RICHARD D. LORBER *A free-lance comedy writer from Pacific Palisades, California, he supplies monologues to stand-up comics and sketches for cable television.*

BENJAMIN NEWELL *Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, with an appearance in "Liquid Ohio" to his credit. Works various jobs while turning down the MFA program at Naropa University because it is simply too expensive.*

DAVID C. ORSHESKI *Poet out of Forty Fort, Pennsylvania with appearances in several small press lit-mags.*

JENNIFER STANLEY *Illustrations flow from the pen in the Yooper land of Marquette, Michigan.*

A.D. WINANS *orn in San Francisco and the author of nearly 20 books of poetics. His resounding voice out of the Bay area can be read in People, You Think You Know? from Four-Sep Publications and elsewhere.*

MARK WISNIEWSKI *Recent winner of a Pushcart Prize, his work is published in numerous journals and small press lit-mags. Confessions of a Polish Used Car Salesman is in its second printing, with more forthcoming. Resides in Lake Peekskill, New York.*

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 have the balls to submit their words to other's scrutiny. Please continue to pleasure me with your submissions. — Christopher M.

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LIT-MAGS

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- ANGELFLESH:** Jim Buchanan, pobox 141123, Grand Rapids, MI 49514. Please send anything—poetry, artwork, fiction, sex toys, whatever. \$4/single issue, \$10/year(3 issues plus extras).
- ART:MAG #22:** Peter Magliocco puts together 76 pages of goodness with a free-buffet table sized helping of some of the best in the small press. This is the 15th Anniversary Issue!!! Besides the excellent poetics, there are several stand-out ink drawings by Lilia Levin. Send \$5 to Limited Editions Press, pobox 70896, Las Vegas, NV 89170.
- DRIVERS SIDE AIRBAG:** Comics, short fiction, poetics, killer illustrations and sometimes a dirty picture. Usually around 50pp, letter-half, loaded with edgy, biting, and intelligent, sometimes sardonic pieces. Issue 40 is \$3 and submissions should be sent to pobox 25760, Los Angeles, CA 90025.
- HEELTAP:** Richard D.Houff, 2054 Montreal Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55116. Mostly poetry, excellent production. Send \$4ppd for a sample.
- THE ICONOCLAST:** A mag loaded with intelligent, strongly crafted poetics, short fiction, art and reviews. A good long, thought-provoking read. Issue #62 out now for just \$3. Send submissions to: 1675 Amazon Road, Mohegan Lake, NY 10547.
- LUMMOX JOURNAL:** Raindog fills his mag with reviews, interviews, poetics and opinion. The Little Red Book series also spews forth from this highly active press. \$2 per issue or \$20 per year to: pobox 5301, San Pedro, CA 90733.
- NERVE COWBOY:** pobox 4973, Austin, TX 78765. Send poems, short stories(up to 5pp), and b&w art w/SASE. Bias toward accessible work that depicts the absurd nature of human experience. \$4/sample.
- PURPLE:** pobox 341, Park Hills, MO 63601. This is Daniel Crocker's excellent collection of essays, reviews, and criticism featuring an always awesome variety of writers. Send a few \$\$\$ for one today.
- RATTLE:** The nice thing about this professionally produced journal is that it looks like a stuffy, crap-hound academia-burdened "review" or "collection" on the outside, yet when I cracked the cover and began to digest the poetic offerings within the pages, I was given a taste of sweet honey from the hive. As bad as this sounds: It is an excellent bundle of words to have in the shitter with you. Clean production and stand-out selections make this one more than worth it: 13440 Ventura Blvd. #200, Sherman Oaks, California 91423.

CHAPS AND BOOKS

- THE COSMOLOGY OF MADNESS by Albert Huffstickler:** Crazy or sane? What earthly being possesses the capacity to deem and decide? A mix of the earthly uncertain and otherworldly potential hangs like a pleasant shroud over this collection of engaging poetics. A few characters recurring through the pieces and allegory, religious and otherwise, running rampant throughout like a madman genius in the empty sanatorium hallways make this one of the best Huffstickler reads in recent memory. A pleasurable, calmingly invigorating chap is yours for \$6 to Pariah Press, 604 Hawthorne Ave. East, St. Paul, MN 55101.
- DEMENTIA PUGILISTICA by David Lawrence:** Just a killer read. Short blasts that tell more in forty words than most do in forty pages. He is currently a boxing instructor which may be why his lines feel like a left-right-left combo delivered with dizzying speed. This dude has lived a ton of lives: millionaire, boxer, convict, movie producer; I guess he doesn't give up. The cover copy blurbs say this perfectbound collection is about "boxing, fucking and money." Yeah, that and a shitload more. You'll probably read it twice. Send \$10 to Box Turtle Press, 184 Franklin Street, New York, NY 10013.
- SLOGAN'S RUN by Robert Roden:** I'm not sure which impresses me more, the killer collection of short poetics and observations mingled with photographs or the exceptional production by Showerhead Press. First the words: you get over 30 pages of short blasts of concise and thoughtful commentary on consumerism, women, beauty, hypocrisy and even graffiti. The center pages are on a glossy stock with several photos accompanied by terse observations. Several substrates hold the ink in this chap: paper bag, transparencies, glossy stock, and standard colored paper are creatively interspersed with seeming purpose and intention. A chap you want to keep forever. \$5 from Showerhead Press, 9430 Claire Ave., Northridge, CA 91324.
- GRAND JUNCTION MESSIAHS by Cabaret Tran:** Three characters, plots, eras and stories intertwine in this short story that mixes politics, art, insanity, failure and idealism into a post-modern/classicist mosh. A young Hitler is a pondering artist, Vietnam takes its toll, and loneliness breaks through a hole in a closet wall. Adept use of compelling descriptive language kept me hooked although I could sense that the conclusion rested with the reader as a pleasing catalyst for deeper reflection. Yours for \$6.95 to Iconoclast, 1675 Amazon Road, Mohegan Lake, NY 10547.

'TRY THESE' HAS BECOME MY FORUM FOR PROMOTION OF THE WORKS OF WRITERS AND PUBLISHERS WHOM I, FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER, HAPPEN TO APPRECIATE OR ADMIRE. I CANNOT PROMISE THAT EVERY CHAP OR BOOK OR MAGAZINE SENT MY WAY WILL BE MENTIONED HERE, BUT YOU CAN BE DAMN SURE THAT THOSE THAT ARE HAVE PLEASURED MY EYES AND BRAIN. TAKE A SHOT AND SEND YOUR BEST CREATIONS MY WAY. THEY ARE IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER.

'TRY THESE' CONTINUES ON PAGE 54

- THE LAST WILL AND TESTICLE** by **Mather T. Schneider**: You'll laugh to yourself through much of this collection of poetics, that wry 'krist that's well written, meaningful and funny as hell' kind of reaction. There's a little bit of booze, a few women, as well as commentary on living in the late hours, but the strength of these pieces lies in his observations and descriptions of the characters that burn past his eyeballs. \$5 well spent to: Sticky Nickels Press, 2627 E. Grant #2, Tucson, AZ 85716.
- CANDY BARS** by **Gerald Locklin**: If you've read Locklin, and you like Locklin, go buy this book. There's not much more to say other than Locklin's sheer endurance and capacity to continue to offer his personality and observations, his persevering everyman indulgences and experiences, this essence that is distilled into utterly readable and thought-provoking work, is stunning if only for his ability to rarely, if ever, let the reader's mind wander to somewhere off his page. It is damn hard to put this book down. You get 265pp for \$16.95 from Water Row Press, pobox 438, Sudbury, MA 01776 or www.waterrowbooks.com.
- THE MOTH EATERS** by **John Bennett**: A collection of John Bennett's longer pieces. A brooding and exciting zone where characters develop and the full tale is told, though always with a bit of mysterious oddity teasing your brain for a time after ingesting. If you have read one of his famous "shards", imagine that as a speedy jolting assault, while in these stories, Bennett has the opportunity to tie you to a chair and spread his tales all over your face. Gorgeous words. Great production. Angelflesh Press, pobox 141123, Grand Rapids, MI 49514.
- DOWNWARD GLIDE** by **Errol Miller**: This is poetics. No foolishness, pretension or classless meanderings. Miller is a poet with a talent for putting heavy weight into each word. As Vincent Bator writes of this collection: "A native son of the South, Miller mines the region's indelible history, a milieu of culture, myth and hopeless failings woven into a solid body of poetic epics." Indeed. Ninety pages, professionally presented with full color cover available for \$12 ppd. from: BGB Press, 158 King Street, Northampton, MA 01060.
- THE JACK KEROUAC UPPER PENINSULA DIARY** by **T. Kilgore Splake**: A fantastic work that is so much more than a stylistic exercise. Splake "discovers" a lost segment of the life and writings of Kerouac in a backroom bookstore in Michigan's upper peninsula while poking around on a road trip. Extraordinarily well done. Angst Productions, pobox 508, Calumet, MI 49913.
- FEBRUARY IS THE CROOKEDEST MONTH** by **Mark Weber**: Buy this chap! If not for the wonderful words of Weber, then for the phenomenal production by Clamp Down Press. Joshua Bodwell, the editor, culled these poetic gems from a vast supply, creating, as he states a "Weber reader". An awesome exploration of his common themes (booze, jazz, gardening, Janet) with beautiful hand-crafted and bound pages to ride on. An outstanding six-color screen printed cover starts it all out. \$8ppd to Clamp Down Press, pobox 7270, Cape Porpoise, ME 04014-7270.
- GRAPPLING** by **Susanne R. Bowers**: The poetics in this collection are strong reflections on the turgid underbelly of faulty family life and screamie memories. Happily spiteful, yet fair, Bowers pecks out the best words from her thoughts and experiences and soothes the needles down your throat with impeccably succinct expressions. This collection took third place in the 1998 Nerve Cowboy chap contest. Sadly, Bowers is no longer with us, but her words still are. Send \$4 to Liquid Paper Press, pobox 4973, Austin, TX 78765.
- BRENDA'S BIRTHDAY** by **Jack Saunders**: This is Saunders' 154th book. Saunders serializes segments of his life, his actions, his interactions, while injecting and infusing his paragraphs with thought-deep, sensible, outlandish opinions and assessments, relating all things to larger events and ideas. Wide-ranging thorough world-knowledge pumps through the heart of his works and the result is an eloquently chaotic macro-micro of the whole she-bang. A generous, sharing, prolific writer, contact him at: Garage Band Books, Box 1392, Tucker, GA 30085.
- BLOOD ON THE FLOOR** by **normal & charlotte**: In the piece of poetic "luna in the late sun", normal notes that he has "not watched television since 1969 --- / nothing on that screen can come close / to approaching the picture I see / through my autumn window", referring to luna, the "late in life lesbo". Indeed. What normal has done is to observe the quirk and work of the humans poking around and all of the crass love and hate they exude. A killer read with a few fitting and explosive images from charlotte in one of RD's (Raindog) \$5 LRBs from LummoX Press, pobox 5301, San Pedro, CA 90733.
- INVERTEBRATES OF NORTH APHASIA** by **Stepan Chapman**: "Doctor" Chapman presents his collection of "obscure organisma" drawn from his field notes, and annotated with informative notes. Crafty, hilarious, a weird sort of Dr. Seuss-like creature collection with offerings such as the Pediatriform Locust, which collects secondhand medical tools. The image shows the Locust attempting to locate the pulse of a hatchling cricket. Perhaps you get the idea. Chapman's illustrations have been prominently displayed in FC for quite some time. A mere \$3 for 36pp to: Hellp! Press, pobox 38, Farmingdale, NJ 07727.
- BLUES FOR BIRD** by **Martin Gray**: Rather than blues, this is a well-crafted celebration of the short life of Charlie Parker. I've got the first six in this 12-part series of chaps and it's easy to sink right in and devour Gray's poetics. Perhaps overshadowing the delivery is the story itself. It would be difficult to pen an uninteresting exploration of the compelling and groundswell/-breaking master of the alto sax. Hell, Parker inspired so many wicked jazz-horn blasters, he may as well have inspired the poet in Gray. Besides a few painful typos, it's worth a read and re-read. \$5 to Alpha Beat, 31 Waterloo St., New Hope, PA 18938.