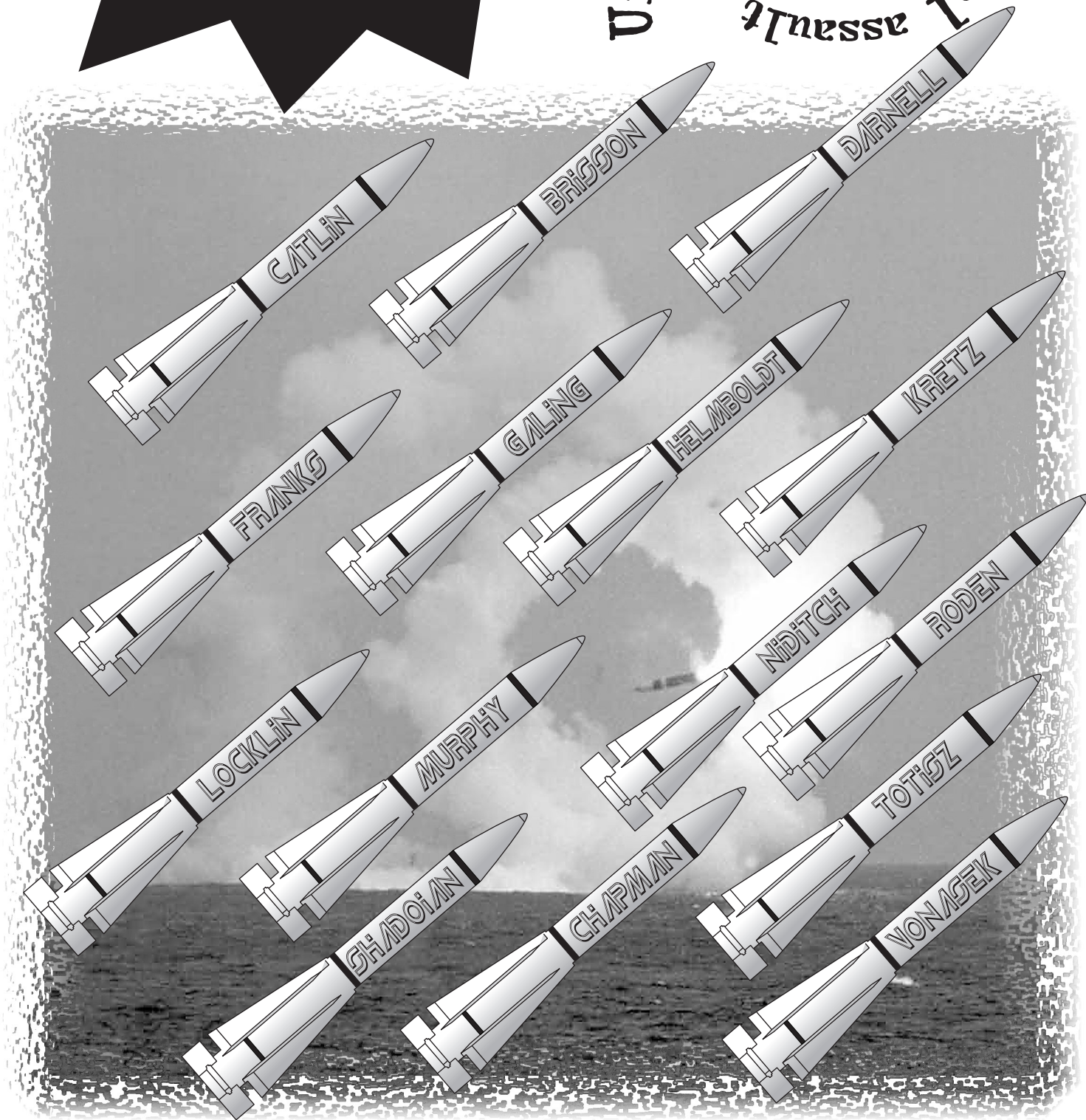


ISSUE THIRTEEN/ I of III.2000
FIVE BUCKS

First Class

Unprovoked, out of control
assault on your senses

13





ISSUE
THIRTEEN

Dedicated to and in memory of
Susanne R. Bowers
an admired writer and contributor
who enhanced the pages of this lit-mag.
I will miss her letters
and enthusiasm.

ALL CONTENTS ©2000
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS



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

FIRST CLASS
pobox 12434
MILWAUKEE, WI 53212

www.execpc.com/~chrifor

ALL RIGHTS REVERT BACK TO AUTHORS

SUBSCRIPTION INFO:

IT'S SIMPLE. SEND \$5 FOR THE VERY NEXT ISSUE MAILED DIRECTLY TO YOUR HOME, OR \$14 FOR THE NEXT THREE.

POSTAGE IS INCLUDED.

**CASH OR CHECKS PAYABLE TO : CHRISTOPHER M.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT.**


First Class Contents

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 1: | INTERSTATES <i>by Christopher Brisson</i> |
| 3: | THOSE WERE THE DAYS <i>by Christopher Brisson</i> |
| 5: | UP THE LINE TO DEATH <i>by Alan Catlin</i> |
| 10: | GARGOYLE <i>by Scott Darnell</i> |
| 12: | LEF-TEYE... RI-TEYE... <i>by Christopher Franks</i> |
| 13: | BONING UP <i>by Ed Galing</i> |
| 14: | FRIDAY AFTERNOONS <i>by Krista Helmboldt</i> |
| 15: | FINDINGS OF 1803 <i>by Thomas Kretz</i> |
| 16: | john singer sargent: the daughters... <i>by Gerald Locklin</i> |
| 17: | jean antoine watteau: l'accord parfait <i>by Gerald Locklin</i> |
| 18: | MISSION <i>by David Murphy</i> |
| 34: | THE LAST HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL <i>by B.Z. Niditch</i> |
| 36: | FOR STORIES ON THE FIFTH FLOOR <i>by Robert Roden</i> |
| 37: | T'N'T (for Timmy Taylor) <i>by Robert Roden</i> |
| 38: | SUBURBAN AIRS AND ATTITUDES <i>by Jack Shadoian</i> |
| 39: | ON THE FLOOR <i>by Jack Shadoian</i> |
| 40: | A STORM IS COMING <i>by Andras Totisz</i> |
| 45: | CROW <i>by Wade Vonasek</i> |

GREETINGS: A bit fatter this time around, with a longer short fiction piece from David Murphy, of Ireland, as well as a bit of the absurd from Andras Totisz from Hungary. Once again, I try to mix the established writers of the small press, with a heavy dose of new names, since, after all, does any writer really matter if not for the created and imagined words? I publish in FC what I believe are the best reads. Perhaps you agree, perhaps not, but please enjoy. - Christopher M.

IMAGES

 **COVER DESIGN** *by Christopher M.*

 **ILLUSTRATIONS, PAGES 2,11,35,38,45** *by Stepan Chapman*

Do you have to cancel?
Are you trying to cancel on me?
I can't believe there's something else you'd rather do.

Yes, I most certainly got the ants in my pants. I am itchy
but persevering. Did you smell the brambles on the beach?
They smell like sewage, septic green. A rotten wish.

Did you know the way to San José when you were a teenager in the 1960's?
Did you say, *Dionne, I'll show you the way?*
Did you, do you, have you ever...?

These are the questions I keep repeating, must ask.
And still they say, *Keep your feet off the couch.*
Get those new crocodile shoes off the table.

It feels as if my mind is in mid-flamenco. Spinning. Kicking. A Big
Dipper. Let's call it "The Purge." Now switch the metaphor to vacuum-
eliminating all the debris so something emerges in a clean, visible space.

Canvas. Rooms. Not canvas rooms. But, *Canvas, Rooms*. I tell you:
we are all entitled to passion. We are all fitted for the wilderness.
We just don't all of us know it yet.

And so I ask, would you eat a dead comrade
if you were languishing in the remains of a crashed two-engine
in the Andes, stranded seventeen days and counting? I think I could,

but I wouldn't kill my large dog and eat her tender
parts as some other caloric misfortunates chose to do
in some other icy predicament. Was it real life or just a movie?

Lordy, Lordy, get me a butter churn for Christmas and I will make butter
cookies for all the principality's orphans. The ones with no hands
shall be fed with a special contraption operated by the elbows.

Do you know the way to San José? –Don't you dare
hold out on me–[*Why do I need to know this so badly?*]
I walked down Brock Avenue, stopped at T.V.'s Variety, they were out

of what I wanted–how unusual–bought instead plenty of two-cent red
fish, those pastel flying saucers that taste like the wafer at Communion
some shoelaces of black licorice, to assuage my dolor. I was hoping

you had some plantains in your tote. I saw them in your child-
proof carriage at the supermarket, and now that we meet on this
deserted street... well, must I spell it out? Hungry bastard, you

call me, but that's what I am keeling over for. Jack Wagner
is getting older. See it in his handsome face, the multiplication
of creases. Remember when he was illuminating "All I Need"
from every young girl's radio? He was only twenty-five, Jack.

Jack and Rick and John, those singing heart-throbs ensmocked
at the General Hospital. Oh, and dangerous Michael Damian, so young,

so restless—did you ever fantasize that—hey, before I forget,
Melançon Meats has a special on ground beef this week:
90% lean. That's what I buy when I make the meatloafs.

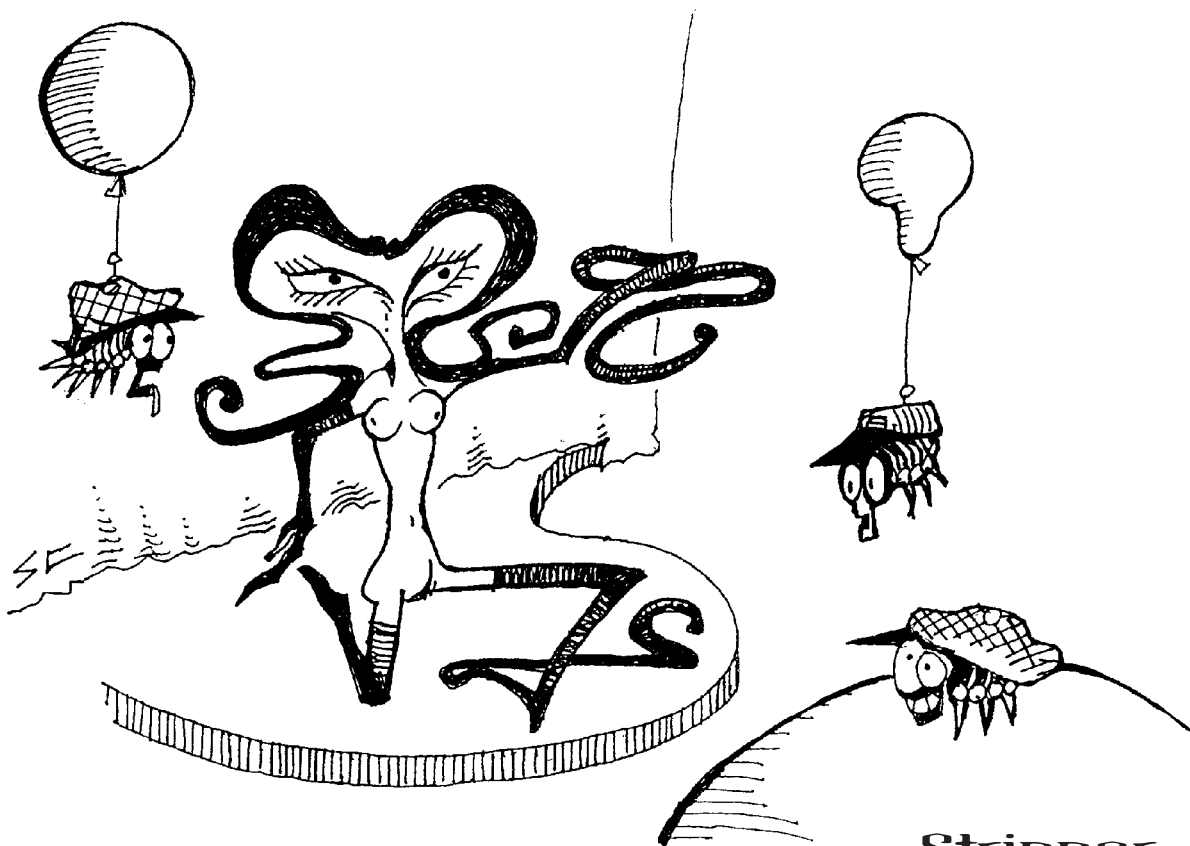
I want my kids to enjoy the taste of cow without all that fat
that ruins the less choice cuts. Take your vegetarian
diatribe and shove it up your ass, I could barely believe

my ears, but that's what the young scholar said to his girl,
in line behind me at the Bread & Circus in Brookline
when the conversation jumped from the politics of Hogarth's

late period prints to an impending soy-based repast. I like meat,
he was adamant. Over dinner the girl fumes over bean burgers.
I can't imagine they're still together. I doubt it. Just as

I doubt my ability to travel, those melodramatic
nights I cry myself to sleep with a full tank of gas,
new tires, sunglasses, tattered map—and no guarantee

San José is more than
a splendid
mirage.



Stripper
Stepan Chapman

Those Were the Days

Christopher Brisson

I.

My brief nosebleeds in April,
as regular as Easter, never cease
to amaze me. I usually let them
l a s t.

Stand over the toilet bowl and watch myself
drip, drip, drip into the blameless
water, the calm white porcelain,
confront the blood unspooling
in slow motion, delicate incarnadine
ripples reminiscent of scenes from famous horror
movies, Angie Dickinson's slashed palm, frantic
and spurting, as the elevator descends...descends...
STOPS
forty-nine minutes into *Dressed to Kill*.

My girl Amy can't bear to see, once
the killer has fled, Angie's limp draining
wrist getting banged over and over again
by the shiny elevator door, its determination
to shut its spattered chrome. Oh Amy
that blood's fake and sticky, made from Karo syrup
and gelatin recipes. Far from salty. Ain't nothing
like the real thing, baby.

II.

Celebrate spontaneous nosebleed
as a point of entry, a rare opportunity for mortal
reflection, the one place to dissociate blood from pain.
Don't rush for the tissue box, get yourself
to the throne, lean over and let the pitter patter
commence in pink, the swirl and movement
of your fuel finding its way across the water.
For a moment ignore the obvious, the unpleasant:
bug bites, papercuts, hangnails,
the pulpy holes from which a mouthful of baby
teeth escape. Think back and discard routine
childbirth, painful and protracted, scraped knees,
elbows, leeches, splinters, stitches, sutures,
each attempt at suicide, failed and otherwise.
Hide all the sharp instruments. Set aside a lifetime
of nick and scratch, razor mishaps, clumsy onion
dicing, the big stubbed toe. Won't you
concentrate instead
on the iron, redolent, essential. Focus on that cha-cha
of salt, goosey and sharp.
Consider your life, the locomotion, streaming
avenues of hidden blue identity
we harbor always, that wet sapphire
self which vanishes into scarlet
fibs in the company of oxygen.

III.

I remember laying on top of the table,
the low surface on which we cut out a smorgasbord
of revealing items—fanciful things, stabs at reality—
from construction paper, pasted them together

and brought them home to be hung on the refrigerator,
juvenilia for the ages. Mrs. Morrissey thought
it would stop if was prone, never had she seen
such volume. I had become the principal
center of interest in the classroom. All but two
of the other kids had gathered round, grave
and attentive, some strange tribal configuration;
they studied the stains on my shirt, the strewn
red tissue, and what little else there was to see—
my instructions had been to remain still until
the flow ceased. I see their eyes, the little flickers
of admiration and excitement at this break
in our predictable morning. But it is a quiet
memory: my breathing, their breathing,
and what it is to be left alone,
an eventual drifting
back to other activities by onlookers
ready for some new distraction,
perhaps the building of a bridge or
fort with the bright red cardboard
bricks, each the size of a shoebox,
a good five hundred or so, enough
to construct tower, turret, moat,
doghouse, porch, patio,
stable: your very own world.

IV.

Oh...yes: I want to yell so loud: I am the liquid
me you never see except through the tease
of my skin like a lampshade lit in dark winter
when we climb into bed and you remark
on my thicket of veins, misinterpret
basic anatomy, think that
blood is indeed red inside this body,
and I have to correct you, say *Baby, just think:*
our juice truly is the color of the sea.

We are oceans, all of us
walking across land, yet largely unaware
as we yell *red! red! red! red! red!* and
dote on switchblades, menses, scabs and
rubies, punches in the ring. You can never
keep our hearts away from homicides
and vampires for long. And the discerning
elderly, they sigh, watching us run like
refugees from our insides, they know something
else. They can't help
but wince as we accommodate the bitter
white chalk of latex
gloves trapping the sweat of dentists' hands,
the exploration of the mouth, and what of
the shrink-wrapped sex, the punctilious
miseries of exchange, those petrified
witnesses at the scene of an accident
who will let you bleed to death, expire
on unforgiving concrete, slip away
on well-peopled streets
for fear of

Up the Line to Death

Alan Catlin

The Text

Begins with an evocation of what it was like in that "War to End All Wars"

"There were still in Ypres at that date (1917) poets who kept something of the idealism of 1914 in their outlook and their poems. But that was in the Passchendale year, and to me it seems that the Passchendale 'drive' was murder—not only to the troops but to their singing faiths and hopes. From then on the voice of those who found strength and interval enough merely for penning their visions was generally a cry."

— from the introduction to "Up the Line to Death"

A pain cry

In the post war after wars to end all wars era, we who have come to die salute you
from the trench warfare of the mind
to the battlefields of the heart
to the actual fields of honor
and dishonor
to the locked-in wards, drunk tanks and solitary confinements in and out of prisons

Life on the Locked-in Ward

He said he'd done time in a locked-in ward in San Diego, that he'd sat down with the schizos over coffee and shot the breeze, everyone else professional was upstairs locked in an office talking to the tape recorders or dictation machines that spit back the buries child:
"I'm twelve years old now. My father wants me. I hate the idea of living."
Her wrists are in his eyes, carved to the bone, scar tissue, thin red lines on white, he's saying, "I had this chick, Linda, crazy as they come. Dug me plenty over the hot black stuff and the weeds. Said, 'You know, John, you're crazy, really crazy coming down here to rap. No one raps with us, 'cause we're up against it all the way.' That was the biggest, Goddamned compliment of my life; being labeled crazy by a Lifer. 'Linda, honey', I said, 'the only difference between me being a counselor and you being in a closed-in ward is that I learned to dig my craziness.'
'Now I know, I'm in trouble,' she said, 'That's a bad trip that never ends.'
I cured that girl all by myself."
Sure he did. Just like the fleet that had her on the beach respected her virginity, her eyes washed out on home-made acid, the white hot electro shocks of where her brain met his, splitting the gaps between his teeth, deadening the last remaining life inside the cells.

We're all up against it all the way

Listening to music by Big Brother and the Holding Company and the voice screaming from the inside of the deepest void is Janis still suffering in an afterlife of unremitting pain

The psychic wars we are fighting transcend all the known boundaries of time and space

Armistices signed are written in blood and disappearing ink

The automatic writing of beggars, thieves, demon-saints and two-headed monsters set loose on the streets as free agents brainwashed on a special form of living death: life without parole

Thorazine Angel

Afternoons, he is the guardian
angel of the sidewalks between
Alvey and Princeton Streets,
stands tall and lean smoking
cartons of Camel Filters, grey
black hair wire ropes growing out
of his head, eyes glazed over
by countless years of mind
numbing drugs. He paces
the pavement adjusting the broken
frames of his glasses, gesticulating
wildly, carrying on silent
conversations with the pope,
God, John Lennon and the beetles
that crawl down his spine,
touching vertebra, creating
nerve endings, hives of pain
that erupt from the skin.
Walking from block to block,
chain smoking, he absentmindedly
touches a lit match to his lips.

The walking wounded are everywhere

There aren't enough fallout shelters, city missions or psych-centers to hold them all and with the bottle law the way that is now, they all have enough money for a drink and a pack of generic cigarettes they augment by picking up butts on the street or raiding ashtrays the barkeep hasn't had time to dump

sometimes they even go through the garbage, if you let them, for treasures

that's why McDonald's has a new look to it these days, the look of an urban wasteland surrounded by thin homeless people dressed in beyond salvation army rags, filthy hands, face and clothes covered with the worst kind of landfill dirt and grime, rifling the garbage cans for uneaten leftovers, fighting off the birds, waving their arms as they scream to get away, get away!

after awhile the authorities don't even bother picking them up unless they are armed and dangerous

POW

All the cash he has
left in the world is on
the bar, thirty-five cents,
three hours out of the VA
unsuccessfully attempting
to cash a two hundred dollar
out of town check drawn
on a bank in the Bronx.

In every bar along Central
Avenue, he is known as the man
without a county, a prisoner on
the losing side of a War
of the Worlds, walking wounded
without hope of rescue.
By eleven on a Sunday night,
he has nowhere to go but
to the end of rounds others
buy, reliving Vietnam,
chain smoking, lighting three
to a match, no need to worry now.
Born to Be Wild on
the jukebox is their motto
slugging down Mr. Budweiser,
chasing Mr. Jameson's Irish
back into the jungle where
they leave him, one by one,
alone on perpetual guard duty
with a soiled copy of The Book,
paralyzed by Fear, his white,
shaking hands, tracer rounds
illuminating all his terminally swollen
brain cells, throbbing the night.

And there is no way out except in a body bag
identification tags tied around the big toe of your right foot for easy reading
dreaming of angels of mercy that tended to your bodily needs when you were wounded in action
a warrior for peace that never comes
on a different kind of ward than the locked-in kind,
the ward that has no visible bars
but a wooden one where medicine is served and the angels of mercy are always out of uniform
but you can hear their voices mixed in among the sounds of the jukebox, the endless droning
of the tv stations, the casual voices rising in volume to be heard among the gathering din,
the earthbound angels without wings

The Weaver

She's in the bar to cash
a check for a six pack to go
and a box of filtered weeds
on New Year's Eve, is into
pounding down draft beers,
talking a blue streak out loud,
to herself, so involved in a
full moon of totaled-out craziness
no one notices her sneaking
in on the end of rounds
others buy. Smiling, three
sheets to the wind, she thanks
the cracked faces in the back
bar mirror for their hospitality,
drinks all remaining unguarded
cocktails on the wood finishing
off the old year with the new.

Standing, she has one rubber
leg guiding the other out into
the night, describing wide uneven
arc weighed down by six
Pabst Blue Ribbon gravity beers.
She hits the ice covered bricks
with a vengeance, staggering,
walking in a coma weaving
from bush to tree to telephone
pole until, she goes down for
good, eyes waxed-over like
ice on shallow water you could
see trapped living things in,
moving about beneath that surface,
trying to get out.

And somewhere in the din and the smoke
the falling shells, mortar rounds
burning cigarette ends, long neck beer bottles broken in anger
shots spilled on the bar and bodies broken in spirit and mind
the singer's voice from a distant era sings of years gone by, "I swear I was so lonesome I took
some comfort in -"
Took some comfort in, a necessary angel of the night

Jukebox Junkies

She's too old to have been
born with Calvin Klein
sewed on her like an extra
layer of skin and it didn't
take X-Ray vision to see
underwear was passe in
this let's get a good
bag on continuation of a
Saturday Night Live and Naked
drinking B-52's with beer
chasers, sharing a BLT long
after the naked lunch
under the table kisses,
and caresses, continually
feeding a jukebox habit
that requires a roll of
quarters, hot wired double
edged sex-farce tunes that
ease her them over into the rowdy:
lets spill drinks on each other
and get crazy with our good
buddies Mick Jagger and
Rod Stewart phase of the weekend
lifting off on a Sunday Night
bombing run in a rapidly
declining arc lighted pattern
just before the perimeter
trip flares ignite and the silent
screaming begins.

She's not the one you need, though

Not the real goods but an advance scout for the soft parade that must inevitably follow all the loud advance billing and shouting

Usually to no avail

The main event

The original desolation

Original Avenging Angel

She was this outrageous
blonde from nirvanaland
all the bar fly young guys
were about to jump on
when she whipped out
this stiletto & sd.
"I'll cut the first dick
head who moves another
inch. All I need is a
shot of double Wild Turkey
& I'll be on my way."
She downed that shooter
never taking her eyes
off the wide mouthed crew.
She backed out of the bar
as if it were a war zone
which it was with Cher
carrying on entertaining
the troops in less than
underwear on MTV.
That was one subdued,
burned out, late night
crowd dreaming of a
better life expecting
something but getting
nothing but another beer,
if they were lucky.

Just like the song says, life's a lie.

Scott Darnell

Forty feet above ground is no place to lose one's concentration, unless of course you're looking to crackle-splatter in a messy final exit best dealt with by a janitorial crew. Nobody ever said that being a painter was an easy task. It's a life or death struggle to slap that color between and betwixt all those rafters.

Man against gravity, the least and the greatest of mother nature's weapons. How awesome! It pulls at every molecule in your being so subtly, all you need do is forget for just a moment, just a millisecond and...

Hell, even the gargoyles know better than to get distracted. Stone upon stone, still as night, they at least stay conscious of the fall. But then. Pin no gargoyle. I'm just a lowly bug. At least that's what The Powers That Be around this place call my kind. We aren't real bugs of course, just a bunch of mental patients scurrying about the institution with paint brushes in our hands and prolixin coursing through our veins.

Hey, don't knock it, it's a job. Maybe not the best in the world, but then again, I'm not in the world. I'm in an asylum. It's either this, or end up like some of the real bugs down there on the ward. Sitting half comatose in front of a television all day is no way to spend a life, believe me. We definitely got it better.

Still, we are bugs, and sometimes as I paint the walls and ceiling with those bland eggshell-whites and slate grays that belie the hundred year old cracks and crumbles hidden underneath, I find myself wondering about the lot of us. I mean, do any of us truly realize the cracks and crumbles so prevalent in our own skewed little minds?

There's Ghomer for an instance. Pushing his broom across the red tiled floor below me, he seems oblivious to anything but the need to answer those pestering personalities relentlessly pushing and pulling at him with their brand of reality.

Sitting way up here, alone and untouchable, Ghomer merely appears to be mumbling at the dust to me. But underneath it all, I know his conspiracy rages on. Memories acquired, memories forged, memories yanked from the shadowy sub-basement of his disturbed little childhood cry out to him. They endlessly mutter about a dead aunt killed by an uncle who lives a secret life as a Nazi who builds Volkswagons with slave laborers versed in the Cabala.

Now that Nazi uncle and his slaves fester deep inside, worming their way to the core of a confused mind that can only mumble the esoteric chants of unwelcome borders who cry out for justice, for emancipation, and most especially, a Volkswagon of their very own.

Then there's Folks, a black bull of a man, braided up like a Bo Derek reject. He holds a paintbrush chest-high, confusedly seeking an area to paint on a wall he's covered several times already. Poor Folks is always confused. It's little wonder with an I.Q. barely surpassing that of an eight-year old, though no eight-year old I ever met took a pair of scissors to anyone.

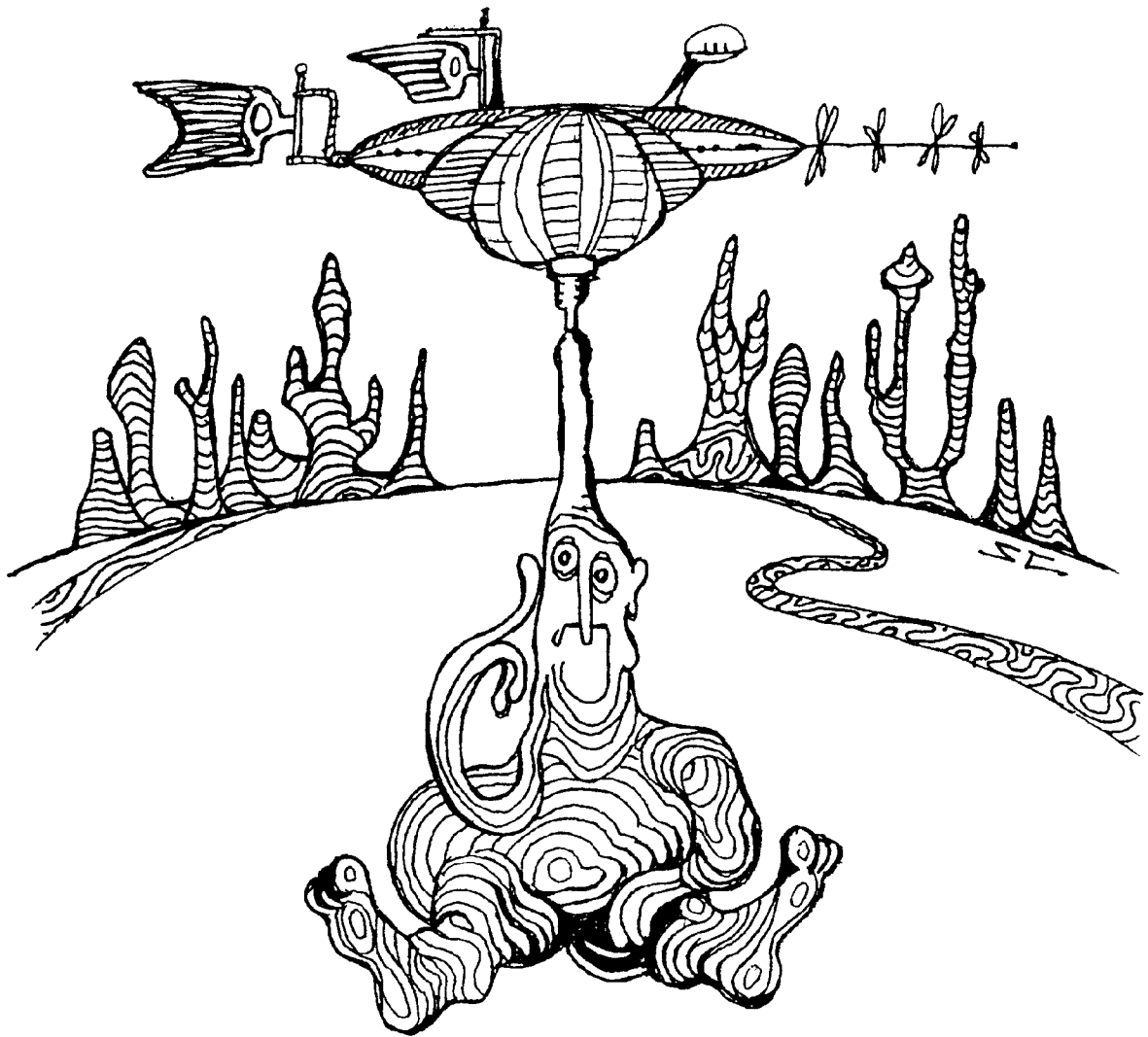
To hear him tell it, the school nurse was dead when he found her. The blood on his jeans wasn't blood at all but red paint from the janitorial project he'd been assigned. He'd been drinking the night before and the paint fumes, red noxious little gremlins seeping through the air and into his poor brain, knocked him cold and painted him guilty. He remembers nothing, thanks to those fumes. Whether he did it, or will ever do it again, he cannot tell. And yet, in their infinite wisdom, The Powers That Be allow him a place on our paint crew. God protect us from the gremlins!

Destined for early release is our very own resident kiddie molester. Sixty and loving it he patiently trims the window frames, dreaming of the day he can get back to his leather shop and earn enough money to take that special trip across the ocean-blue, the Philippines no less. But hell, enough said about him.

Even in the best of situations monsters sometimes slip through the cracks.

Then there's me, the gargoyle sitting astride a plank stretched precariously atop the metal skeleton I depend on to keep me afloat, Without it, how could I paint the ceiling? How could I hit the corners deemed so important to the cosmetic survival of this asylum I call home? I'd come crashing down, tumble after tumble until suddenly, no tumble, no more.

I wonder, if gravity won out, would I scream? Or would I fall all quiet like, simply grateful that my own cracks and crumbles were about to shatter into oblivion? No, I think I would scream, and then giggle insanely when I came so close to hitting but never actually did. I'd float above the insanity so prevalent on terra firma. And then, having more fun than my doctor allows without a shot of prolixin and a few choice restraints, I'd wing my way back on top of my scaffold and keep on painting.



Wax
Stepan Chapman

Lef-teye... Ri-teye...

Christopher Franks

“Lef-teye... ri-teye... Pull!”

What she had heard was true then. These were the acts that would etch themselves to coming generations’ minds. There would be no erasing the unconditional “love” of *it* all from their subconscious. They would have seen the acts they had, and no matter how much that was, it would be too much to have seen.

“Lef-teye ... ri-teye ... Pull!”

Seeing is believing. Before she had seen *it*, even before she was taken there, she had heard. Not much of what it was, but enough to be believed. And she believed like the rest when she saw it happen. But after it happened to her she was not as sure as she had been before.

“Lef-teye ... ri-teye ... put ‘em wi’ the res’!”

In a way *it* was liberating, after all was seen and done. But before, when it was being done and still being seen, she had cried.

The room they were kept in was so cramped that they had to sleep standing up. There was no room to lay down, or even to sit. There were two-way mirrors on two of the walls, and closed-circuit televisions on the other two walls, so that they could watch *it*.

A couple of them would be taken, and replaced with a couple more. Always a couple more than there had been taken out; to keep it cramped. And it worked. When the lights in the adjoining room would go on those who were near the mirrors were packed in so tightly they could not even turn their heads away from *it*.

They saw *it*, but they could not hear *it* in their room. And it is far worse seeing someone scream when you cannot hear them. But when *it* happened to her she heard herself scream...at least she did at first.

After having to see it happen a couple of times, she worked her way away from the mirrors. There was a lot of rustling when the couple of them were taken out, and those by the mirror would always try to move inward. She did, and because she did she was taken.

She was crying when she was taken out of the room. Could she even cry after it was done?

“Lef-teye...ri-eye...Pulled!”

In a way *it* was liberating...afterwards. What she had seen made her cry...before. But afterwards, still as cramped as before, she could not see *it*. Everything was gone. If there were others screaming, she did not even see. And after a while she did not even feel...not even cramped.

Boning Up

Ed Galing

I usually wait until
The bones are
Dry before
I eat 'em

There's somethin'
About the marrow in
A good bone

That is so sweet
And juicy

And it really gives
Me a good
Appetite.

I don't know where
I got this cravin' for
Bones so much

I guess it goes
Back to my
Childhood

When I was raised

By those damn vampires
Who adopted me from
The vampire agency

All they did was
Eat bones all day
Long and drink 'em down
With a nice bottle of blood...

Come to think of it
I'm runnin' low

Gotta stop down
At the local
Mortuary supermarket
And get some ribs.

Friday Afternoons

Krista Helmboldt

I am at a little cathedral set aside for carved picnic tables
And I am writing down verse after verse.
A man with a look of lust and a black thermos
Comes by with a broken mirror and his carried curse.

So here I sit on Friday afternoons with leaves for my wallpaper
And a man soaked in a layer of nothing, thin
With a heavy suitcase of Jack and Seagram's
And a backpack of chessboards and cameras and sins.

And while he talks, my headphones are on to ignore;
And he's petting the fish he's caught in his rusted yellow pail
And I look up and wish he leaves me with peace when he goes
And he grabs my pen and takes off down this trail.

And so I have no pen and nothing at all to do but look around
And I get up and wander aimlessly through this park
And I end up on the same bench with only my Walkman and my notebook
And end up studying some tree and her bark,

And a woman comes by with her peanut butter sandwiches and her shopping cart
Her eyes are as heavy looking as the bells on her polkadot skirt
She walks with her toes pointed out inside her Converse All Stars
And her hands look red, like they're bold, and her cheeks are covered in dirt.

For all the times I wish I had ideas to give out
And my brain stops working and takes a vacation
And I feel like a failed artist with my block of inspiration
And all I can do is switch my location

And I get in my car with the paint chips and the bumper stickers
And life is good. My credit card is paid off and my muffler is fixed
And I go home and fall asleep and dream of coffee shops and blond haired girls
And wake myself up with some vodka and Kool-ade mixed.

And Christ! I wonder if that's me in ten years
With my shopping cart and my dirty tears...

Findings of 1803

Thomas Kretz

Morning found a spirited lass
without the bind of corselet
and revealing a decolletage
of busty brain for all to see,

quoting von Goethe and Schiller
as if they were personal friends
she must bring into the salon
of Madame de Staël Holstein,

advancing monarchic theories
mixed with Franklin and Socrates
between sips of watered absinthe
cloudy but intoxicating.

Afternoon found Lady Corinne
strolling with a handsome captain
down some rue d'amour, parasoled
to hide her mind from his senses.

He was about to be dispatched
to Antwerp with invasion plans
for Britain but should not tell her
and she feigned proper indifference

until after the third cognac
in the back room of the brasserie
she became insistent as hands
upon her to learn his secrets.

Moonlight found a tipsy trollop
sleeping in an odorous bunk
riding the Seine to Le Havre
having paid dearly for passage,

but this was her chance to arrive
at the end of Paris intrigues,
the hypocrisy of Amiens,
unavenged death of her father.

She left behind the belles lettrés
to the wrath of their emperor,
her captain to his suicide,
and herself to dark British ale.

Gerald Locklin

variously bemused
by the gaze of the portraitist,
they do not even look a lot alike.
even before our psychologic century,
the american girl,
of privilege at least,
is growing independent.
only the archetypal urns
they lean against in moments of distraction
stand taller than their personalities.

a foolish critic notes their "sexuality,"
but it is the antithesis of this,
their new-world innocence,
virgins of the virgin continent,
that constitutes their childhood beauty
and will later render them more prized
than european women of greater sophistication,
fashion-plates of ostentatious sensualism.

(of course their daddy's virgin wealth
won't hurt their chances.)

the foregrounded youngest,
playing with her pinafores doll,
is the living doll of lyric commonplace.
The two teenagers,
clad in white on black,
rembrandt pale in fathomless shadow,
prefigure bergman's persona,
posed in perpendicularity,
the erect/the relaxed,
one ready for the world,
one fixed upon the self/same other.
in the light, miss confidence
puts one foot forward,
at balletic angle,
on the threshold of a slender, be-tressed perfection.

they do not think to read their destinies
in the mazes and spoked mandalas
of the epigenetic omar khayam carpet.

their freedom will consist of
their response to what life
has to offer them.
the rooms they occupy will cease to seem
quite as spacious as
the mansions of remembrance.
this is the tragedy and dignity
we cannot spare our little girls.

Gerald Locklin

perfect accord? perfect harmony?
as the museum mag points out
this has to be high irony,
a satire of the pastoral tradition
the flutist playing from a score
held for him by a maiden
has a face that would be the envy
of lon chaney's wolf-man.
he has more scar tissue closing his eyes
that the relentless welterweight,
carmen basilio (the pride of the
canastota onion fields).
his hands are as hirsute as moss
and he has to be as old as
the black forest itself.
it would take a trash-talk champion of
yo' -mama and the ugly stick
to do true insult justice to this guy.
i bet he knows the tune by heart
and is actually stealing glances
down her décolletage.

reclining at her feet,
mezzetin, the musical trickster,
is, i can tell
(perhaps because i would be)
giving serious thought to letting a hand
creep up under her skirts.

not that she's any starlet.
i wouldn't call her pretty, exactly,
and i suspect she's seen better days
than she's admitting to. her hair's
somewhat coarse, and i wouldn't bet
my last billion lira on her virginity.
come to think of it,
maybe they are a perfect match.
not beauty and the beast,
but pan and the soon-to-be-beastly.

behind them a courtier listens intently
to a woman with a comely, creamy
neck and shoulders, of course, we are
only seeing her from behind.
and men have always had to feign interest
in the things that interest women,
if they hope to get laid.

1: Statement

To keep Hannah satisfied Eamon often feigned eagerness for appetites more hers than mutual. This time it was different. This time it was painfully smelly - the most distasteful thing they had ever done. When she had suggested it first, he had been dubious. How he wished he had refused. Too late now, he turned his head to hide his grimace but she had seen the look on his face.

“Want to stop?”

“It smells like a dung heap.”

“What do you expect a cattle mart to smell like?” Hannah had that ability to cut through waffle and come uncannily to the point. “Sorry,” she said. “I should have let you decide how to spend Sunday.”

“Definitely our worst car boot-sale ever.” He slid his hand around her waist.

Hannah smiled in that knowing way of hers and nudged his shoulder with her head as they walked past ring-fenced pens that contained no animals, but reeked of silage or slurry or whatever it is that gives off the vilest agricultural stench. The aluminum bars and grills of the cattle mart hemmed in the smell like an invisible steam self-contained in each pen, fouling the people within and the detritus they were trying to sell. Not that there were many stall-holders, though for the first day at a new venue the attendance was not at all bad. But there had been no paintings worth a second glance – as far as Eamon was concerned, that meant the day had been wasted.

Monster Car Boot-Sale, read the sign as he swung his 4-wheeler onto the narrow road back to the city. “What a place the organizers picked,” he said. “Won’t last as a venue. It’ll be gone in two weeks.”

It was – and so was his woman.

Hannah of the chestnut hair and hazel eyes; Hannah of all Eamon’s hopes and dreams. One month, three weeks and two days since she had startled him simply by being interested. That anyone so beautiful could love him, never mind be with him, was something that mystified and thrilled him. Were he a musician, songs of love and praise would have filled the air. He had thought it was a passion reciprocated. For almost two months they seemed to sweep each other along, Eamon surging on a kind of windswept joy he had never before experienced, until Hannah upped and left him - for another woman.

It was as if the sea had crested in a mighty spout and shat its rawest sewage upon him. His period of greatest happiness, surpassing even the golden moment when he had unearthed that painting in Paris, was gone now. That Hannah had gone for another woman left him frail and confused. He took more than a year to get over her. During those twelve months he bumped into her constantly in the tossed-up turbulence of his dreams. Beyond the lonely world of dreaming, in the anguished grip of reality, he journeyed from apartment to work and back again, his spirit decaying about him. He might never have recovered were it not for Mel, a true friend. Eamon and Mel talked the way men do; tongues loosened, hearts opened by a gallon of beer. Mel was a good counselor in a world increasingly dependent on counseling of all kinds for this-and-that ailment, large and small, serious and trivial. Eamon’s malaise was anything but minor - but then his whole life had been littered with obsessions.

For as long as he could remember, he had moved from one fixation to another. Prepubescent obsession with ufology had led to environmental crusades in his teens. Schoolmates had dubbed him eco-man and taunted him for his tree-warrior dress sense. A brief flirtation with a radical group at college meant two court appearances and a one-year deferral in obtaining a pass degree in economics. Mostly his obsessions were dark, clingy things that sucked him into a self-delusional morass. On occasions when girls were involved, his life became airy and bright as if his head flitted between clouds. Whatever the obsession, Eamon had the inherent knack of concealing most, though not all, of his delusions. Sometimes months might pass between these Mitty-like episodes. During one such smooth period he got the call to the civil service. Within ten weeks he had moved from his parents’ home in Galway, via a Camden Street bedsit, to his apartment in Knocklyon. In the five years that followed, fixations came and went, though none as serious as the one involving Hannah.

At the end of this latest obsession, when he could fall asleep without thinking of Hannah, when half a day might pass without her floating into his mind, he consoled himself with the thought that he had been

truly in love - a passion many people, including married couples of his acquaintance - Mel and Shiela, for instance - never experience, not once in their entire lives, though they might think they do. Eamon had known real love. He took solace from that.

He was coming out of the greatest passion of his life when news came through that he had been promoted, through seniority rather than performance, in the civil service. That sent him seeking masterpieces in curio shops again. He even began to notice that other women lived in the world. One in particular, Betty Wilde, worked four floors down in Public Liaison. Behind her designer silver rims, deep in the doe-like gaze of her roundy eyes, Eamon detected what his friend Mel had called a twinkle. Definitely evident at recent lunchtimes, its gleam increased in Eamon's company so much that he had asked her out. To a play they went, followed by a meal and drinks but nothing after that, thank you very much and goodnight, except an encouraging when we know each other better. She closed the door of her apartment leaving Eamon with only the tempting afterburn of her tongue in his mouth. He lingered for a moment, staring at the door, considered knocking on it, visions of Hannah pumping up and down flashing through his head. He longed to see Betty do the same. She was different and would not do that, he knew. Not for a while, anyway.

Later that night, he peered at his wristwatch in the streetlight outside his Knocklyon apartment. 1:15. He slid his key into the door and stepped inside. He slipped out of his black leather jacket and whipped off his scarf. He caught a reflection of himself running his hand through his hair in the window. The blinds were not drawn. He shut them and poured himself a nightcap. Whatever way he plonked himself down, he dislodged the jacket which had been slung across the back of the couch. It fell onto the cushion beside him. Old and battered, it was his favourite item of clothing. Then he noticed a hole in the left armpit. He clucked his tongue and considered folding the jacket neatly on the armrest. Instead he flung it to the far end of the couch. It was time to change things. As if to confirm his habit of clinging onto too many of life's souvenirs, he stared at the line of cheap plastic lighters gathering dust on the mantelpiece. Like a stubborn line of squat soldiers they served to remind him of days and places long passed. Fuck it, what were they doing there when he had been off cigarettes for more than two years? That brought a wry smile to his face. He sipped his whiskey and considered dumping the lighters into the bin. That could wait, he told himself. There were more important things to consign to history - former girlfriends, for instance. Trying not to think of Hannah, he dwelt instead on this new woman in his life. Betty Wilde was not unattractive. Definitely worth going out with again. He glanced at the balled-up jacket. Yes, he promised, he would treat himself to a new start and a new life, beginning with a new jacket and a second date with Betty.

The very next evening Eamon walked around a corner off College Green and saw a woman waiting for a bus in D'Olier Street.

Unmistakably Hannah.

In the soothing light of Searson's, over bright and bubbly pints, he had once confessed to Mel that a single glimpse would shoot the lovesickness back into his veins in all its heart-pumping glory. Mel agreed it would be better for him never to go near Hannah again. How wise two men had been that night: slip her slowly into the recesses of bittersweet memory. Let her fade like a dying star rather than face her in reality's naked glare.

She was on the other side of the road.

It was as if the streetlights had faded and the neons had toned themselves down. The street blended into sticky dullness. She stood like a supernova silhouetted by blobs of grey as she stepped aboard one of those traffic-busting little buses. In the elongated instant that he had been staring, the love-demons rebounded off the walls of Eamon's heart like a thousand pinpricks of hope. He just had to say hello. Cars were growling on the rush-hour street. By the time he had slalomed between them the bus had pulled away, carrying with it the cargo of all desires.

He watched the bus stutter almost to a halt a hundred yards away, his heart misfiring in brief contemplation of running in pursuit. The lights turned green and the bus pulled away again. Maybe it's for the best, he thought, staring. A blast of horn blew him off the road. It was a second 489X pulling in, pack-hunting as they usually do at rush-hour. Unlike most buses, this one came when Eamon needed it most. He sprinted to the pavement and squeezed on board, feeding his monthly pass blindly into the ticket-reader, eyes only for what was turning into College Green. The bus was full now as Eamon clung grittily to a strap just behind the driver.

Bus-stops were ignored like wallflowers at a country dance. Hands of kerbside queues reached out - no

chance they might persuade the buses to stop. The latent anger of would-be passengers was obvious to Eamon as he passed them by. Their frustration was wasted in the diesel fumes of rush-hour and got no sympathy from him. He was glad both buses were full. There would be no losing sight of Hannah in a roadside scrum at an oversubscribed stop - until they reached Rathmines where Hannah's bus offloaded some, but not her, as the other 489 pulled in obediently behind. Eamon stared like a Rottweiler through a windscreen that was perilously close to fogging up in the early evening gloom. They moved off, a pair of dinosaurs in tandem, occasionally passing each other in some weird mating ritual known only to public service vehicles. Eamon considered switching buses at one of the stops but decided against it. She might pull away and leave him forlorn on the pavement, like Omar Sharif at the end of *Doctor Zhivago*. He glanced briefly at his fellow passengers. Like public transport victims everywhere they traveled in their own cocoons as if nothing existed outside them. Whenever the two buses passed each other, Eamon's eyes were glued to the person seated third from the back on the left hand side. Hannah's head was slightly bowed, as if reading. Never once did she threaten a sideways glance.

Thus they traveled, separate but entwined, beneath streetlamps of creamiest white. On the far side of Terenure the filigrees of overhead light turned to yellow - street was becoming road. Hannah's bus pulled in, leaning slightly to one side on the roadside camber, indicators blinking. As his bus slid by Eamon saw her standing at the door, ready to alight. He jammed a finger on the bell and bounded forward to the wrong side of the white line. His bus slowed, but only for a red light. The next stop was two hundred yards away. With a jerk of his head he saw the other 489 pull out behind, a familiar figure walking back the road away from him.

"Let me out here!"

The driver turned like a headmaster glaring up from his desk at an errant pupil.

"Let me out!"

Whether it was the way he said it, or the mad gleam in his eyes, Eamon's words were not to be dismissed.

"Just for you, Boss."

The driver broke the rules and the door belched open. Eamon jumped straight into the path of an oncoming motorbike. Luckily for him it had slowed almost to a halt in front of the red light. With not so much as a glance at the biker he took two steps to the pavement and looked back at the bus-stop.

Nothing.

Like a fish in midnight water she was gone without a trace. As the light turned green the swearing biker sped away, the bus spluttered something from its exhaust and lurched forward, and Eamon saw a break in the pavement where a road turned in. Perhaps she had turned right.

He hurried to the side road and looked down.

She was in the distance, turning right once more.

"Hannah!" he called out.

Strong wind and the roar of a passing van stifled his cry as she turned into a laneway. Once more the night had taken her from him. The van drove by as he scurried along. Its silencer box needed fixing, he thought, feet impetuous on the damp pavement until he came to this second turn that led into the lane. He saw her then, not fifty yards away, mounting the steps to the porch of a semi-d. He was about to call her name again but checked himself, curious to see who might greet her at the door. Visions of a six-foot, leather-clad, shaven-headed Amazon kissing her in the doorway came to nothing when she pushed the door open and walked in, closing it behind her.

Feeling slightly foolish Eamon walked toward the house. He could hardly say he happened to be passing, not in a cul-de-sac down a laneway off a side road. No point in lying; covering up only got you in trouble. He knew that because he had been brought up in a family where the unwritten rules were: don't say anything, keep that to yourself, what will the neighbours think? He remembered keeping his feelings about religion a secret from his mother, and saw a flashback of himself going out to church when he was really going to the pub. Evening Mass at 7.30 in St Neachtain's, he used to joke to his friends in Galway. One Sunday evening at 7.20, at the age of twenty-two, he looked his mother stone cold sober in the eye and said, "I don't go to Mass these days, Ma. I don't believe that stuff any more."

She took it better than he had expected.

In the five years since, Eamon had become a stickler for telling the truth. Blurt it out, man, blurt it out, he muttered to himself as he emerged from the lane. Yet he hesitated to tell Hannah he had followed her out of town. Pulling his collar about him, he stood in the shadow of an overhanging willow at the pillar of a nearby driveway. Moments passed. A light drizzle fell. There were footfalls, too. Four of them. A couple came down the laneway, crossed the road, and stepped up to the same porch Hannah had entered two minutes previously. Eamon squinted hard. He could have sworn those two people had been on his bus. Had they alighted at the stop beyond the red light and walked at normal pace, they should arrive about now. Blinking to see better, he watched them push the door open - the lock obviously in the off position. That's a mad thing to do in this town, he knew, wondering whether he should go up and give the door a rap. The drizzle was getting heavier. He stepped further into the willow's welcoming embrace, the house behind him in darkness, its driveway empty. He resolved to wait out the rain beneath the tree, stepping forward only should a car arrive in case it contained the inhabitants of the house behind him. Meanwhile, there were more footsteps.

Two men walked out of the lane, crossed the road and pushed open that unlocked door. Eamon shrugged. Five people sharing a house was commonplace. He glanced at his watch, then cocked his head. Someone was walking down his side of the cul-de-sac. Fearing it might be the owner of the willow he was sheltering under, Eamon bent down between the tree-trunk and the driveway pillar. In the length of a long heartbeat, whoever it was strolled past the driveway and turned up those steps to the porch. Eamon stood and shook his head. Six?

In the space of the next twenty minutes seventeen other people, in singles and pairs - except for one group of three - made their way into that house. Eamon was straining his ears yet no sounds emanated from within the walls. Most of the lights seemed on though all of the curtains were drawn. Bit early for a party, he thought. Perhaps they were members of a strange cult - not that he ever remembered Hannah having a religious point of view. He wondered could it be a gathering for an innocent purpose - an informal briefing for a group holiday, perhaps. Whatever it was, the rain had stopped and Eamon reconsidered knocking on the door. Something was confusing him. Somehow he knew he would be better off at home. Let it rest for the moment, he decided, though rest proved far from his mind that night.

How right he and Mel had been that evening in Searson's. One glimpse had her back, gnawing at his dreams with the raw process of her beauty. Lovesickness wrapped him in its touchy-feely arms. He longed for her in his bed. St Vitus of the Sacred Heart dancing merrily in his head, sleep came only in dribs and drabs, deserting him entirely at 6:30 am. He got up and picked at his breakfast cereal. Perhaps she did not live there at all, but had called in for some meeting like all those other people. He glanced at the clock on the wall of his studio apartment. Beneath it, on the shelf above his books, his car keys. To hell with the traffic, this was one morning he had time to kill. There was one obvious way of killing it.

2: Top Secret

He lay with his wheels on the verge of the path, like a leopard in short grass. As soon as she emerged from the lane on her way to the bus he would happen to drive by. That was the plan.

Eamon never did approach her that morning. In half an hour of waiting in his front seat, he saw the couple from his bus the previous evening. He also recognized some of the others by their clothing and from what he had seen of them the previous night. They walked in ones and twos, and again a group of three. They came out of the lane and mingled with the many pedestrians using this busy street. By the time Hannah turned left in front of him he was so muddled he let her go and board a 489X. He had no chance of keeping up with it, not with traffic hemming him in and the 489 zipping through the bus lanes. He paid a small fortune in parking fees that day, and formulated another plan.

Next morning, from a doorway off Westmoreland Street, having correctly calculated when her bus would pull in, he was kitted out in shades, hat, and high-collared raincoat. He followed her and breathed out slowly when he realized where she worked. It was not where she had worked in the two months he had shared his life with her. His breath caught in his throat when he saw familiar figures enter that same building, in ones and twos over a period of ten minutes.

Coming days were Chandleresque, between spying and following and prying and taking notes. He could have approached Hannah but it was a game now. In a peculiar way he enjoyed playing it. It lent an edge to his comings and goings into town to a job that was devoid of any kind of edge. It soaked up his breacktimes, too - with all the investigative calls he now had to make. He did not go for lunch to O Sullivan's where the twinkle in Betty Wilde's eye might have greeted him. Betty stood far back in his mind, the promise

of when we know each other better as pale as a moonbeam compared to the lightship that was Hannah. Obsession had strolled back into Eamon's brain, dominating him as no everyday thing could. His memory banks were re-shaping Hannah in his mind, which helped keep him from reintroducing himself to her. From a distance, the singularity of her walk reminded him of her old intensity. He remembered how she always wanted to touch things, as if by touching she might delve in and draw down whatever mystique they held. It had been like that in the junk sales and antique shops. Everything from the flimsiest trinkets to the most mundane items - golf clubs, fishing rods, chimney brushes... No matter, she had to hold it, to examine it... It had been like that the day of the cattle mart boot-sale until, sated, she saw how uncomfortable he was and nudged him lovingly with her head as they left.

His mind sought explanations like tendrils reaching for adhesion and sustenance in a frosty field in the height of winter.

Paris, too, had been a magnet for her curiosity. The highlight, apart from golden showers in the bathroom, had been their visit to the flea-market at Clignancourt. On a previous trip Eamon had discovered an oil painting buried among a stack of landscapes in the stall of a young Algerian dealer. He held his nerve to haggle it down from 250F to two hundred francs, and sold it at auction in Dublin two months later for £6,500. His habit of compiling names of sought-after artists had paid off with that signature on that landscape. For it to happen in Paris, of all places, was incredible. To revisit that city, particularly Clignancourt, with Hannah had been wonderful - yet looking at her one year later as she walked the windswept streets of Dublin to her bus-stop, was like looking at her through a convex rearview mirror. Certain aspects of Hannah protruded in a way Eamon had not noticed before. Funny how in the couple of months he had known her she had always avoided the tricky subject of family. It fit into a puzzle, as yet unsolved, that was forming in Eamon's head. With 20/20 hindsight he saw again how she

picked the bones of the flea-market more thoroughly than he ever had, not for hidden masterpieces, but for any type of thing she had not come across before - as if she were an archaeologist searching for artifacts in the freshly opened tomb of an unknown civilization. She was like that too as they strolled from Champ de Mars through the Trocadero to L'Arc de Triomphe down across Place de la Concorde to the Tuileries and the Louvre. With childlike hunger in her eyes she had sucked in the architecture, the culture, even the toy sailboats in the pond. She was the same with sex, the same with everything. As if she had never experienced something before, now she wanted to have it, to hold it, to savour it, to devour it from every angle with a passion seldom found. As if, having used Eamon, she discarded him when she had sucked him dry. Like a child - no, not like a child, it was as if she...

Eamon shivered in the December afternoon. His speculations about Hannah and her companions had been so fueled by observation that the conclusions he found himself jumping to were frightening. Despite his history of obsessing, which he himself was all too aware of, he felt that some of his conclusions might be justified and correct. He now believed the house where she lived to be some kind of hive, though of exactly what he did not know. Working alone, he did not have the resources to discover if there were other hives scattered about the city. He found no evidence for this in his surveillance, though in his heart he felt there must be. In truth he was baffled. He tried to make sense of it all by reaching out for reasons, any reasons. His mind sought explanations like tendrils reaching for adhesion and sustenance in a frosty field in the height of winter.

As Hannah walked to her bus the cold air clarified her, lending her a definition that Eamon hoped was not true. He felt his time with her might never be equaled, never surpassed. Those were days that glittered - though barely a year had gone by, it seemed a far-off time. The economy had glittered in those precious days, too, only for it to stutter and stall in a cynical imitation of Eamon's personal life. Fine new cars still abounded on the busy Dublin streets. Like the 4-wheeler Eamon had bought with the help of his Parisian treasure trove, they were not as shiny now. The bus pulled away carrying Hannah with it. He thought briefly of Betty Wilde with her sad, circular face and big, round glasses. Maybe she was the best he could hope for now that beauty had passed him by.

Pints of lager bubbled with all the lustre of Saturday night. Mel's wit had been sharpened by four of them. "Next thing you'll be carrying a hidden camera like Dick Tracy."

"I'm giving you facts. The number of people living in that house is twenty-six or twenty-eight, as yet I'm not sure exactly how many. They all work in the financial sector."

“-Is that why you asked me yesterday to find out about another finance company - those offices down in the Financial Services Centre?”

Mel was quick tonight, Eamon knew. He also knew his friend had been cagey about making enquiries. The bank where Mel worked was a commercial business, entirely separate from the company in FSC. But financial institutions were financial institutions, according to Mel. None of them liked it when an employee started nosing around, especially when the company he enquired about appeared to be an arm of some kind of foreign conglomerate dealing in nobody knew what.

“That’s the place I phoned you up about,” said Eamon. Quickly, he went on, “Like I said: here are the facts. They all stagger their entry and exit to their workplace, probably to hide the fact that they know each other. They do the same going to and from home. Their house is at the end of a cul-de-sac, opposite a secluded lane. Two or three of them use the street, the rest come out of the lane. They move in ones, twos or threes to avoid attracting attention. Those are all facts. Can you explain it?”

“It reminds me of the randy secretary - she was an accessory before the fax.”

“For fuck sake...”

“Alright, alright,” said Mel. “It could be a house with a large extension. Any self-respecting Dublin landlord could divide it into loads of little bedsit-”

“-It’s a semi. Three bedrooms - four if you make a tiny boxroom. No extension out the back - I checked.”

“Then that amount of people couldn’t live in it except like sardines.”

“Exactly. Their behaviour is abnormal. Can you think of an explanation?”

“Why don’t you ask Hannah?”

Though he had been expecting such an obvious question, and given that mention of her name still knocked the spirit out of him like air from a punctured balloon, he did not forget his resolve to prevent her from messing up his head again. “I told you before that I wasn’t going near her. It’s just... curiosity. I’m hooked on getting to the bottom of this, but I’m going to keep her at a safe distance.”

“What do you think they’re up to?”

“It’s not normal carry-on. It’s the behaviour of people who have a shoal-mind, like brainwashed members of a commune, or...”

“Or?”

Eamon shrugged. How could he explain what he was thinking to someone, even someone like Mel, when they had not witnessed for themselves the enigmatic comings and goings of that oh-so average semi-d. Especially someone like Mel, he realized, when his friend began to hum the Star Trek theme in all its high-pitched melody.

Mel stopped humming. In a soberly fashion he advised, “You realize what you’ve got to do, don’t you? Get into the house. Check it out. You need more information to help you figure out what’s going on. Know thine enemy, as they say in the Bible.”

Know thine enemy, indeed. Eamon smiled but the frothy head had been blown from his pint by that screechy space-opera tune. No use explaining to Mel how they always used public transport to move about; that though they walked in twos or threes, they never seemed to talk; that how, with the concerted effort of a hive-mind, they could use their positions in the finance industry to wreck an entire economy. No use explaining that he was now of the opinion that Hannah may have been sampling him, discarding him at the finish to taste instead the sweetness of her own sex.

In Mel’s stare Eamon saw an expression he had noticed at other times in other eyes - eyes that went back a long way. He had seen that look in his father’s glare; seen it in the sarcastic glaze of a teacher he had trusted too much; in the eyes of friends he had confided in once too often in student days. Eyes that said, You’re fixating again, Eamon. Where do you get these obsessions from, boy? Poor, pitiful, paranoid Eamon. Those eyes came back to haunt him now, staring at him through the gaze of a friend.

Eamon knew this was all getting too much. He had become fixated in the ten days since he had first seen Hannah board a 489X. She dominated his mind as if the smoky vapours in this badly ventilated bar were her very own, and they were reaching out to him. But it was more than her. The set-up with the house and its mysterious inhabitants was affecting his concentration at work. His relationship with his friends

was at risk. He hadn't bothered contacting Betty Wilde again, though a week and a half had passed since their first and only date. Maybe even his sanity was threatened. There was no one he could turn to. Father would never listen. Mother would break down and cry. As for his brother and two sisters, Eamon had little in common with them. He only suffered their straightlaced company on family occasions. Making excuses to Mel, he finished his drink, turned down the offer of another, and went home. An early night of sci-fi dreams and pulp horrors swirled in his head. Scratchy scratchy dub-dub, the manic mix of a clockwork DJ in a nightclub from Hell.

3: Aborted

One night in the ebb-tide of his teens Eamon walked with a friend through the streets of Galway. It was stormy and late. The Corrib was in flood; a swirling vortex from the Salmon Weir down to the bridge. Eamon and Tony Mullen were on that bridge, making their way home from a party. Tony was talkative, but not abnormally so. With the retrospective vision that hit everyone hard in the awful days that followed, it was known that Tony had been talkative at the party, too. There had been a kind of pseudo-cheeriness in most of his comments, according to the party-goers. Not due to drink or drugs, they said, for Tony drank little and took no other substances that fateful March night. Though Eamon had not been with him much at the party, he experienced some of the forced jollity when Tony paused on the bridge and said, "Fuck this for a game of soldiers."

A chill north wind whistled down the River Corrib. In a strangely balletic movement Tony Mullen placed both hands on the parapet and vaulted himself out over the edge. He fell into a raging blackness that churned him wordlessly, never to be seen again. Eamon stood rooted to the bridge, staring over the side. Cold wind ripped through his ears right down to his ventricles, numbing the cockles of his speechless heart until he heard the frantic sound of footsteps. A man who had seen it all came running, but it was too late.

Sub-aqua teams searched the waters of Galway Bay for the family's sake rather than from any realistic hopes of finding the body. About eighteen days it takes for a drowned corpse to surface. We'll find it then, they said, but maybe not if the river's in flood and probably not if the bridge is so close to the sea. Hard it is for a seventeen year old to comprehend the death of someone his own age. The idea of not if you choose your place well, the decoded version of what the sub-aqua men had said, is a suicide concept beyond the understanding of naïve teenagers like Eamon. Comprehension comes only with years of bearing witness to and experiencing life in all its gritty shittiness and joy. Even now, ten years later, Eamon found it hard to understand what had happened that night and why. The Corrib was back in his mind, big-time. Tony Mullen's spiky hair, yellow and gelled, glistened in the moonlight; the last part of him Eamon ever saw, anyone ever saw. That gracefully grotesque jump returned to haunt him with the kind of dread clamminess he had not experienced in all the years since. He was experiencing it now because Mel had been right that Saturday night: the house had to be investigated, and here was Eamon about to do the investigating.

He stood in the porch of the semi-d, halldoor locked as he knew it would be. Observation had taught him that first home opened it with a key, leaving it unlocked until number twenty-seven arrived to secure it carefully. A recheck of his notes confirmed the total of inhabitants to be, not twenty-six or twenty-eight, but the number in between. Average time for group homecoming or morning exit was roughly twenty minutes. The same time-pattern applied to entry and egress from the finance company where they worked. Eamon glanced at his watch. It was 4:40 of a cold Monday afternoon, the cloak of mid-December concealing him from the prying eyes of passersby, not that there were any. The hands of the clock would keep Hannah and her mysterious house-dwellers away for at least another hour. He hoped.

No replies to repeated ringing of the doorbell, no lights visible through frosted hallway glass, no chinks in curtains that seemed permanently drawn - drawn so well that light might never seep out no matter how hard it tried. He stepped back a little from the porch and looked down the street and across to the head of the lane. Still no one stirred. Nothing moved except a gust of wind through the leaves of the willow in the driveway next door.

Eamon skipped quickly around the corner of the house to the side-gate. There he stopped, heart beating like a metronome on speed. Before making his next move he had to reaffirm in his own mind that there were no outward signs of alarm systems, security lights or cameras. He had checked this the day he had scanned the house from all sides (including the rear, through a useful gap in an alleyway off a parallel street). Now he needed to double check it again in his head.

He put his thumb on the latch and pressed firmly. Locked. Placing both hands on top of the gate and heaving himself up with his arms, one half of Eamon tried to convince himself that this was nothing more than an adventure. The other half didn't know what it was doing. He felt that nothing could really happen to him; you don't when you're obsessed, or stupid. Not when visions of Tony Mullen haunt you as you vault yourself over and down on to the far side. Eamon hit the ground, feet hurting, face like a manic alleycat. He steadied himself and stood still, heart hammering like a kettledrum in a war movie. The palms of his hands were slippery, maybe from fear, maybe from dew on top of the gate. Not wanting to stop and think, he stopped and listened. Nothing could be heard. He sidled around the corner to check there were no lights in the rear windows, and then to see if he could peer through them. He shone a small torch at the glass but these windows were also heavily curtained. There could be no one at home. He had checked that morning that all twenty-seven had left for work. The back door was locked, its frosted glass impervious to small torch beams. He checked the doors of a shed and what appeared to be a boiler house. Everything was securely locked.

Eamon squatted in a natural alcove between both outhouses. In his pocket he felt the stubby presence of a screwdriver, its barrel cold and lubricated by a palm he knew to be wet not from dew, but dread. This was mad, the better half of him told himself. He could force one of the shed doors, or maybe the back door or one of the windows, but for what? His other half slipped from nonchalant adventuresque into whole-time paranoia. What if behind the doors he found what he had seen in mad dreams the night before? Walls lined with slimy bed-like cocoons, empty now but lying in readiness for the nightly harbouring of twenty-seven monsters. He might somehow be trapped within, only for them to sleepwalk in the night and kill him in a terrifying zombie-death. What if Hannah had saved his semen and used it for some weird crossbreeding experiment - supposing the house was full of hybrid babies...? What if behind closed doors he discovered rooms full of all kinds of objects of Earth culture, from the tackiest to the most sacred, stacked and ready for a transporting device to take them to beyond? What if behind the doors there lurked a minder ready to pounce and...?

Eamon swallowed hard. His throat bubbled with little dry spots that ached so much. He looked at the sky but saw only blackness. Light from friendly streetlamps did not seep into this garden. The moon was masked by the deeply hostile underbellies of clouds, hidden like everything in this god-forsaken back yard. All around darkness loomed. In the darkness, shadows. In the shadows... Eamon swallowed again. The better half of his mind reminded him that he had a decent lifestyle; a steady, if unexciting, job. Pay was reasonable; he did have a few friends. He thought of Mel and bright lights. At that moment he sincerely longed for brightness and friendship. He thought of Betty Wilde and chided himself for not contacting her since the night she had closed the door of her apartment on him. In a lucid moment of sanity, clear of paranoia, he realized that he was a civil servant, for fuck sake. If he was caught breaking into a house, or even if he was just caught in someone's garden with a torch in one hand and a screwdriver in the other, it would be goodbye to the reasonable pay and farewell to bright lights, at least for a while. That made up his mind for him. He stuck his head out of the alcove to make sure the coast was clear. With a hiss of "Fuck this for a game of soldiers," he scampered to the side-gate and lifted himself up and over like a Peeping Tom on an urban assault course.

4: Control

It was what he had tried to do that first night when he had followed her home on the bus. Then his voice had been thwarted by the wind and the rickety silencer of a passing van. Now he stepped onto the path before her. She was in the same place, too - about to turn off the side road down the lane to the cul-de-sac. This time no vans roared, no headwind stirred to blow his voice away.

"Hello Hannah," he said, in the most casual tone he could muster.

She stopped and looked at him. Surprise was notable by its absence from her eyes, which seemed different, though the rest of her china doll face was as beautifully sculpted as ever.

"Hello Eamon," she said. "We've been expecting you to do this."

All the things he had rehearsed - casual remarks and half-funny comments; the way he might lilt them with semi-serious tones and stand-offish inflections - went out of his mind as though a suction pump

He scampered to the side-gate and lifted himself up and over like a Peeping Tom on an urban assault course

had sucked everything out of his brain. He had thought she might say that, though right now he could not remember the reply he had preformulated to deal with it, because her eyes were different. Glints of affection he had known in times past were replaced with a stony stare, a gleam that unnerved him so much he lost track of thought and action. A sucker, indeed.

“Come,” she said.

He did, though he had decided not to enter that house with her - not before spending time in her company to make sure his wild fantasies were untrue. But his legs moved with a volition not his. Down the laneway they carried him, two paces behind her like a lemming in a motherly wake. His mind was detached, curiously calm, as across the cul-de-sac they walked, up to the porch. She pushed the door open. Still calm, he felt a frisson of fear, a desire to look away, as if he were staring at a television that was about to show a medical close-up in goriest detail. His mind lay in parking mode, ticking over at idle speed. The frisson remained a frisson, as if he were an audience and the house an image on a screen revolving about him, three-dimensional but fake, realistic but unreal. He saw a hallway that seemed normal and an opening to the right that led into what appeared to be a sitting-room. White walls, heavy brown curtains thoroughly drawn. No furniture except a chair in the middle of a bare wooden floor.

“Sit down,” she said.

He did - his mind still parked, detached and emotionless. God, she was lovely - though he avoided her eyes. He saw then that the room was full. Two dozen faces in a circle. They towered around him, glaring. A communal mindset moulded their expressions in a way that reminded him of a painting by Edvard Munch. How appropriate that Eamon’s last independent thoughts should unite Hannah’s loveliness with the name of a painter, the twin peaks of his life’s passion. The last conclusion the detached part of his mind ever jumped to was that he finally understood how so many of them inhabited the same small house. They stood so close they tessellated into each other as if personal body space did not matter. How obvious: to stack against themselves and park their minds.

“You’ve been checking on us, ringing around the financial sector, trying to find out my job status, how long I’ve been employed there, whether or not I’ve been on leave... Haven’t you?”

“Yes.” He did not know how the word came out of his mouth. Frisson turned to fright. It climbed his spine like icy water from a soda fountain in the back of his neck. It spurted violently into his mind, making him shake so much he couldn’t help but squirt urine in his trousers.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “You’ve been so persistent we’ve decided what to do with you. Fear no more, little petal,” her reassuring eyes drew level with his. “We’re going to make you one of us.”

In Hannah’s face he saw what lay waiting behind her glassy-alley eyes. When he saw that Eamon realized how useless all his planning had been. All the formulating and scheming this last week and a half had been without merit, without value, without meaning. In a never-ending instant his whole life marched before him, from memories of mother’s breasts to last moments of freedom at the head of the lane. It was all there: Tony Mullen’s gelled hair sparkling in the moonlight as he vaulted over the bridge; Mel humming a well-known TV tune - though Eamon couldn’t think of the name of it right now. He saw Betty Wilde. He saw a girl he knew in school but could not remember what she was called. Thinking was useless, utterly useless. Just as his entire life had been useless. Everything from the moment of his birth to this clinically savage rebirth. Everything he had ever said, read, wrote, ate, learned, forgot, remembered, saw, heard, groped, let go, caught, let slip away again, dreamed, imagined, drank, swallowed, threw up, gave, took, inveigled, stole - all was useless. Useless as a sprig of magnolia in a dungheap, useless as a fly in amber, useless as an analogue tape in a digital studio. Useless... Useless... Useless...

Use... less...

Now he saw its true meaning. It hit his brain with a clarity more coldly harrowing than overtly terrifying. It was downright logical - he must use his own mind less. There will be no more fear, no warm piss in his trousers, no panicky terrors in his head. He must use his own mind less because it was out of place. As out of place as an elephant in Lilliput, a parrot on an ice floe, a lifebelt in the desert or a barnacle on Mount Everest. Hannah took him to those exotic locations. In her beauty, so abundantly evident as she reached out to him, he understood that his own thinking was useless. With that insight, his last lucid moments of comprehension, he finally knew that this last bit of his own mind was truly out of place...

...A buzzing noise came from outside the catchment area of his head. Seeping into his consciousness like a wake-up warble softly resonant, it scattered Hannah’s image into a dozen soft-focus pieces. By the

time he recognized the persistent burr, his vision of Hannah had been replaced by the sharpening up of a familiar scene - the walls and bookshelves of his studio apartment viewed from the couch where he had fallen asleep.

It was Mel ringing to say hello - so he said. Eamon quickly realized his friend was phoning to check that he hadn't upset him too much with the Star Trek mickey-take on Saturday night. Never was a call so welcome. Eamon gripped the phone between clammy fingers, his hard and fast breaths drawing a predictable observation from Mel. When the conversation was over Eamon turned around and stood with the palms of his hands on the bookshelf behind him. Still sweating from the nightmare, he swayed gently back and forth, taking deep, long breaths for several minutes. He looked at his watch - 10.40: six hours since his foray into the back garden of the semi-d.

An hour later he had showered, shaved and eaten a comfort-supper. He sat in a chair deep in thought, a process aided by a generous glass of Tullamore Dew. Flashbacks of life thus far whizzed before him. Indeed, this had not been the only obsession. His parents had taken him to a shrink when he was fourteen, convinced that some of his fixations were unhealthy. There had been a history of schizophrenia in the family. Mel knew that the mid-to-late twenties was a favoured feeding time for the self-inflating demons that go walkies in the head. There was only one thing for it: he would have to exorcise this demon by confronting it.

Next evening at five o'clock he crossed the bridge to Custom House Quay. Residues of the previous night's phantasms remained with him as the tower blocks of the Financial Services Centre loomed overhead. To be on the safe side he planned to approach Hannah on the wide-open steps outside her workplace. There he would satisfy his desperate need to know that she was normal, that his suspicions had been built on the stuff of daft nightmares and nothing more. Then he would say goodbye and walk away from her forever.

He turned to his right and looked up.

The part of the building used by Hannah's company lay in darkness. A cold tingle whispered in Eamon's spine as he plodded up the steps like a man aghast, these self-same steps Hannah and her co-residents had strolled up and down for the two weeks he had been watching. The floors where they worked were dark now, obviously empty. There were lights on other floors. Here and there Eamon could see staff move about, but these were not the people he was interested in.

The security man in the reception area said the company had pulled out that morning. "Happens a lot with the recession," he added. "You an investor or a reporter?"

"Neither. Can you tell me where they've gone?"

"Don't ask me. Try the financial pages tomorrow. With so many closures these days they mightn't even get a mention."

Nonplussed, Eamon hurried to Westmoreland Street and boarded a 489X. His heart flapped against his ribcage. His breath clung to the sides of his mouth. How could this be happening? Everything was crazy, so crazy. He huddled in his seat like a child before the execution of its mother and looked vacantly out the streaming window as the stops rolled slowly by. Half an hour later he stood at the spot where, in the world's worst nightmare, Hannah had looked him coldly in the eye and said, We've been expecting you to do this. More than winter's chill hung in the air. Down the laneway he hurried, legs like tar barrels, feet like high-tensile rods hitting the concrete hard. When he saw what was planted in the garden he was not surprised, though he felt as if someone had hit him a sucker punch in the solar plexus. He took a bookie's pen from his breast pocket and copied the auctioneer's phone number onto a slip of paper, then went home like a coffin ship sailing on a silent sea.

Again he sat in his lonesome studio, programming music disks like a late-night lonelyheart. The previous night's combination of early-evening horrors and late-night whiskey had lead to a large dose of sleeplessness. Allied to a full day's work it was quite a toll. Eamon decided to forego more alcohol. He opted instead for an early night - but not before making a decision he had mulled over for twenty-four hours. For his own sake he realized this could not go on: Hannah was gone from him, he would have to accept that. As an aid to acceptance he lifted his mobile and keyed in a name, half-expecting Betty Wilde to slam the phone down given that it had been nearly two weeks since their first date.

"Hello," she responded matter-of-factly to his greeting.

"Look I'm sorry - I should have rung sooner but I haven't been too well"

“You could have got in touch. Your office is only a few floors up from Public Liaison.”

“I know but I’ve been to work on-and-off, to tell the truth,” he lied.

The silence down the line magnified the sound of his own blood pulsing in his ears.

“You sound fine now,” she said, eventually.

“Betty, can I buy you lunch tomorrow?”

“Where - O Sullivan’s?”

“The place around the corner might be quieter. The office crowd don’t go there much.”

“I’m not available tomorrow.”

“Thursday?” Again his receiver thrummed in his ear.

“Okay - one o’clock. See you there.” With that she was gone.

He put the phone down wondering had she bothered to check his whereabouts at work since their night at the theatre. She would have found that he had been attending irregularly at the office - a half day here, a whole day there - all on the counterfeit of being ill. Betty could not have known that Eamon’s absenteeism had been due to subterfuge, not sickness. A shrink might argue otherwise, he realized, so what he had told her was not perhaps a complete lie, merely a venial one. With that he went to bed and a night devoid of dreams, devoid of Hannah.

Lunch was short, short by miles for both - though Betty did put up a suitably cool front. She maintained it throughout the meal, and coffees, until they paid up and left. Turning into Duke Street, Eamon asked could he see her that night.

A cold easterly blew along the pavement whipping up dust devils at their feet. Betty kept her head down for a moment, glad of the broad red ribbon that protected her hair from going wild in the wind, glad too for having Eamon beside her. She looked at him. Trying her best to frown, fully intending to tell him she would need to check her diary, she said yes.

Whatever else was borne on the wind that Dublin lunchtime, it brought into two lives the indefinable thing that entwines hearts on the road beyond friendship. In the following nights and weeks Betty found herself drawn to Eamon. In turn, he convinced himself that what he felt for her were not hollow feelings rebounding from memories of Hannah, but genuine emotions.

Despite his resolve to put past obsessions behind him, Eamon continued to make enquiries about his former lover. The trail ran cold at that half-empty office block down by the Financial Services Centre. When pressed, Mel didn’t seem to have the necessary contacts at work to find out anything. Eamon’s own calls to financial institutions proved fruitless, as did questions to the media. Nobody knew or nobody was telling. Two days after his second date with Betty, one night before she finally let him into her bedroom, he phoned a number he had seen on an estate agent’s sign. Within twenty-four hours a busy auctioneer was puzzled by the inexplicable unease on the face of a potential buyer as they stood in the porch of a certain semi-d. With all the anxiety of a mouse abandoned in a cattery Eamon explored the house without once letting the auctioneer out of his sight. It turned out to be a normal semi-d. Thorough examination revealed nothing behind its heavy drapes except the mundane furnishings of rent-a-home suburbia.

His enquiries were leading him down a blind alley. Realizing that those two weeks in pursuit of Hannah had almost led to mental breakdown, Eamon tried to put it in the past. He searched for a beacon in the darkness. His eyes fell on Betty. Despite her plain looks and country ways, she shone for him like a night-light in the lowest hours before dawn. She wrapped him up with compassion and love, winning him over with the even-keel of her common sense plus the emotional and biological desire to have a partner to call her own. Betty was steadiness. Betty was cotton wool. Betty was a chrysalis, not very attractive on the outside but soft and full of promise within. She used her charming ways and scant physical attributes to overwhelm him, though after what he had been through he was too drained to put up a fight. He welcomed her like starlight into his life knowing she could stabilize his mind and soul with a stellar glow he felt he scarcely deserved. Mel and Shiela welcomed her too, by inviting them both around for dinner at Christmas. They had a laugh that night. Then, soon after the main course, Mel and Shiela locked their hands together. Leaning forward on the red tablecloth they broke the news that they were expecting their first child. Life was good then, for the four of them, but recession worsened with the turn of the year.

5: Understood

Eamon walked briskly toward St Stephen's Green, hands deep in pockets in a cold snap that echoed the economic climate. Christmas lights had been gone for weeks; the air overhead leaden as it was all over the city. Swinging no more with festive bulbs, the Dublin mood was pregnant with gloom. The biggest bubble-burst in the annals of history had ripped down the walls of financial security all over Ireland. Though the crash had been building for months, it seemed sudden. So sudden.

Given the general lack of cash, shop-fronts had begun to sulk. Mannequins that sparkled in money-strewn days wore the drabest shades. Jewelry stores remained open - diamonds were small and customers scarce. Petals wilted in the desperate hands of flower sellers. Pedestrians walked with heads bowed, as people do in troubled times. Their worries fell from them, weeping to the ground like raggedy threads gathering up the dirt from the red tiles on Grafton Street. Eamon walked on the cracks, he didn't care. At least his job was safe, and he was making his way home to Betty and the new apartment they had moved into one week after Valentine's Day.

Out of the corner of his eye that frigid evening at the top of Grafton Street, he saw that walk again.

Unmistakably Hannah.

She was making her way briskly to Harcourt Street. He would have to decide quickly. Betty and all the pleasures of his life this past couple of months passed before his eyes. Visions of Hannah and her enigmatic existence came crashing down as if falling into a weighing scales in a thought-bubble over his head. Betty, Mel and all the new-found constants of his life were tossed up into the dark and gaping Dublin night. He just had to know. Not that there had ever been any doubt. Dublin was never more than a village of a million people. He knew that someday their paths would cross.

Resisting the urge to tap her on the shoulder, he followed her around the corner southbound to Harcourt Street. The pavement was busy with people; not easy keeping track between the bobbing heads and shuffling bodies in the jostle-time of rush-hour. He hurried along, halving the distance between them. When the crowd began to thin out, Eamon dropped back a little. He did not have to strain to keep her in sight now. She was wearing a long black coat, heels clicking merrily on the pavement. Eamon kept an even pace behind, wondering where she was going. Harcourt Street Station? Another bus-stop? Before he knew it they were in Cuffe Street. She crossed the road at the lights, turned left and entered a four-storey apartment block. Eamon cursed his luck in case he needed a key or swipe-card to go in after her. Fortunately, a resident was just leaving as he arrived and obligingly held the door open for him. He glanced at the elevator floor-dial and saw it pause on number three. To his left, a stairwell. He took the steps three at a time, arriving at the third floor to hear the shutting of a door somewhere to his left. Breathless, he stepped out onto the corridor and looked along it. Three doors on the left hand side, two on the right. One was not numbered, obviously a storeroom. He paused to sweep the hair back from his forehead and felt the shirt rise off his back with sweat. His face tingled with the sticky perspiration of an uphill run. It was warm in here. He hoped it was the heat of radiators rather than the clammy smell of nervous tension that had him sweating so much.

When he had composed himself, he chose the first door to his left.

His knock was firm.

Twist of knob and creak of wood revealed the telltale links of a doorchain snaking out until it was taut. The slit between door and frame revealed a slice of face. Old face.

Tension jumped out of Eamon's lungs like gas from a geyser. "Do you know the girl Hannah?" he said. "She's on this floor."

The old lady shook her head and pressed the door outwards, leaving Eamon staring at the fish-eye lens of her spy-hole two inches from his nose. Eamon walked to the second door and knocked. Turning his face from its spy-hole, he heard footsteps on the floor. A slight pause. The metallic yield of a deadbolt. He was conscious of his shirt again, how it clung to his back. As the door opened fractionally he saw that the chain was not engaged. Then he saw a chink of face, of chestnut hair and hazel eye. His heart raced.

It was her.

He had a foot over the door-saddle and pushed forward with his arm. He was in before she could think of resisting. She stumbled back, her throat catching her scream as she recognized who the intruder was. By the time she steadied herself, he had his back up against the door, pushing it closed with a loud click.

"Hello Hannah." He stared hard at her but also took in the apartment with his peripheral vision. It seemed normal. No two dozen residents towered around him, tessellating against each other to save space.

"Eamon!" She panted, spreading her fingers on her breastbone. "What are you doing here?"

At least she had not said We've been expecting you to do this. "What's going on, Hannah?" He stepped past her and swiveled through three-sixty degrees in the middle of the apartment floor. There was nothing out of place. Typical southside decor - designer stock from a tacky fashion magazine with a lava-lamp thrown in for good measure.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

Her hand was off her chest now, though her breathing still came hard and fast. "You tell me," she said, circling him.

In her eyes he lit fires of panic that threatened to spread. In her eyes he also saw a secret - a secret he had to know. He grabbed her by the shoulders. "I've been following you. I know about the twenty-seven of you in that house you abandoned. I know about the financial company. You've got to tell me what's happening."

Her face softened. Eyes no longer hard, moistened in front of his. "Eamon," she leaned into his shoulders. "Why did you seek me out?"

"I... I told you I need to know what's going on." He could feel her in his arms, her shoulder-blades firm yet delicate beneath his hands, the soft yield of her breasts against his chest. For a moment his resolve melted. He felt unsure of what to say. Then he held her at arm's length. "Tell me, Hannah. Tell me exactly what's happening."

She looked into him with a gaze that had mesmerized him so often in the old days. She sighed. With her sigh came a smile so slender he wanted to take her in his arms again, but did not.

"Tell me," he demanded.

"We're not supposed to tell," she said. "We're not supposed to interfere."

They stood in the middle of the room like two bottles isolated on a lonely sea. She spun a tapestry of words that snared him with their improbability. In describing her task, which she said was almost over now, Hannah spoke with great sadness. It was an observational trip, she told him, not a rescue mission. Nothing could be done to alter events. Her assignment was to partake and record, not to save or change. It had been a hands-on field trip, plenty of experimentation in situ, but everything had to be left intact in the end-

"-Except for the sanity of people like me," he blurted. "People who've been unfortunate enough to understand what's going on."

"In the entire year of my mission no one has come close to uncovering the truth - except you."

"What about that house with twenty-seven inhabitants? It must have been noticed!"

"At the first possibility of detection, which was you snooping about, we dispersed. The others are gone now. I'm the last one, just tying up loose ends before I also go. We were at that address for two months."

"What were you doing before that?" Eamon felt a huskiness in his throat that threatened his voice. "What were you doing with me last year?"

Hannah took his hands in hers and held them as if they were childhood sweethearts in a playground. "I was starting out then. I had no specific mission at that stage. I was told to mingle, to download. We do that by being there... by touching... by living..."

In the incredible weave of her words Eamon recalled what he had often seen before: the hungry look of a huntress in her eye. He remembered the way she had picked the bones of the market in Clignancourt. Everything from the tackiest to the most sacred had been hers to explore. The curiosity, innate and insatiable, that drew her to the trinkets of life - that drew her to him - was clear at last. He was a gimcrack, a curio in the bit-and-bob bric-a-brac that had formed the basis of her mission. She was a sociologist, a modern-day archaeologist - he was a small find in the field of her research.

"You used me, Hannah," he said. He saw then that her eyes were filled not with the old intensity, nor pity - but resignation. She was really close now. He could feel her warm breath on his face. Never did anyone look more human.

With tears in his eyes he asked was she from the future. She said no; time was not like that in her world. She drew her hand gently down the side of his face. Her dimension was beyond his understanding. Not the fourth, not the fifth. More like the ninth.

“Does that mean there is no future?”

She stepped from him and momentarily bowed her head. “We cannot tell,” she said. “We cannot interfere.”

“Can I go with you?”

She looked again into his face and saw his anguish. His heart was beating so loud he felt she must hear it. “It’s not allowed. Nor can I stay here. My time is running out, Eamon. I must go.”

She spoke with a gravity he knew to be unbendable. There were no yield signs on her journey to wherever she came from. When he realized that, he asked, “What’s happening to the world. Are you studying the end of history?”

“Our time is not shaped like that. There is no history - just events. We are chroniclers of events.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“I cannot tell.” She tried to pull away from him.

He took her right hand in both of his. His mind was swirling like a quiz contestant with temporary amnesia. It felt like he was standing in the spotlight of a million-dollar question with the whole world watching. He swallowed hard. Not knowing what to say, he asked, “Is it the economy? Is that it? An economic meltdown - was that what you and other twenty-six were up to in the finance business?”

“No. We were not up to anything. The group I headed for the last couple of months specialized in fiscal events. There was nothing sinister in what we did. Nothing we were allowed do could have changed things. We set up the company as a research project to see at first hand how the financial world operated.”

“You specialized in finance? Like I was your specialty, too?”

“No, Eamon...” She shook her head and pulled away again. “Don’t judge me by your world’s moral systems.”

“Is that world going to end? You mean you’ve been doing nothing except study the end of the world, by studying the onset of recession? That must be it! A great big economic collapse causes the end of civilization...” Eamon’s head was shaking, his mind in a daze.

“Not just that.” She stared at him with all the old intensity shining through her red-rimmed hazel eyes. “Not just the economy. Something else will happen, too.” Her rueful smile was tender, so tender. “Like I told you, we are observers. The others are gone now. Our work in this city is finished. I must also go.”

“No, Hannah...”

He held her trailing hand as she opened a door to what may once have been a bedroom. It lay empty except for a piece of furniture standing in the middle of the floor. It was shaped like a shelf-unit, seven feet high and arched at the top - unremarkable except that it contained no shelves. When she flicked on the light he saw that it appeared to be made of cane.

“Is that why you left the semi-d, because you knew I was finding things out?”

She pulled her hand from his grasp and indicated the room with a broad sweep of her arm. “See, there are no others.” Walking forward she added, “Now it is my time to go.” She turned to him and a great bauble of a tear fall from her face. “Goodbye, Eamon,” she said.

By the time he understood what was happening she had shimmered under the arch and was gone.

“Hannah!” he stepped forward.

There was nothing but empty space beneath the portal arch. It, too, briefly shimmered. For a moment he thought it might transport him to her but in an instant it was gone, isolating him further in an otherwise empty room.

6: Accomplished

Though Betty Wilde was a golden girl, Eamon often regretted that she never read anything remotely imaginative, not to mention speculative. Neither was she given to creative cinema or avant-garde art. It was with trepidation, and little success, that he had tried to tell her about the semi-d in

Terenure. She could not grasp what he was getting at. This latest episode was beyond her ken entirely.

"What you're telling me," she hissed, "is that that woman is still in your head!"

"It's not like that, Betty," he pleaded. "Every word I've told you is true."

"True my arse! What's true is what Mel says..." She paused, killing her cigarette in the middle of the ashtray.

"What do you mean 'What Mel says'?"

Betty put her hand to her forehead, but could not stop it furrowing beneath her fingers. A tear splashed on the table. "The office is alive with rumours. I was the last to hear them, of course. They're all about you. Your department is only four floors up from Public Liaison. They've been talking about you for days, about how you're..." Her voice trailed off into a snuffle.

"How I'm what?"

"That you're mental!" She sobbed. "You've been taking time off and behaving very strangely. You were alright for a while but now you're worse than ever, that's what the gossips are saying. I had to talk to someone. I rang Mel."

"What did he say?"

"He said that you had become fixated again. He said I should try to humour you, that you might come out of it like you did a couple of months ago. Then he said that you're obsessing to a greater degree than ever before. He said..." Betty swallowed deeply and bit the corner of her lip. "He said that you had a history of mental... strain."

Eamon slumped slightly in his chair, like someone had pulled a plug on him. Mel's friendship had always been a thing of value. He felt betrayed. "What else did he tell you?"

"That you should get help, Eamon." She reached over and covered his hand with hers. "Will you see someone - he's highly recommended."

A sigh came from somewhere so deep within him he thought it came from the floorboards beneath his chair. "Come with me, Betty. Together we can get to the bottom of this. They're out there, I swear. We can track them down..." He let his voice trail off.

Betty was sobbing again. "What? You want me to help you look for aliens?"

"They're not fucking aliens."

"Then what the hell are they?"

"I don't know, Betty. But I'm determined to find out."

The room froze over with a silence that rendered movement impossible. Eamon found himself mulling over it all again. Maybe Betty was right - they could be aliens. He didn't even know what planet Hannah was from, if she was from a planet at all.

Betty broke the silence. "You're too unpredictable, Eamon. I'm not suited to a man like you. We don't have anything in common. I want somebody ordinary, someone who doesn't get these strange notions. Look at all we have. We have this lovely new apartment, we have jobs and friends. We have... I don't know what we have!"

Eamon looked across the table. Poor, pragmatic Betty with her feet tethered so firmly to the ground. At last, at the age of twenty-nine, she had won a man only for him to turn out to be a looper. He never felt so sorry for anyone as he did for her at that moment. "You've your head screwed on too much for me, Betty." He took her hand and squeezed it one last time. "Don't worry, you'll find someone else."

Mel had not seen his friend since that February night in Searson's, must be two weeks since, when they had parted on a sour note. How could he have expected him to be anything other than skeptical, spinning a yarn like that? Eamon had always been a sensitive sort. The same thing had happened months previously when Mel had taken the mickey out of his crazy theories about that weird house in Terenure. Not that Eamon had stormed off in a huff then, either. No, nothing like that. He just made his excuses, finished his drink, turned down the offer of another, and was gone.

Typical that, keeping his true feelings bottled up, letting his friendship fade away. So many adult relationships ended that way, according to Mel's wife, Shiela. Mel could see her now, rubbing her tummy when the baby began to kick. "People get hurt covertly," she said. "They let things drift until contact is lost."

A few days later Mel rang Eamon's mobile. 'Out of range,' said an automated voice. He phoned the civil service to find he had resigned his job. None of his former colleagues knew where he was. Someone remembered he had been asking a lot of questions about a particular company in the Financial Services Centre. "Could be gone there," the someone said. Mel smiled at that - career moves were no longer an option in a private sector that was crumbling to pieces all over Dublin, all over the western world. Mel stopped ringing around enquiring about Eamon then. Maybe Shiela was right - he was the one who had walked away, let him be the one to resume contact, if he wants to.

As the economic crisis worsened Mel found himself longing for the kind of job security that the civil service is renowned for. Even that safe haven was throbbing with the threat of downsizing, so said an old colleague of Eamon's one day in Dawson Street. When Mel asked about his old friend, he was told that Eamon had gone off the wall in the week before resigning. Not that that was unusual, said his former workmate. He had done the same back in December, taking half-days and all sorts of time off. Him with the mad gleam in his eye. Off he went and never bothered his arse saying goodbye. Never said hello again either at the office or any of the old haunts. The girls down in Public Liaison were on about it for weeks; how he had driven out whats-her-name, Betty Something-or-Other, from that new apartment they had just moved into. Then moved out himself, with no forwarding address.

"I know," said Mel, shaking his head. When asked, he replied that he too had lost contact. Later, he sat at a lonesome counter drinking a cocktail of melancholy - two parts alcohol, one part regret. It made him take out his mobile and key Eamon's number one last time. 'Out of range,' said the automated voice again. Mel put his phone in his pocket, ordered another drink, and resolved not to bother ringing that number any more. Delete it from his book, even. A shadow moved in the doorway. Mel looked but it wasn't anyone he knew. Halfway down his drink he had himself convinced that the loss of Eamon's friendship was not his fault. Shiela was right: life is a parting of the ways. With that, he knocked back his drink and went home to his wife wondering how on Earth they would manage when the baby came.

Beneath streetlamps on half power, on a road with few cars in a city starved of fuel, a man stepped onto a pavement and stared at a moon hanging in the sky. It was low and large, orange-yellow and pumpkinesque in the early-evening light. The man looked over the quay wall and caught the moon's reflection in the softly-lapping waters of the Liffey, where it seemed to twinkle. At that moment he found himself thinking of a former friend. He remembered how their friendship had operated within such strictly defined limits. Maybe they had never been real friends at all. Perhaps he was just being paranoid again - that thought made him brighten up with a tiny, ironic grin.

He looked up from the river and made his way to Tara Street Station. In the distance, dim lights necklaced their way down to where he knew there was sea. Whatever else this other thing that she had spoken of was, it might come out of the water. Or come out of the sky. It could come from anywhere for that matter. Whenever it came, he knew he would not find her and her colleagues in a city that had already been fine-combed and thoroughly catalogued. They had moved on but there was still a chance they were digging elsewhere. At least he hoped other exploratory teams were still retrieving, still classifying, before all was lost. There was also the possibility that some other native people had uncovered them and believed in them, and their expeditions, as completely as he did. If such people existed he would find them, he promised himself as he sat in the second carriage. With a good-natured toot, the train pulled away and headed for the ferryport.

The Last Holocaust Memorial

B.Z. Niditch

The Bagel Lady kept tapping me on the chest. "So you aren't married yet?"

"Well, my brother Mo became a transvestite the night of his wedding. Not that she ever wanted the divorce. It doesn't run in my family. Cindy adored Mo, even more as her shopaholic third husband." The Bagel Lady hands me the lox spread on a sesame. This goes with my Sunday routine. I'm worrying already because I see my number one enemy, Franklin, has spied me at the juice bar. He wobbles over to me. I find him suddenly nose-to-nose.

He says to me: "So there's the guy whose Swathmore sister had to marry the Illinois vacuum cleaner salesman."

"Oh, Franklin, always with the kind word... Just because Bacall wouldn't even talk to you."

Franklin looks like a woodpecker. "She said I was like an encyclopedia – but she had bad eyesight. And for your info, Bacall is now on-line. I used to see her out with all those guys from history class." Franklin spills some grape juice on the white paper tablecloth. "We never got along, you and I."

"No, Frank, I was too busy being a kid. And whenever I'm down, you invariably show up."

"What's wrong, writer's block?"

"You're what's wrong, Franklin – busybodies, all of you, like the Bagel Lady over there, trying to get me pinned and stuffed." Franklin lets out a huge belch and makes his way out of the crowded Holocaust Memorial Hall.

The rabbi, next to a well-sculpted priest and platinum blond minister, gets up on the stage and has six young people light candles. "Our main speaker," the rabbi, suffering from a bronchial inflection rasps, "is Dr. Sherman Binder. He will talk on his survival in Poland. But before that, Rose, our own international village poet, will read." Rose Rosen is wearing earth tones with a turquoise necklace. She looks like she's riding a wave, and reads from her fictional collection of child holocaust memoirs.

"There before me dying was my only friend; I saw the American liberators..."

And one elderly man with a crawly mustache starts to clap and stamp his feet.

All of a sudden, the town's only Jewish revisionist, Mr. Slovisky, stands up and says, "Rose Rosen, get off the platform! What does she know from the Holocaust? The only place she went was NYU and back." The Bagel Lady says, "Shh, have you no respect?"

When Binder steps to the mike, Slovisky screams, "Binder wasn't even there either. I know it for a fact! I was there! I lived in the forest! Then I was in three different camps. What does Binder know? He lived in some Parisian attic."

Franklin gets into the act and yells out, "Shut up, schizoid! That's what they call me, but I know yours is an injury from the war."

"Take these sick men out! I won't speak if they're here. They belong under good medical care," says Binder. "Every year they come here with the same speech. That Slovisky thinks he's the only survivor in Long Island." Slovisky throws a rolled up "Yiddish Forward" toward the stage, but it doesn't get far.

"I was orphaned at twelve. But you never let me come up and give my story, just because I don't have a master's degree. But I'm in touch with Spielberg, believe me."

Mrs. Bornstein is rattling her umbrella at the Bagel Lady, who was in turn shouting to let the rabbi proceed with the ceremony, since her child was the fifth candle. A boy starts crying.

The Bagel Lady chirps, "That Mr. Slovinisky is crazy! Did you ever go down his basement? He doesn't want anyone to see that tarantula. His library was bare. All I saw was his late wife's record album (Rochelle of blessed memory), 'How to Strip for your Husband'."

"Liar, Sydelle! You lent her the album! I'd never let you step foot in my house."

The assistant rabbi, Rabbi Price, says "let there be peace at all costs." Someone yells out, "Munich, Munich." Mrs. Bornstein says to Sydelle, "Every year I tell them, have a policeman here. I'll pay for it. Anytime Slovinisky is coming, call 911 beforehand."

Slovinisky stands up to leave. "I'm the best speaker you'll ever get, because I lived through it." I follow him out of the hall, leaving before kaddish is said. I feel sick to my stomach that there's never any dignity at this particular shul.

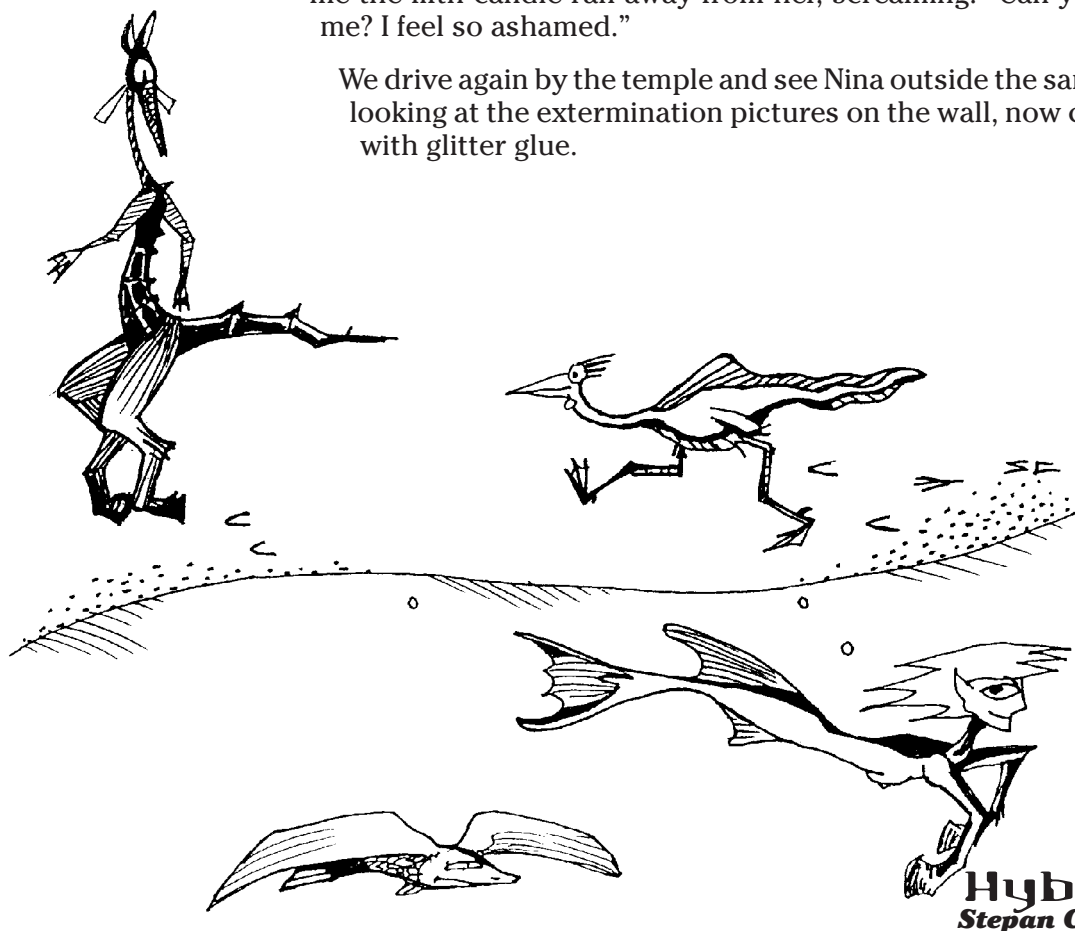
Slovinisky turns around to look at me on the temple steps. "So you're gonna write about me finally? You promised."

I walk across the street to the candy store at the Safire Mall, and buy a box of Fiddle Faddle. I spy Slovinisky at the Foot Pump, rummaging through the sock bin. He suddenly notices me and motions to me to come in. I feel sheepish but stubbornly furtive. This is not for me. I made a big mistake to go to this horror show. The manager of this store and his twin nephews stop to stare at me.

An obese woman carrying a shopping cart full of vitamins tips it over on me, but I won't lose my composure. I walk the other way, past Slovinisky, who raises his fist to remind me of his camp tattoo. It seems the mall's air conditioning is off.

I leave by the back exit and run into Mrs. Bornstein driving her pea green Mercedes. I feel sick, and get into the car anyway. She tells me the fifth candle ran away from her, screaming. "Can you help me? I feel so ashamed."

We drive again by the temple and see Nina outside the sanctuary looking at the extermination pictures on the wall, now covered with glitter glue.



For Stories on the Fifth Floor

Robert Roden

I

Take a woman in the library
For example. Desire her
On a purely physical plane.
Want her on a solid table,
Her mouth agape for books,
Her gasps a swollen
Churning river of fallen, leafed pages.

Take her on the fifth floor
For the sake of the flawed vision,
Hard gaze through windows
Where horizons break.
There: phallic power speculums
For business stand erect.

II

Penetrate with soft impotence.

III

Hear birds call, whispering women,
Autistic moans coil from the floor
Below. Closed eyes
Hallucinate everything.

Come to school
The self in studies of isolation.
Pricking witticisms drop, to stoop.
A blunt pencil lies
Limp beneath
The table.

IV

Take the pencil up, for preamble,
Begin another vague sketch.
Sharpen it. Stick it in
A pocket. Walk. Stabbing
Only the self here now.

T'N'T (for Timmy Taylor)

Robert Roden

Chicago's Lounge Axe, Tim Taylor took stage,
10,000 volts made his body convulse.
His voice wreaked havoc on the audience.
Tim sold Brainiac shirts after the show.
And I popped *dexatrim* for two weeks straight,
Looking for that fix after Timmy died.

It's been 74 weeks since Tim died.
My teeth still clacking, bones shaking the stage—
Sense that something truly great has gone straight
To Hell. I smell his burning and convulse
From the stench of his death on my clothes. Show
The fire hydrant to the audience.

LA's Roxy, Tim sprung the audience—
Vesuvius on the microphone, dyed
Boots twisted, punched keys on the Moog for show.
I stood transfixed, staring at the lit stage,
Like some hot flame was about to convulse
In my blood. His pulse on meltdown mode—straight

Atomic disaster. We all got straight
Interference: feedback. An audience
On television snow sat convulsed.
On the 23rd of May, Timmy died
On some dark Dayton, Ohio street stage.
Alone in the car with nothing to show

For the explosion. The brilliant sideshow—
Few people mourned; the world kept its face straight,
Oblivious outside its own filled stage.
Melody Maker told the audience,
Captured it: "The Day the Sexmusic Died."
Repulsive modes in different convulsions.

I got good feelings seeing him convulse,
Like God himself had decided to show,
Nietzschean notions had finally died.
I can't shake him, can't shake him, can't get straight.
Pity the cutthroat cash cow audience
That settles for less passion on a stage.

The erratic convulsive pulse of straight
Joy & screams for freak show audiences
Died that night Timmy drove his car offstage.

Suburban Airs and Attitudes

Jack Shadoian

who is he that stares down into his hat?
an insurance man, remembering the morning sun's
unwelcome light upon his homely wife who,
savoring her recent pendant buxomness,
coaxes the last drops from his homely penis
with a patience scored to glorias.

while she recalls four hoarse, unstified groans
it's time to ask (as they recede and fade)
who is that wild, unmindful woman plunging
the smart French kitchen knife into her gut?
that's his mother-in-law, hysterical at first-born
Dora's Communist mulatto marriage.

we also can imagine few things more disgusting,
but nonetheless must ask whose dog is defecating
in the driveway? you say it's the Browns dog, Rex?
we ought to kill the ugly beast.
those Browns no longer live here, but big Rex
returns to drop huge turds on our lawns.



Escape
Stepan Chapman

On the Floor

Jack Shadoian

thin light slices from beneath the bathroom door;
I feel heavier than slag, eyes loose, about to roll,
mind hanging by a thread; a female emerges, wobbling,
a subway face...familiar...

she steps on my sleeve, then over me (slight kick
stubbing her toe); has an interesting smell. I hear
impressive thunder, or what sounds like thunder;
my stiff neck won't swivel

I think I'm where they warned me I would be:
In the vicinity of ...vermin, terror, blindness.
a Ugandan-It's my boss!-clomps by, black head ballooning,
and the light goes on again

...for good. It's like I'm sunk into the wood,
as stain, as...blessing(?). Sure, but what are *you*
doing here, above me, sober, vague, whispering
desperate cues and leads:

if I had money, looks, and power, you would help me
tap Congressional switchboards, bring back Wheatena
Farina-sound investments in nostalgia,
blahblahblahblah.

suddenly, the future clamors like cathedral bells untuned-
I will miss... my karate lesson; I will-have to-sell my car,
find mold in my sperm, lose with four queens, suicide,
but stay within the law,

oh yes, so you'll forgive me, huh? I'm up, up,
up, I'm coming home, half shot, to clutch at sleep
and for your restless, wandering thighs, hoping maybe
that it's still last year

A Storm is Coming

Andras Totisz

My older brother Tommy began to walk into pictures last year, when he was 12 years old. The first one he walked into was a picture Mother has hanging in our drawing room. He was gone from the room for a good five minutes, and when he returned he looked odd. His face was sweaty, his hair sticking to his forehead. His eyes shone, and he was a little out of breath as if he had been running. In fact, he told me that he had been running. When I asked him where he had been, he just looked at me strangely, as if he had a secret, then said that he had been in the picture. He had been running in that forest, among those trees, he said.

This picture in our drawing room is really a painting. It is in a big gilded frame and must be very old, because our Grandma got it from her mother. It was painted by hand, because there were no cameras in those times.

There is a forest in the picture. It's a big one, with old thick trees so tall I can't see their tops, and green grass is growing among the trees. And those trees are far enough apart that a child can easily move among them and even play hide-and-seek. And this forest is not frightening at all, but a pleasant one, the kind where you know that if you walk a bit farther you will come to a friendly house where you are expected to tea. I remember that on hot afternoons I often wished I could walk there, where it would be so cool in the shade of the trees. But I didn't really think that I could do it.

When I went back to the drawing room for another look, the picture was at its usual place on the wall, with nothing to show that Tommy had walked in it. That broken little branch on the right side was just where it had always been. Tommy hadn't kicked it away. It would have been funny to see it in some other place.

I just stood before the picture and stared at it, since Mother was not at home to tell me not to stare. She doesn't like if I just stand and stare. Tommy looked out from his room, then closed the door. The forest was green, big and quiet. I imagined a family taking a walk somewhere among the trees but out of my sight. I imagined Tommy running among the trees with his stupid jerky run. I stepped closer. It almost seemed as if I could feel the cool air and breath the wonderful smells of the forest, the leaves, the clear air.

I took a step closer, so close that I could have touched the picture. I could see the traces of the brush, places where the paint was thicker than in others, and what from a distance had looked a tree looked now like just a brown spot. But it was still my forest. And something drew me to step even closer, hoping that the paint spots might disappear and that I could reach out with my hand and touch the knotty trunk of a tree, instead of the old painted canvas. When it didn't happen, I ran away. But from that day Tommy walked more and more often into the picture. He told me that there really was a house on the other side of the woods, but he wouldn't tell me who lived in it. Soon he discovered he could walk into other pictures too, but only paintings, not photographs, because photos have no depth, he said.

"What a pity," I thought. I had a picture taken on my birthday where my friend Silvia Moes is staring very hard at something behind me, and I had hoped Tommy could walk into that picture too and tell me what she was looking at.

Instead, Tommy walked into that painting of a park which also hangs in our drawing room near the door. It's a nice park, one where you just walk and not run around, because if you ran people would tell you not to run. Two women sit on a bench in the distance wearing old-fashioned clothes, the kind you see in old movies, and there is a pram in front of them. If you stand in front of the picture one of the graveled walks reaches straight toward you, as if inviting you in – supposing you can walk in pictures the way my brother can. Beyond the place where the shadow of a tree falls on the gravel walk, little bits of gravel seem to glow in the sunshine.

Tommy told me that a couple is coming toward us from around the bend, wearing the same

kind of old-fashioned clothes. The man wears a hat and carries a stick in his hand, even though he doesn't limp. And the woman's face is sad. Tommy said that as he went toward them, they smiled at him, and maybe they were astonished too.

I stood for a while there in front of the picture waiting for them to appear around the bend, but they didn't come, and then Tommy told me that I was stupid and had better not mention this thing to anybody.

That was all he told me. But after that he spent less and less time at home. He would come in quickly after school and just stand by the table to wolf down his snack. He would not even take the time to sit down, just rushed out again. In the evenings he would tell Mother that he had spent the afternoon at home, or at one of his friends' house, or stayed late at school. But I knew that he had been walking into pictures — in forests and on the shores of lakes, in ancient battles, and in funny places among fat, half-nude women. But I didn't give him away. Our parents are divorced, and Mother works every day. She wouldn't understand it.

Sunday when Father came for us I asked him to take me to the art museum. He looked at me like I was an alien, then said, "Oh, I think you'd enjoy a movie more. How about 'Jimmy the Wonder Spider' with a hamburger afterward?" Tommy glanced up for a second from his book, then went back to reading. But I could still feel him listening and watching. I was surprised that Father didn't feel it.

"No," I answered. "I really want to go to the museum."

Father's and Mother's eyes met. I suppose they don't love each other any more, because if they did, Father would never have moved away. But at times like this they can talk to each other without words, the way lovers can. They think I don't understand what they say, but I hear it just as clearly as when Father still lived here and I used to eavesdrop at the bedroom door. And they say the same things.

Father says, "I don't understand this child, Kate. She isn't stupid, but sometimes she behaves so strangely."

Then he says something else I can't catch, and Mother speaks again. "I'm afraid she'll turn out like her brother."

And now Tommy is angry with me. He hates me because he has to come to the art museum with Father and me. He doesn't look at me — just stares out of the car window and taps the glass with his nails till Father tells him to stop it.

When we reach the museum Tommy says he would rather stay in the car. We can go in, he says, and he'll wait for us. Father doesn't understand, because Tommy always used to like pictures, and Tommy usually doesn't object to doing what Father suggests. Father promises that he will take Tommy to some football match next week if he comes in now. When Tommy just stares silently into space, Father realizes that he hates football.

In the end Tommy does come in, and I am beginning to wish I could tell Father to take me home, or else take me to see "Jimmy the Wonder Spider" after all.

Inside the museum all was silent, with only a few people walking slowly through the big halls. It was as creepy as the afternoon when I found myself alone in the school because Mother hadn't come for me in time. My own footsteps sounded very loud. If I had been alone I would have had to stand near the door and wait until somebody took my hand and led me out. But Father didn't seem to think it was creepy in there. He walked calmly from one hall into the next, making a little circle in every room, while Tommy sat off to himself in a corner. And on every wall there were pictures into which my brother could walk, where he could run and talk to somebody. I wondered if that couple in the park picture at home had spoken to him, but I didn't dare to ask.

A man was sitting in a corner of one of the rooms. He looked as old as Father, except that his hair was white and Father's was not. He had on a black uniform with a wide black belt, like a

policeman. I knew that he was there to guard the pictures and probably saw Tommy there every day. Maybe he noticed when Tommy disappeared from in front of a picture from time to time, wondering what happened to the boy. Or maybe other children walk into pictures too. I don't know, but maybe an art-museum guard would know about such things.

He stared at Tommy, then at Father and at me. He didn't say anything, but in my mind I heard him speaking to Tommy as clearly as I had heard Father and Mother that same morning.

"Are you crazy?" the man was thinking. Tommy responded by behaving as if he were apologizing for something. That was strange. I had never known Tommy to apologize.

"Will you be here tomorrow?" was the guard's next thought. Father didn't hear, but Tommy did, because he thought back, "Yes, I will."

The next day Tommy dashed in after school without even eating his snack, just shut himself up in his room for ten minutes, then rushed away again. He still wasn't home when Mother came from work, but she didn't begin to worry until after the Brazilian soap-opera on TV ended and she was setting the table for dinner.

Finally she called Mrs. Eston, Tommy's teacher, and several of his classmates, and then she called Father. He was here in thirty minutes, wearing a suit but with his shirt buttoned up wrong. He was very nervous. I could tell from the way he looked at his watch every few minutes. At 10 o'clock he called the police. I had already been sent to bed, but I listened at the door and could hear him clearly, just as I did when he still lived here.

He was shouting into the telephone. "I don't care how many children disappear every month and show up the next day grinning and thinking what a good joke it was! My son is not some damn statistic! Tommy is not like other children," he shouted.

After he hung up the phone he told Mother, "They will send a detective here." And Mother cried like she always did when Father shouted, then she rested her head on Father's shoulder. I went back to the bed, pulled the cover over my head, and tried to imagine which painting Tommy might be staying in.

I was almost asleep when the detective got there. He was pretty young, wearing his hair long, and he hadn't shaved, either. When he stood by my bed and looked down at me, I hoped that Father and Mother didn't feel what I felt from his look.

"What do you think, Princess? Where is your brother?" he asked in a rough voice, clearing his throat, then half turning away to cough. I thought of telling him the truth. But I knew that Tommy would never speak to me again if I gave him away.

"Say something, Cat, for God's sake", Mother begged. I looked at them and listened to what they were saying in their heads, trying to make believe I didn't hear it.

"This child drives me crazy. The way she just stares really gets on my nerves."

"I always told Kate the child was half-witted, but Kate refuses to have a doctor see her, of course."

"She is beautiful. If her brother looks like her no wonder some sicko got him. Poor people. "

"Princess," I said to myself. "She is beautiful."

"My brother is in a painting," I answered the detective in my mind, and he looked at me like he knew that I was telling him something, but I don't think he understood.

"She is a strange little girl," he said as he went out. Running to the door closing behind him, I heard Father's answer. "I told you. It's always as if she were somewhere else."

I went back to bed and soon heard the front door close behind him.

The next morning when I woke up Father was already gone. I didn't ask Mother when he had gone. I had a glass of orange juice and toast with lots of butter and honey. Mother was standing

by the radio in the kitchen, watching me eat. She didn't say a word, just looked at me. "If I am a princess, she must be one, too," I thought.

She drove me to the school. I saw that her hands were shaking on the steering wheel, and she gripped it so tightly that her knuckles were white. "Poor Mother," I thought. "Other mothers' sons don't hang around in pictures." I gave her a kiss before getting out, and when she hugged me back I could feel that she was crying.

"Don't be afraid, I will find him," I told her in my mind. This time maybe she understood me, because she smiled at me. "You are a good girl, Cat. I love you."

I waited till the car turned the corner, then I began to run.

The museum was still closed when I got there. I carried my schoolbag up the big steps in front of the gate, then sat on it to wait until they opened so I could go inside and find my brother. I expected to see the guard Tommy had been talking to in his mind, but he didn't come. The only person who came was a fat woman who opened the door, then stared at me suspiciously as if I were a criminal of some kind.

"Shouldn't you be in school this time of day?"

"No, I'm sick," I said.

She grumbled something, then went behind her big counter and gave me a ticket. I thought of telling her that I was Tommy's little sister but decided not to.

I started walking in the same direction we had gone on Sunday, but this time instead of circling close to the walls I just stood in the center of the big rooms and looked at the pictures all around. I found a snowy hill and shivered at the thought of my brother spending the night there. What if he were already dead?

On another wall I spotted a big battle scene, and in the front of it a big, bearded man in armor sat on a horse. He had a bloody sword in one hand, a giant flag with a gilded knot on the top of the staff in the other. I could see that people were killing each other in the background. The horses were stepping on dying men, and the dying men were all twisted in a way that must have hurt a great deal. I leaned closer to the picture and looked carefully at all the dead figures, to see if I could find a familiar face. It wasn't easy, because a thick, grayish fog whirled all through the picture.

"Are you looking for something?"

I jumped back. It was the guard. When he leaned over me I could see that his eyes were a clear, pale shade of blue.

"My brother."

"In this picture? It was painted in 1526, little girl. Do you know how long ago that was?"

He stood there for a while just looking down at me, as if he expected that I would tell him something. But then he shrugged his shoulders and left me alone.

In the other hall, the one where on Sunday Tommy had promised the guard that he would be here the next day, another picture caught my eye. It drew me with the same force as our forest picture at home. I stepped closer to see the traces of the brush, wanting the blue ocean and the blue sky to become something more than just a painted canvas. I thought there was magic in this picture too, and maybe if I would touch it, I might be able to swim toward that little ship in the distance.

Cautiously I leaned closer, but I didn't see a soul on deck. All I could see were sails hanging slack in the calm and a coil of rope under the mast. There were no waves, just the flat endless ocean around the little ship. There were no clouds in the sky either, just a grayish-white spot floating in one corner. I could tell that it was growing larger toward the edge of the painting,

but I couldn't see how big it was because of the frame. I was certain that Tommy had already explored it. I knew he would have to see with his own eyes how big this cloud was. He had to feel the rope on the deck in his hand. He had to find out who was in the cabin, who else might be down in the hold. But why should he have spent the night?

Then I looked at the title – “A Storm is Coming” was printed on the little brass plate under the painting. Suddenly I realized what had happened, and I had to clap my hand over my mouth to hold back a scream. That absentminded brother of mine didn't read the title before walking onto that ship!

I stepped back to where I didn't feel the pull of the picture so strongly, even farther back to where I could barely see that scary storm cloud, then farther back yet until the little seascape was just one picture among many others in this museum.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Did you find your brother?”

With his other hand the guard was holding my head pressed back against his belly. He was tall, taller than Father. I tried to look back into his eyes, but I couldn't move my head. His voice was friendly, and his touch was gentle, but I felt that he meant to harm me. He was like that picture that had swallowed my brother.

“Yes” I answered. If Tommy had been swallowed by the sea I wouldn't have to worry that he wouldn't speak to me any more. This guard who had seen him every day in front of the pictures – I knew he would understand me.

“He didn't read the title of the painting, do you understand? He went on board this ship because he wanted to spend a little time on a sailing boat in the middle of the sea. Maybe he lay on the deck in the sun for a while, then he went into the cabin and talked with the captain, who was too busy to come up the deck. Maybe the captain had never had a visitor before, and he was happy to see one, and while they were chatting the storm broke on the ship.”

I felt the guard's hands tighten on my shoulder and my forehead, then relax.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Princess,” I answered.

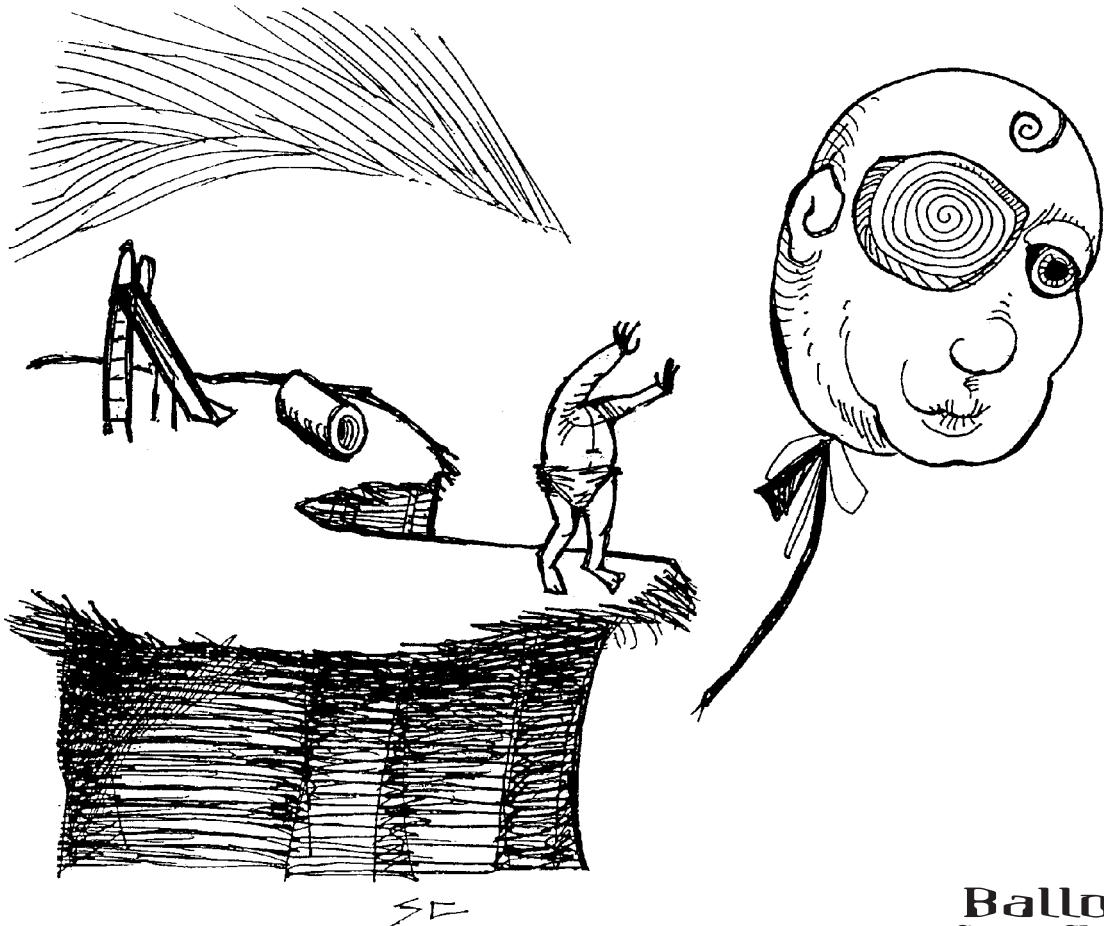
“Good, Princess. Now you go home and don't speak about it with anybody. If that storm caught your brother he will never come back from that painting. But they will take you to a doctor, then they will lock you up in an ugly institute. Is that what you want?”

“No, it isn't,” I answered.

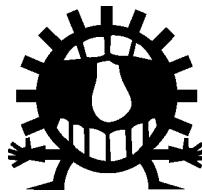
I turned then and looked into his eyes. They were as blue as the sea in the picture, with the storm coming, and I knew that he was lying.

I began walking out, and he just stood there looking after me. When I got out to the crowded street I couldn't feel him looking after me any more.

I saw a crow
And became all mystical
Thinking that
It might be carrying
A dead soul.
Intently listening
With patient ears
To it's call,
And pondering past lives,
I watched
As the magick creature proceeded
To shit on a stone
In the shade.
As I heard the sound
Of the splash,
Mixed with my muffled chuckle,
I decided it was a sign
That sometimes this life
Shouldn't be taken
So serious.

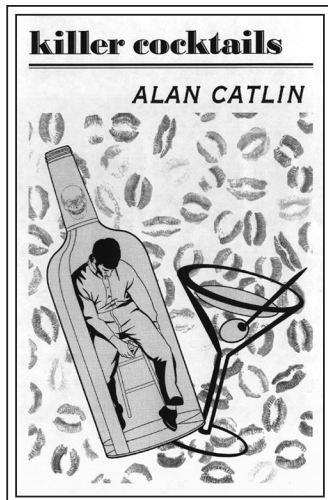
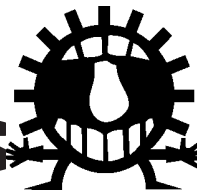


Balloon
Stepan Chapman

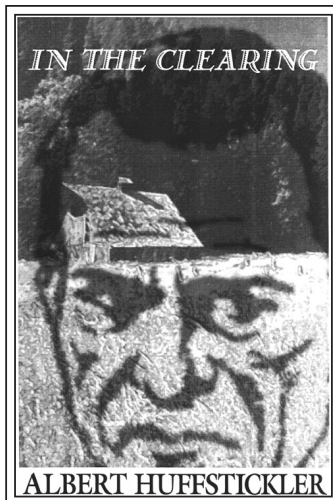


also available from

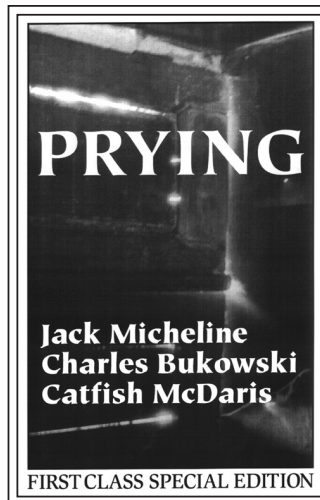
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS



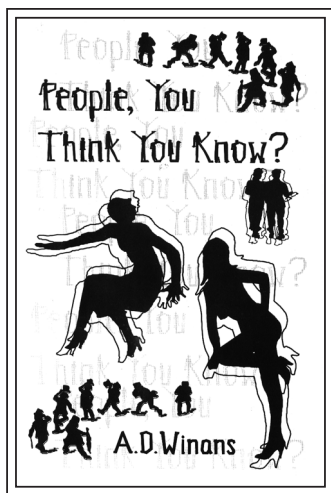
KILLER COCKTAILS is the latest collection of poetics by the well-known Alan Catlin. Each piece in this collection of thirty is a portrayal of a character or event inspired by a particular cocktail. Persona and event become imbibables.....Fully worth the \$5ppd./offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp/FS#104



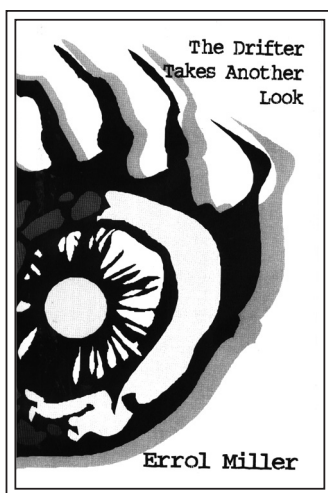
IN THE CLEARING is a wandering collection which merges into a fragmented cohesion. Disturbing and fearsome, yet the most brutal aspect of this journal of poetics is the impact of frank self-examination. Albert Huffstickler is one of the best, period....\$5ppd./offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/32pp/FS#105



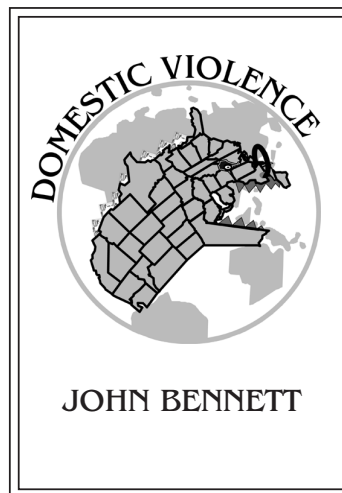
PRYING is a special edition of First Class featuring the words of Jack Micheline, Charles Bukowski (unpubbed), and Catfish McDaris as well as images by Sinisa Dugonic(Belgrade), Jouni Vaara- kangas(Finland), Carlos Serpas (Mexico), and Mike Tolento (USA)....\$5ppd./glossy cover/bamboo paper/28pp/FS#103.



PEOPLE, YOU THINK YOU KNOW? is short fiction and poetics from one of the long-standing greats in the small press, A.D. Winans. This is Winans at his best with short fiction and gritty poetics. Get into Winans' head! Also features fotos of San Fran folks, through the eyes of A.D. / \$5ppd/offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/28pp/FS#107

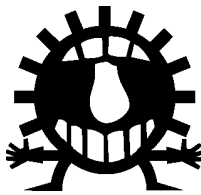


THE DRIFTER TAKES ANOTHER LOOK... These are pieces from the late 80s, Miller's mind ripe, the pen in his hand, once again, after an 8-year dormancy. This is the sweetest, most well preserved fruit plucked from the sealed cellar of the mind of Errol Miller, one of the more prolific writers on the scene today/\$6ppd/offset slick cover/bamboo-laid paper/50pp/FS#108



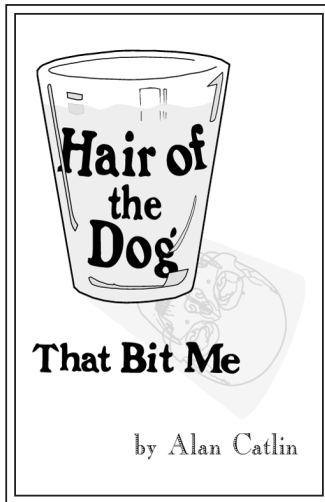
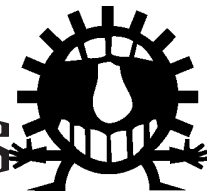
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE is a new collection of John Bennett's finely honed style of 'shard writing': stripped away convention beating like a pulpy red heart. This is the very sharpest cutting edge of his talent, and is a most eloquent assault on post-modern sensibilities ...\$9ppd./perfect bound/finest quality offset multi-color cover/72pp/FS#106

TERMS: I PREFER CASH, BUT CHECKS TO CHRISTOPHER M. ARE OK.

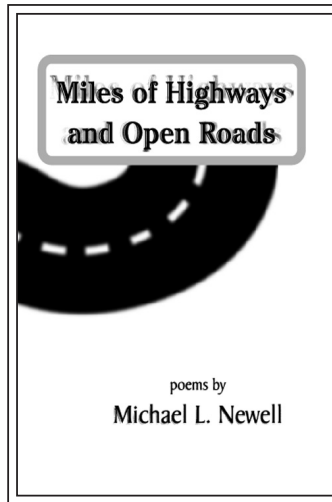


also available from

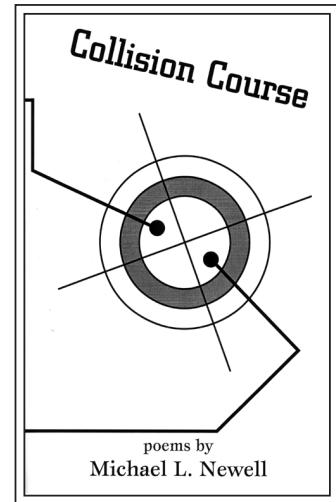
FOUR-SEP PUBLICATIONS



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



MILES OF HIGHWAYS AND OPEN ROADS features 42 poetic slices of the exotic loaf from which the well-travelled Newell nibbles. Never presumptuous and hyper observant, whether it's a glimpse of Jordan or Oregon, these poetics are tight and full of precise, earnest imagery from the perspective of full cultural immersion. \$6ppd./high-end matte cover/24# paper/50pp/FS#110



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.

»»» OUT SOON: Robert Roden 'Scophiliac' and Wade Vonasek 'Starting to End in the Middle'

see below » [NOW IN EFFECT] « see below

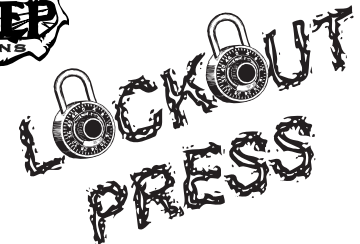
Sickened by the rape of your wallet at the copyshop? Feeling locked out of the publishing loop?

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

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.

Sample rates:

Quantity	Pages	Paper	Price	Each
50	32	Ivory Linen	\$122.24	\$2.44
50	36	24# White	123.98	2.48
75	24	Ivory Linen	130.56	1.74
100	32	24# White	163.50	1.64
100	36	Ivory Linen	179.67	1.80



The Ivory Linen refers to a paper that has a nice rugged texture, a dull yellow/ivory tone, and minimal show-through. 24# is firmer and more opaque, than standard 20# paper. All chaps include an offset printed cover on gloss stock. These are samples and subject to change. Some special projects may entail a greater commitment from both parties.

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/~chrifor (don't forget the tilde)

Christopher M.

cont ributors

CHRISTOPHER BRISSON – *Lives in South Dartmouth, MA. First-timer on these pages.*

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".*

SCOTT DARNELL – *Living in Illinois, while working on a paint crew.*

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

CHRISTOPHER FRANKS – *Lives in Milwaukee, WI. Third time in these pages.*

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

KRISTA HELMBOLDT – *Living in Lawrence, KS.*

THOMAS KRETZ – *Readjusting to the American way-of-life in Washington, DC after a lengthy stay in Europe.*

GERALD LOCKLIN – *Long time, far-reaching presence, with an abundance of publishing credits. Teaches at CSU-Long Beach and has lectured on Hemingway in the land of cigars: Cuba. His books are even available on popular bookstore websites.*

DAVID MURPHY – *Prize-winning Irish author with more than fifty short stories published in collections worldwide. Lives in Dublin.*

B.Z. NIDITCH – *The artistic director of "The Original Theatre", with both national and international publishing credits. Several of his plays and prose pieces have appeared in First Class.*

ROBERT RODEN – *Hard-typin' poet out of Orange, CA seen in many small press mags. New chap "The Scopophilia" out soon from Four-Sep.*

JACK SHADOIAN – *Lives in Amherst, MA.*

ANDRAS TOTISZ – *Living in Budapest, and loves his country and language but not the snobbish and provincial literary life. Seeks to become an American writer who lives in Hungary and has a special point of view.*

WADE VONASEK – *Lives and writes in Seattle, WA with his wife and son. Recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.*

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.

trythese



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).

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.

HEELTAP: Richard D.Houff, 2054 Montreal Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55116. Mostly poetry, excellent production. Send \$4ppd for a sample.

AMERICA by A.D. Winans: Quite excellent piece of poetics, dedicated to the working men and women of America, which means all of us. Black Bear Pub., 1916 Lincoln Street, Croydon, PA 19021.

DREAMS AND GARBAGE AND THE ABYSS by Mark Senkus: \$2 to 200 W. Portage #3, Sault Ste. Marie, MI 49783.

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.

THE TROIKA by Stepan Chapman: 250pp/\$15 ppd. to: Ministry of Whimsy, pobox 4248, Tallahassee, FL 32315.

)]ISM (an organization dedicated to contemporary writers and the independent presses that publish them: The second issue was a great improvement. Basically a showcase for people like you and me. *Be sure to check out their web site: www.poetryism.com.* Info and correspondence: 1514 16th Avenue #2, Seattle, WA 98122-4196. Submissions: 8772 State Route 80, Fabius, NY 13063.

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 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.

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.

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.

CARDBOARD PASTRIES by Richard Houff: Houff evokes a sense of the Blues in his poetics, perhaps a lyrical answer to his musical endeavors. This work is a great way to spend half an hour, contemplating the cynical and satirical and damn serious methodology in Houff's approach and jazz-punky stance on life. Send \$6 to Scrooge's Ledger Press, pobox 1621, Pueblo, CO 81002.

GRAPPLING by Susanne R. Bowers: The poetics in this collection are strong reflections on the turgid underbelly of faulty family life and scream 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.

DIRTY WALLS AND IVORY ENDINGS by Mark Senkus: Senkus' third collection of poetics from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is a peek at the everyday events in his life, the event and tidbit orbiting his existence. Senkus not only wonders about the inequalities and shaft-ridden rules that dominate our culture, but illustrates them so you see things his way. In "Spooked" he saves a doomed to be pellet-shot squirrel's life because "I knew what it

'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 50

was like/to be unwanted and rejected for/nothing other than the sin of existing". Available from Chiron Review Press, 702 N. Prairie, St. John, KS 67576 (www.geocities.com/SoHo/Nook/1748/)

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.

LOOSE FRONT END by Mark Weber and Scott Virtue: Pleasurable pieces and powerful moods from Weber, punctuated by inked accompaniment from Virtue. These two work well together, and it is your brain's privilege if you place this fine, fine chap before your eyeholes. Zerx Press, 725 Van Buren Pl., Albuquerque, NM 87108.

LONG LIVE THE 2 OF SPADES by Daniel Crocker: The final of three 2 of Spades books, in which Crocker, admittedly, chronicles growing up and his youth. Youthful perception, founding creativity, the quest to develop the soul and ideals, flirting with disaster, heaven, woman, and the booze. This collection completes the metamorph. Crocker could be you, or me, or anyone, yet he comes off as decidedly unique in a cluttered world. Try this perfectbound piece out for \$7 from: Green Bean Press, pobox 237, New York, NY 10013.

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.

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 Lummo 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.

BETRAYALS LIKE THAT (Chap) / RUG BURN (CD) by John Bennett: I've read a load of poetics from guys (and a few girlies) who have been slaughtered by love, throttled, bashed, creamed and otherwise full-fucked. Generally, this shit is just that. So meaningful to the author, but the reader is left with crappy images and "who cares?" ripping through their mind, wondering if there is a bargain to be struck with a devil to gain back the wasted time. Bennett, as always, crams his fist through the mold and creates a readable and damn edgy prowl through the crap-world of betrayal and collapse. You see, Bennett is this vicious phoenix, letting rage calmly guide him into a metamorph of his many selves. With regard to his shard writing: 'A shard is a knee-jerk reaction to rug burn. A blowtorch in the face of betrayal.' If anything, Bennett has the power to turn pen to fistfuck and get you in the brain. 'Rug Burn' is a spoken-word collection of his shards, which translate best when he is lilting his wry-whisper in your ear (whisper as in it seems as though he is speaking in confidence, lilting as in he doesn't seem to really care whether you agree or not, you're gonna get it anyway). The chap is \$5, the CD is \$10, and don't forget that if you were or are a fan of Jack Micheline, get Vagabond's hardback tribute too. Vagabond, 605 E. 5th Avenue, Ellensburg, WA 98926.

THE MURDEROUS CLOWN by T.K. Splake: The clown, lurking beneath the make-up and painted emotion: what is there? Illusion and despair? Unknown intent? Splake relies on themes of alienation and longing and regret to paint the pages of this chap, rendered with each word bearing full impact. Standing out is "Visions for Matthew and Gerard" where the mournful promise to "get squared away" leaves a broken record of a life made empty. Athena Angel Prod., pobox 508, Calumet, MI 49913.

BLOODY AND LIVING by Ed Galing: This is a solid document capturing the attitude and persona of a long-ago South Philly, where you were nearly proud to grow up poor, and the neighborhood was a testament of it's resident's lifestyle and ambition (an idea that has fallen by the selfish and wasteful wayside of this postmodern era). This is a good long read, where the poetics stand best in union, so the reader grasps the entire message, absorbing the essence of each into a cohesive and well-knit bond, much like a neighborhood... Send \$6 to Black Spring Press, 61-36 160th Street, Flushing, NY 11365.

THE NEBULIZER by Robert Roden: Killing technology is on the forefront of our minds at some point in our interaction with the machines around us. This is a chap in the Laguna Poets Series, and much of it centers around our puzzling interaction with these mechanical devices that surround us: the telephone, the automobile, and the unhelping voice on the end of an automated phone system. In "Vehicular Manslaughter" we read: "The car wants blood/Transfusions/And upgrades/To more synthetic products." Yes, Americans, we have personified the products and devices that surround us. Perhaps they will want a bit of our blood, or more.... The Inevitable Press, pobox 249, Laguna Beach, CA 92652.