



CHEW  
MAIL POUCH TOBACCO  
TREAT YOURSELF TO THE BEST

# WATERSHED

GREGORY LIFFICK © 2010

Down in the Dirt chapbook  
SCARS PUBLICATIONS

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## UPSCALE

The brown tree squirrel  
tightrope walks  
on the telephone line  
over the side street  
in Beverly Hills.  
Somehow fatter  
and more content  
than its cousins  
in poorer areas.  
Almost mocking  
in its arrogant  
acrobatics and  
surefooted lack of fear.  
The confidence of the  
well-off and well-fed.

## SETPIECE

My first few years,  
before my family  
moved to Los Angeles.  
A mind's eye memory  
of Mundelein,  
a German-Americana suburb  
just north and west of  
Chicago.  
Hollywood-like backdrop.  
Grassroots scenery.  
Well-mown lawns.  
Nuclear families.  
Kids and pets.  
Homes a Chex Mix  
of post-war, Victorian  
and fifties modern.  
Tree houses.  
Real seasons.  
Snow ball fights in winter.  
A "Little Rascals" short.  
My older brother and I  
banished to the basement  
for mischief.  
Or secluded there  
during my parents' parties.  
Sneaking cool shrimp  
from the platter  
in the refrigerator.

## READING

The pale  
thin fingers  
of the bohemian  
literature student  
dramatically turn  
the pages  
of a weighty,  
required text.  
She earnestly  
takes in each  
profound phrase,  
only stopping  
to sip seriously from  
a cooling Styrofoam cup  
of coffee bar  
cappuccino.  
Her clothing  
drapes loosely,  
pretentiously.  
Smothered is  
any last spark  
of frivolous  
taste and delight  
in the written word,  
leaving only a  
heavy, dark cavity  
within a  
drab costume.

## BIBLEBELT

In the waistline  
of America,  
a fire and brimstone,  
holy roller,  
pink skinned,  
gray haired God  
angers easily.  
The Midwestern  
almighty  
is big on  
strictness  
and long on wrath.  
Jesus speaks  
of loving thy neighbors,  
but only if  
they mind their manners  
and keep off the grass.

## DOWNHILL

Speeding along the  
Pearblossom Highway,  
through high desert,  
at the head  
of a snake of cars  
slithering  
from lane to lane  
around turtle  
sedans and trucks.  
Up a grade,  
from lizards and cactus  
to pines and snow.  
Bound for the slopes.  
Skiing, it seems,  
is putting on size-100  
wooden shoes  
and stepping into  
icy quicksand.  
A “Wide World of Sports”  
outtake, grasping  
the tow rope  
and cartwheeling  
in spectacular Technicolor.

## MEDIUM

The junk mail  
in my P.O. box,  
bearing the names  
of strangers,  
speaks of past lives,  
former renters.  
Unknown to me,  
but haunting me.  
Somehow cosmically  
tied to me  
by credit card offers,  
discount fliers,  
and the odd  
video catalog  
for pornography,  
sent to one  
(name deleted).  
I continue  
to share space  
with these ghostly  
previous addressees.  
We will never meet,  
but I feel like  
I know them  
from their spectral  
paper trail.  
I need a  
postal exorcist  
to forward them  
into the light.

## WAKE

The windows of  
discarded buildings.  
Blank stares  
watching passing traffic.  
People used to  
bring the fibers  
of the sagging shells  
to life.  
Ghosts are the energy  
of melodramatic pasts,  
bittersweet juice  
pumping through bricks  
and wood and steel.  
Every nail that  
held together dreams,  
now just fashioning  
planks and finish  
into low-rent coffins.

## PRONE

A crawlspace  
under the house.  
Pipes. Cobwebs. Spiders  
A midlife man  
huddles in the  
removed, quiet recess.  
Cowering, peering out  
at impossibility.  
Unkempt. Forlorn.  
Rumpled, torn clothing.  
Trying to grin, at least,  
at the temperate shade.  
Better than the heat  
in the open daylight.

## MECCA

A pantheon  
of business cards  
on the supermarket  
bulletin board.  
Gods of  
various realms,  
promising deliverance  
from domestic  
plague and peril.  
Bankruptcy.  
Immigration.  
Get rich quick  
for a  
modest offering.  
Get out of jail—  
not free,  
but for a  
blessed ten-percent.

## INTERSTATE

White line fever.  
Five thirty in the morning,  
one hundred miles  
from Phoenix.  
Lullabied by the road bed.  
Fully asleep at the wheel  
of a '63 Impala  
on the wrong side  
of a two-lane blacktop.  
Driving the car  
cross country  
to sell to my cousin.  
The semi headlights  
bearing toward me  
in the glow  
of rising dawn.

## EULOGY

Several  
yellow, lined  
pad pages  
give  
their lives  
for my poems.  
Many  
ink pens  
spill their  
black and blue  
blood.  
My art  
is driven by  
stationery.  
I write  
in praise  
of  
office supplies.  
I remember  
their  
sacrifice.

## HOSTAGES

In the summer  
of a bygone culture,  
the extended family clan  
virtual prisoners  
in the confines  
of an immense, over-laden  
rolling juggernaut  
of a Pontiac station wagon.  
A prequel to  
“National Lampoon’s Summer Vacation.”  
Hurling through  
the land of the free  
and the home of the brave—  
Route 10, Route 66—  
mothers of roads—  
west to east and back again.  
Five thousand pounds  
of visiting aunt  
and vomiting children  
and migraine parents,  
menacing the A & Ws  
Holiday Inns and greasy spoons.  
Peeing into Coke bottles to save time.  
Always in a rush to get to  
the next indistinguishable relative  
and interchangeable national monument  
(frightening in Seymour, Indiana—  
everyone looks like us).



# CHURCH

The sidewalk  
evangelists  
seem dressed up  
for a  
nowhere-to-go  
congregation,  
singing hymns  
in a yet to rise  
house of praise.  
If faith is belief  
in things unseen,  
then these members  
have surely  
prayed their way  
into a chosen body.

# PIE-EYED

Threadbare scholars  
waiting for a pizza.  
A wee hours Greek tragedy  
in Dickensian dorms.  
Between the hard studied clock  
and empty pits of stomachs,  
counting the minutes in visions  
of cheese and pepperoni.  
Marco Polo, back from the Orient,  
not as welcomed as the teenager  
at the door, milliseconds before  
the free delivery guarantee.  
The steaminess of the box  
second only in warmth  
to the first fire  
tindered by primeval man.

# COMMUNITY

The boundaries are thin  
between are yards  
and our souls.  
Reach a hand across  
the picket fence  
or over  
the brick wall,  
and your fingers tingle  
with your  
neighbor's energy.  
His lawn  
burns with his dream,  
and his driveway  
radiates his desire.  
His house  
is his body  
and his blood.

## FOLKSONG

The driveway  
oil stain  
resembles a young  
Bob Dylan,  
framed by  
scraps of garbage  
blowin' in the wind.  
Joni Mitchell's  
paradise  
was paved,  
local parking lots  
turned to islands.  
Woody Guthrie  
died back east  
in a hospital room  
for Great Depression  
American sins.

## GRASSROUTES

Corner of the eye  
images  
of heartland.  
"Next food and gas,  
five miles ahead."  
"See the  
two-headed snake."  
A thousand  
stepping stone,  
half a horse towns.  
A pilgrimage  
of R.V. nomads  
to flea market meccas.  
Sailing a sea of grass  
between exotic  
gas station isles.

## LINK

Monkey see,  
monkey do—  
that's how  
we learned  
to use tools.  
And to talk.  
And to write.  
Why do parents  
ask their children,  
“If everyone else  
jumped off a cliff,  
would you too?”  
They already  
know the answer.  
It's in our genes.  
We all swim  
in the same pool.

## TRAILBLAZING

Camping out.  
Tang and Pop-Tarts  
in the woods in 1977.  
Backpacking through  
the San Bernardino  
Mountains.  
A family tradition.  
Lost there in the late 1960s.  
On the local t.v. news  
and everything.  
My father making  
SPAM and eggs  
during YMCA outings.  
I thought of Dr. Seuss.  
“I will not eat  
fried eggs and SPAM.  
I will not eat them,  
no, no, ma'am!”  
Old hiking boots  
and army surplus canteens.

## PHYSICS

The post office  
is a  
relative universe,  
where space  
is frozen,  
times slows,  
and light curves  
within  
fluorescent bulbs.  
An eternity spent  
in mere  
existential moments.  
Matter reaching  
infinite density  
at the  
event horizon  
of this black hole,  
too close to  
such a singularity  
of inertia.

## AMENITY

Driving to work  
as a teacher  
in South Central  
Los Angeles.  
Passing  
store front churches  
in corner  
shopping centers,  
sprouting like  
optimistic flowers  
in a cement Eden.  
Mom and pop  
business  
of the soul.  
Salvation  
on layaway.  
A thriving trade  
in faith, hope  
and charity.  
No offer  
refused  
for the gates  
of heaven.  
The afterlife  
financed  
on water into wine  
credit.

## INERTIA

Poetry,  
once in motion,  
wants to flow  
perpetually,  
never at rest,  
its words  
propelled objects  
through  
free space,  
budded  
from blocked  
stillness  
and set on  
a clear path.

## JOURNALISM

The anchorperson  
jokes—  
war and famine  
somewhere.  
Set up  
for a ratings  
punch line.  
The lighter side  
of human misery.  
Something about a  
lingerie fashion show.  
The network news—  
whistling  
in the graveyard.  
Broadcast  
four times daily,  
with plenty of laughs  
and spots for  
commercials.

## RESERVATIONS

Gallup, New Mexico.  
Standing outside  
the Econolodge  
on old Route 66,  
around dusk,  
a speeding ticket  
in my pocket  
from the local  
Navajo police.  
The Bronco had  
materialized like  
a shaman spirit  
in the sleepy  
emptiness  
of the open  
copper land.  
Ambushed  
on the trail  
to the  
Circle K market.  
A lonely outpost  
of manifest destiny  
in native territory.

## FARM

Nature is about  
leveling the field.  
The hands of  
the universe  
bury anything  
rising above  
common ground.  
Everything  
back in its place,  
six feet under  
the flat surface,  
or ashes,  
spread over  
the plain and  
down again  
evenly to earth.

## CLICK

The t.v. and me  
and the microwave  
having a three-way  
on a lost Friday.  
Add take-out  
and it's an orgy.  
The only sex  
to be had.  
Fantasies  
about Swanson  
Hungry Man dinners.  
Couch potato  
kama sutra positions  
in the living room.  
Remote control  
erotica.  
Channel surfing  
a dirty dance  
on the edge  
of virtual ecstasy.

## ABU GHRAIB

No remorse  
in the voices  
of the prosecuted  
young American  
military guards.  
No batting  
of the eyes.  
Just following orders.  
Another day  
on the job  
torturing prisoners.  
Where have we  
heard that before?  
At least the Nazis  
had the nerve to be indignant  
about being tried.  
These desensitized,  
empty faced soldiers  
can't even muster that feeling.

## SPY

Losing face  
in the crowd  
you see behind  
the backs of  
strange eyes.  
Cold shoulders  
become warm  
with revelation.  
Hairs standing  
on passerby necks  
telegraph secrets  
on anonymous  
waves of air.  
The act of  
disappearing  
unveils the  
whole picture.

## VOYAGE

Dad took  
my older brother and I  
bottom fishing in 1968.  
Off the coast of California,  
in shallow waters  
between two islands.  
Out on the ocean  
for the first time.  
Getting my sea legs  
was an issue.  
Though the fresh air  
on deck helped.  
I lost my breakfast before  
the Dramamine kicked in.  
Standing, walking  
on the slippery, rolling bow  
of the fishing boat  
in the dim sunrise light.  
But brothers dare each other.  
Who'll catch the biggest fish?  
He beat me out by two ounces.  
Mine a white fish,  
his a red snapper.  
Both fish tasted good, but  
salty.



## COMMUTE

Bumper stickers  
spit politics  
and religion.  
The only place  
they are allowed  
to fraternize  
in public.  
People don't talk,  
but they drive.  
The freeway  
a running conversation,  
an argument  
of fenders  
and turn signals.  
The diamond lane  
an awkward silence.

## HOOSIERS

Somewhere south  
of Indianapolis  
and north of Kentucky,  
my parents were raised  
within fifty miles  
of each other  
on rich Wabash River  
bottom land.  
A picture of my mother,  
dirt poor at sixteen,  
in overalls,  
leading a horse drawn cart.  
Last of nine children  
(those that lived).  
She the baby.  
A photo of my father  
in his Army uniform,  
headed off  
to World War II.  
In Hawaii  
when they dropped  
the bombs.  
Never fought.  
Toured the Ginza  
in post-war Tokyo  
and saw Korea  
as an occupation soldier.  
They met years later  
in Chicago.  
My father a salesman.  
My mother a secretary.  
Eisenhower era fate.  
Windy City romance.  
Heartland marriage,  
back home again  
in Indiana.

## RINGSIDE

Boxed into an  
ugly corner of words,  
poetry comes out  
swinging with beauty.  
Counter punching  
from the tongue  
with jabs of wit  
and toothy hooks.  
Rhythmic smacks  
to opposing mouths.  
The square circle  
of the weekend  
open mike night.  
Verse doesn't  
fight dirty.  
But it won't  
sit still either,  
for any spoken  
fat lip.

## SINK

To a drowning man,  
the surface  
of the water  
above his head  
is crystal clear.  
A skylight  
pane of glass.  
A kind of  
cathedral window,  
through which  
permeates the  
flickering glow  
and promise  
of entry  
into heaven.  
His eyes strain up,  
as in a chiarascuro  
religious painting,  
grasping at rays  
of sun, like ropes,  
filtering down to  
his wet demise.

## EXHIBITIONISM

Modern art  
love bites  
the sexy,  
beholding eye  
that feeds it.  
A naked dance  
on satin-finished  
loft floors.  
Wine, cheese  
and soft light.  
Slow, flirting  
circling before  
creative acts  
against the  
virgin white  
gallery walls.

## BLUEJEANS

Levi Strauss  
was on to something.  
Denim is a metaphor  
for determination.  
The fabric  
holding up,  
like the human spirit,  
to all sorts of toil  
and punishment.  
Not diminished  
by the  
down and dirty  
of daily existence.  
Comfortably worn  
like a second skin.  
We all pull  
ourselves up  
by the seat  
of such pants.  
And when  
the knees go out,  
like wounds  
to our minds  
and bodies,  
we merely slap  
a patch on them  
and go back  
to work.

## SOUND

White noise  
is always  
humming in  
my background.  
The air thick  
with static  
waves and particles.  
Channeling  
a wide band  
of interference  
and competing  
buzzes and clicks.  
The busy din  
only silenced  
by a narrow  
span of attention.

## COVER

Cemeteries are  
odd landfills.  
Bodies resting,  
still and empty,  
like old sofas  
and broken  
refrigerators,  
under a blanket  
of dirt and grass.  
At least they don't  
build golf courses  
over these mounds.  
The headstones  
are a problem.  
In theory.

## CARDS

Sorting out  
friends and enemies  
is tricky  
when treachery  
feeds the kitty  
in the poker  
we play with  
our alliances.  
The Constitution  
is just a placemat  
on which the rich  
place their full,  
greedy plates  
and topped off glasses  
of sucker blood.  
The latest  
corporate memo  
is more worth  
the paper it is  
written on  
than the  
Bill of Rights.  
States are only  
united by  
the bottom line.  
The business  
of America  
is giving us  
the business.

## CAMERA

Since birth,  
my eyes  
wide-angle  
and close-up  
on experience.  
Constantly  
in focus.  
Light  
falling on  
negatives  
of memory.  
Curiosity  
snapping away,  
taking pictures  
through my  
personal  
lens frame.  
Multiple shots,  
still photos  
connected  
in linear motion.  
In and out  
of range.  
Some images  
clear and  
some blurred.

## RIDE

Rollerblading  
is an exercise in balance.  
Trying to stay on two edges  
made of wheels.  
Because the edges roll.  
And you along with them,  
just within control.  
Cracks in the pavement,  
concrete pushed up  
by the roots of large trees,  
provide spice to the journey.  
A misadventure in physics  
with knee pads.  
Inner thigh muscles  
shouting with strain.  
Even louder than the cries  
from your alarmed mouth.

## MINSTREL

The homeless  
street musician  
pushes the empty  
wooden crate  
up the steep street,  
his lopsided burden  
poised impossibly  
atop a small,  
wobbly skateboard.  
He stops at  
odd downbeats,  
playing the mute keys  
of the broken, portable  
electric piano  
tied to his one-man  
would-be bandwagon.  
Imagined music  
flows from his head,  
if not his fingers.

## DRAIN

Memory backs up.  
Pipe dreams bursting  
in the basement  
of the brain.  
Rusty plumbing  
clogged with  
an unflushed past.  
Everything should  
flow smoothly.  
The water cycle  
of existence—  
cleansing tears  
following gravity  
to the ocean.

## MEDICINE

Love sick casualties  
wandering the streets,  
broken hearts and  
bruised pride  
going untreated.  
X's and O's  
HMOs and  
emergency rooms  
closing all over  
lonely towns and cities.  
Romance and TLC  
have lost their  
bedside manners.  
Witch doctors  
and faith healers  
stepping in to  
fill the prescription.

## LAUNDRY

Wash, rinse  
and tumble dry  
cycles of life.  
A shallow  
gene pool of  
whites, colors  
and delicates.  
Evolution—  
hands no longer  
beating cloth  
on rough stone.  
But, still pressed  
by nature  
to fluff, fold, roll  
and put away.

# WATERSHED

## GREGORY LIFFICK

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**Compact Discs:** *Mom's Favorite Vase* the demo tapes, *Kuypers* the final (*MFV Inclusive*), *Weeds and Flowers* the beauty & the desolation, *The Second Axing* Something is Sweating, *The Second Axing* Live in Alaska, *Pettus & Kuypers* Live at Cafe Aloha, *Pointless Orchestra* Rough Mixes, *Kuypers* Seeing Things Differently, *SD/SD* Tick Tock, *Kuypers* Change Rearrange, *Order From Chaos* The Entropy Project, *Kuypers* Six One One, *Kuypers* Stop, *Kuypers* Masterful Performances mp3 CD, *Kuypers* Death Comes in Threes, *Kuypers* Changing Gears, *Kuypers* Dreams, *Kuypers* How Do I Get There?, *Kuypers* Contact • Conflict • Control, *the DMJ Art Connection* the DMJ Art Connection, *Kuypers* Questions in a World Without Answers, *Kuypers* SIN, *Kuypers* WZRD Radio (2 CD set), *Mom's Favorite Vase* and *The Second Axing* These Truths, *assorted artists* String Theory, Oh (audio CD), *Life At The Cafe* (3 CD set), *the DMJ Art Connection* Indian Flux, *the DMJ Art Connection* Manic Depressive or Something, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #1, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #2, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #3, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #4, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #5, *Chaotic Radio* the Chaotic Collection Collection #01-05 (5 CD set) etc. (audio CD, 2 CD set), *Chaotic Elements* (2 CD set), *Chaos in Motion* (6 CD set), *SD/SD* Screaming to a Halt (EP), *PB&J* Two for the Price of One (EP), *Kiki*, *Jake and Haystack* An American Portrait, *Kuypers/the Bastard Trio/Paul Baker/the JoAnne Powlers Trio* Fusion (4 CD set), *podcasts* the Evolution of Performance Art (13 CD set), *Kuypers* Live (14 CD set), *the DMJ Art Connection* the Things They Did to You (2 CD set), *Kuypers* Seeing a Psychiatrist (3 CD set), *Kuypers* St. Paul's (3 CD set), *Kuypers* the 2009 Poetry Game Show (3 CD set), *Kuypers* and the *HAL*man of South Africa Burn Through Me (2 CD set)