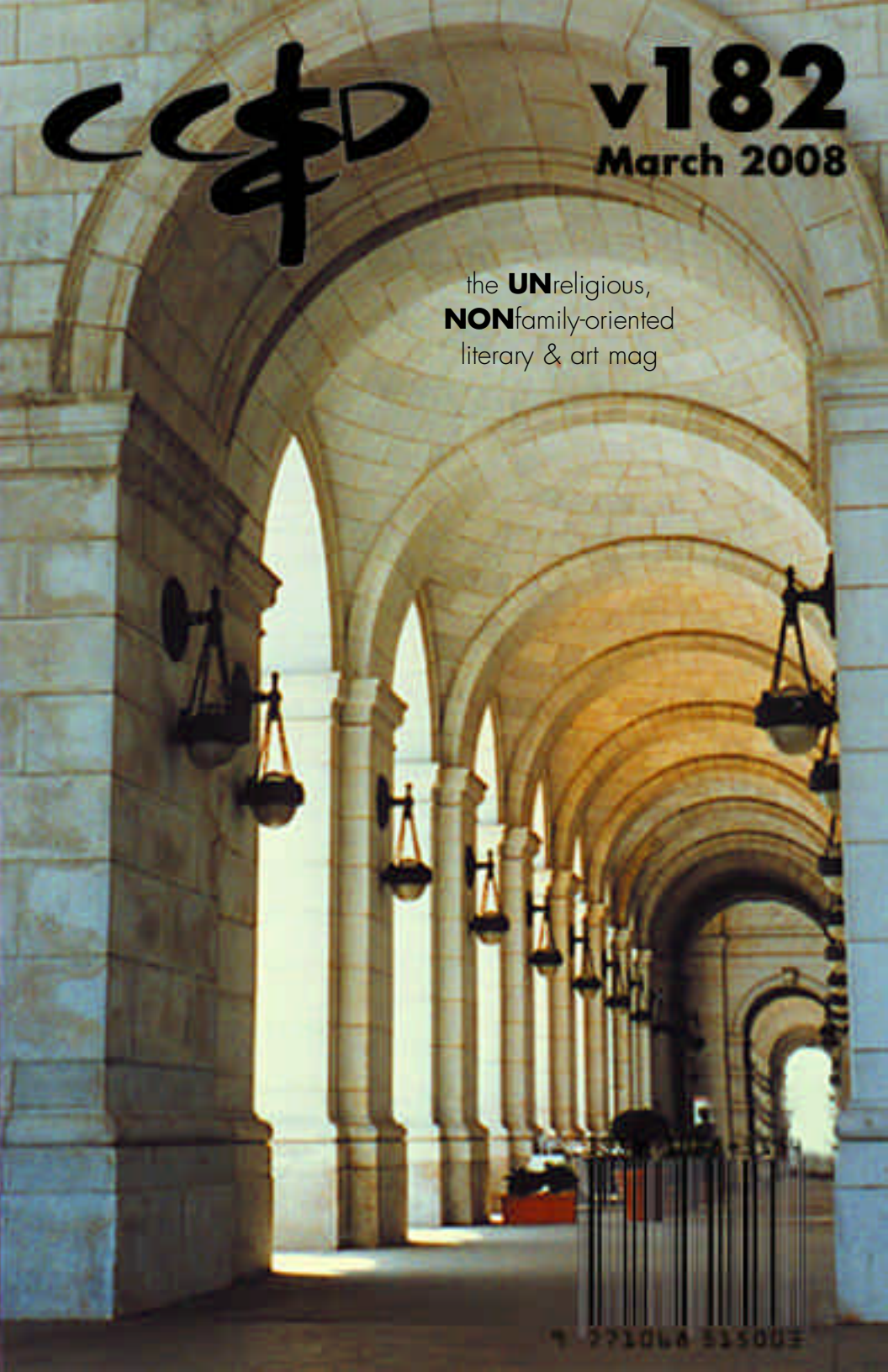




v182
March 2008

the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag



9 271068 335003

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Scars art

6, 9 (2 images), 21. Cover art is of arches in Washington DC.



Alien Relic, art by Junior McLean

the boss lady's editorial

Making Sense out of the Economy

I heard a news reporter on News Radio 780 (AM) WBBM in Chicago discuss the economy in a business report that things have not been looking very good in general for the economy. The reporter mentioned something that stuck in my head; he said (with a dismal tone to his voice) that “Right now, unemployment... could only go up.”

And it was said in a way that made it seem like this was a dismal thing, but all I could think was that those statistics mean that unemployment is at an all-time low. And I mentioned this, and realized that this is one way a news reporter can editorialize the news, suddenly making news reports commentaries.

And I didn't realize that reporters could make commentaries like that about the economy, but then it occurred to me that news reporters have been putting their collective slant on any war activity in Iraq, so if every news center (newspapers, radio and television) outlet in the country can help to change America's view of combat in Iraq (expect of course for anything related to Fox News and the Republican pundits of Talk Radio), then they could probably work to put a slant on how the nation views the economy. Think about it: out liberal media on the whole talks about the doom and gloom of the war, as well as the economy – only the Republican stations work to show off how necessary the Iraq war is (if only Congress wouldn't have been such sissies and only declared the war legally themselves instead of just letting Bush do whatever he wanted), and only the more Republican-oriented news broadcasters talk about how successful the economy is. I mean really, the stock market has been at an all-time high, much higher than it was during Bill Clinton's dot com successes.

But when I think about it personally, I wonder whether it is success or not. I had a lot of money saved, including a decent amount of money in my 401(K), but right at the end of Clinton's reign (and right at the beginning of Bush's reign), the market totally died, and I lost the vast majority of my 401(K) and a chunk of my savings. (I know, I could have moved my money into a less risky investment, good point, but that also happened to be when

I was almost killed in a car accident, and I was spending my time learning how to walk and talk and eat instead of how to reinvest my savings. Sorry.)

So I go into this thinking that since the high days of the 90s, I lost a lot of money due to the stock market. And I look at the high value of the stock market now, and I compare the value of the dollar to the Euro, and see how in world markets we're getting destroyed, and our dollar seems to be worth less and less. When I say that, I'm reminded that the Euro didn't exist in the 90s, and a reason for the increasing value of the Euro is the expansion of the Euro into different countries. So I guess that's supposed to make me think that it's all in my head, that the dollar is still extremely valuable and we're really just basking in America's bounty of wealth.

Hmm.

I just keep thinking that we Americans are acting like that overweight uncle who drives in for Thanksgiving dinner, eating a lot and then watching the football game while drinking beer, reveling in the days when he used to be a quarterback for the high school football team. It's almost as if he should be telling every family member (again) about how he threw four touchdown passes at the homecoming game and won the day. But if that fat uncle is sitting back and burping with their beer while they let someone else do all the work for them and America's that fat uncle, this economic superpower has stopped working on excelling in the fields that will keep them ahead of the game, and outsourcing anything and everything to other countries, so they can take all of our good standing.

America has been training everyone else from other countries (with our outstanding higher educational system) to beat us at our own game. While we sit back and let them.

Maybe in the 90s mentality of trying to get rich quick, we decided to buy our Japanese technology and drive our German cars, and don't forget that we drink our French water (yeah, I won't forget that Evian is "naive" backwards) when we're not drinking our French wine. But maybe when we got into the mentality that we could get rich quick instead of learning how to work hard, and when that didn't work we'd watch the advertisements saying we could have yet another credit card so we can afford the better things in life immediately (and they forget that they'll only put themselves farther in the hole when they can't afford to pay the balance in full every month), maybe this country forgot as a whole how to stay ahead.

Or more importantly, possibly *get* ahead, since we may have lost our high ranking on this planet.

But even thinking of the housing boom that happened in the first half of this decade, people (because mortgage rates were so low) were buying big-

ger and better houses like mad. But a lot of people bought homes not with fixed 30 year loans, but with variable interest loans, and a lot of people are having problems with paying their mortgages with the higher rates they now have to deal with (for that matter, when people thought it was good to get a house, they got something bigger and much more expensive than their budget could even afford, and they're paying the price now too with foreclosures). And I just read in USA Today (weekend paper, Friday-Sunday, August 31st to September 3rd 2007) the headline "FHA to step in, help refi at-risk loans" (with the subhead "Bush proposal would benefit 80,000," I love seeing these affirmations that people want a socialist government that bail them out of every problem they have) because some homeowners with subprime adjustable rate mortgages will be saved by big brother, I mean, our government, by being given the ability to refinance their homes.

And with people having problems with their mortgages, mortgage brokers are having problems too – because several thousand of the nation's 53,000 brokerages closed in 2007 because of this year's housing slump and the recent surge in home loan defaults. And because in the past loaners did not pay so much attention to credit scores, people could get away with whatever loan they chose get – even if they couldn't afford it later. Because when you could add the past good mortgage rates with the fact that brokers can earn higher commissions by steering future home owners to loans with higher interest rates, then there is a bigger chance for people deciding on things they can't afford.

Because if you can't get rich that quickly, you could at least feel like you're rich by overstepping your bounds with an unrealistic mortgage so you can have a nice big house, and by using the high interest rate credit cards to get everything you want, right?

As a nation, we're fatter than a *lot* of other countries, and with out get rich quick mentality, we don't think twice about suing a doctor for anything going wrong, which just drives the cost of the best healthcare on the planet up for everyone because of the insurance doctors have to pay to save them from their litigious patients. But you see, we all *deserve* the best, because we're Americans damnit, our poor welfare constituency still has a television in their homes (the average number of televisions per household in the United States is over two TVs), our teen children feel they deserve a free cell phone. And the same youth, with dyed hair and tattoos and a pierced tongue, complain that something is wrong with the system when they're not offered a job.

Hell, our president even offered the idea (when having to worry about border security after terrorist attacks) of granting immunity to

some illegal aliens, because they do the work that he believes most Americans wouldn't do.

Welcome to the American mentality.

But then again, our unemployment rate is so low (oh wait, the news reporter said begrudgingly that the unemployment rate "could only go up"). But then again, maybe there is a low unemployment rate not because there are more manufacturing jobs available (you know, the jobs that make better products so we don't purchase French water and German cars and Japanese electronics and toys made in China and clothing probably manufactured in Indonesia or Thailand), but because the jobs that are available are in the service industries... I mean, think about it: if we American want the better things in life, someone needs to be pampering us in the spa, and we need more people in the wait-staff of the restaurants we prefer, we need to pay money for a car wash to try to get lower gas prices at the pump (that is the current scam at gas stations now, spend a lot more on a car wash to get less money off on your gasoline, since gas prices are now so high). And that is the thing, we Americans are filled with the mentality that we deserve the finer things in life, so we over-mortgage ourselves for a big home and we get another credit card to max out and pay the minimum charge on so we get further in debt, and we spend money we don't have to get a nice hair cut and get our nails done – there are places that will style your hair or give you a makeover (I have to admit, I did that once for my wedding), but people want to splurge and have other people do their work for them. So yes, there is an increase of jobs, but they're not high-paying jobs that help our economy, they are low-end jobs to help us pamper ourselves.

Is this how we get ahead?

So I see things and I wonder if we are getting ahead or falling behind. I wonder if the media is painting a dour picture, or if the stats I see about the (in general) increased stock market value are actually a good sign for our economy?

The bottom line is this in practical terms: do I feel like things have gotten more expensive than what inflation allows for? Well, I can only guess on a few comparisons, and I think big ticket items like cars have gone up (though they offer more features now), but airfares have actually gone down (I flew across the country throughout the 90s, and a round trip flight from Chicago to either Florida or Arizona at comparable times costs the same as it did in 1990). Basic food items have shot up in price (can you remember the cost of milk and eggs from 10 to 20 years ago? The price has skyrocketed.), And thanks to the smart moves from our current president, the price of gasoline has more than doubled. I mean, I traveled

around the country by car in 1997, and the price I would get for a gallon of gasoline was around \$1.50, and I remember the price of a gallon of gasoline in 2002 was even still sitting around the same price.

So I can't tell you for sure if we're better off economically than we were in 1990, or if any changes in our economy are a result of political changes (doesn't it suck how all of these things could actually depend on each other so directly). And I can't tell you with a 100% certainty if the value of our dollar against the Euro doesn't say something about the value of our money – and the value of our economy. I know we're in a global economy, but we're outsourcing everything that we used to strive at, the Chinese purchase our used scrap metal that we think is too difficult to reshape and reuse, and China's building skyscrapers off our scrap metals (granted, their building methods are sub-par, but still, look at what we're giving away because we think we're too good). And it's a shame that I



can't even depend on the true news reporting any longer, because apparently with competition in the news world (where you'll get your news from whomever appeals most to you emotionally), the news media is becoming less and less like reporting, and more and more like telling you the news – how you'd like to hear it.

Janet Kuypers®

Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

poetry
the passionate stuff

Regrets

Bernard Gieske

The frog
knows no regrets
leaps and eats
copulates
and not much else

Our regrets
often repeat
if only if only
I'm sorrys bandage
over the scar
of our inner consciousness

Defining Human Life

Don't worry, this isn't about abortion or when life begins...
It's deciding if a chimpanzee is a human being. Really.

I was staying at a hotel, and they dropped a local newspaper at our hotel door (funny, most hotels usually drop off a USA Today, but whatever), and since I didn't have time to scour the paper for any interesting stories, I just pulled out the stories with valuable (or at least interesting) headlines. The *Commercial Appeal* (Friday, 09/27/07) had a headline across the top of the second page the headline, "Can chimp be a person? Court to decide" — which made me think that *this* had to be a story worth saving.

I read on the caption next to the photo of a chimpanzee (the closest thing to a subhead I could find), which said "Pan and another chimpanzee were smuggled to Austria from Sierra Leone for use in pharmaceutical experiments. Now activists want to make sure the apes don't wind up homeless." Interesting. Then this little article could be a statement on the legality of smuggling animals like this across country lines, Or, depending on what the pharmaceutical company was testing these chimpanzees with (cosmetics or medical drugs, and I think that even the non extremist would believe there is a difference), and whether the animal was treated fairly over its live imprisoned in Austria. So when I read that caption, I was interested to see what the argument from these activists would be about. So I had to read the article.

But this AP article from Vienna (can't tell you much about Vienna, we only stopped there by train, but didn't stay long to get a feel of the town) this chimpanzee, who now has a human name (Matthew Hiasl Pan, and I don't know who gave the chimpanzee the name) has been in court, thanks to the Vienna-based Association Against Animal Factories (ah, so maybe this *will* be a story about the cruel captivity of this chimpanzee, I mean, the cruel captivity of Pan). For the legal shelter, where Pan and another chimpanzee (named Rosi) were living for 25 years, recently declared bankruptcy, and no one knows where these chimpanzees (I'm sorry, Pan and Rosi) will go after the building shuts down. These "animal rights activists were campaigning to get Pan, a [now] 26-

year-old chimpanzee, legally declared a person”, because Donors are willing to pay for the \$6,800 upkeep a month for Pan and Rosi, but according to Austrian law, only people can receive personal gifts (which is what the donations for upkeep would be).

Hmm. This story is seeming less and less like a cruelty-to-animals story, but a people-wanting-to-care-for-a-chimpanzee-legally story. Because as the story explains, “Both [Pan and Rosi] were captured as babies in Sierra Leone in 1982 and smuggled into Austria for use in pharmaceutical experiments. Customs officers intercepted the shipment and turned the chimps over to the shelter” — which is apparently now going bankrupt,

Once again, hmm. So this isn’t about the cruelty to the pharmaceuticals company testing who-knows-what on these smuggled chimpanzees. They were rescued when the attempt to smuggle them into the country was made, and all of their lives they have been living in a shelter. But people would like to set up a trust fund to help pay for the costs for Pan (remember, it costs thousands of dollars a month to take care of this chimpanzee) has a life expectancy in captivity of about 60 years.

Now, this scenario probably seems like an expensive endeavor, but these activists want to ensure that Pan and Rosi won’t be legally sold to someone who doesn’t live in Austria — because in Austria, these chimpanzees are protected under strict animal cruelty laws — and people from the Association Against Animal Factories want to make sure these chimps don’t leave the country, where they are better protected. So they only way they see they can pull this off is to get Pan declared a human, so he can get funds for keeping him safe in captivity in Austria.

But the Association Against Animal Factories “vowed Thursday [09/27/07] to take their challenge to Austria’s Supreme Court after a lower court threw out their latest appeal.

A provincial judge in the city of Wiener Newstadt dismissed the case this week, ruling the Vienna-based Association Against Animal Factories has no legal standing to argue on the chimps’ behalf.” So the Association Against Animal Factories has been pressing to have Pan legally declared a person, so that a guardian could be legally appointed to look out for Pan and Rosi.

I read through to the end of the article, because I have to share with you the last paragraph from this AP article. “Group president Martin Balluch accuses the judicial system of monkeying around.” (Now this is the priceless quote from the man, which concludes the article...) Martin Balluch said, “It is astounding how all the courts try to evade the question of personhood of a chimp as much as they can.”

Well, no duh. I hate to state the obvious, but who *wants* to correlate per-

sonhood with a chimp? It will be interesting to hear with the Austria Supreme Court, from a country with such great rights given to animals, will say about this. Will a chimpanzee have to given personhood in order to keep it safe in Austria? Or can they decide that a chimpanzee cannot be considered a human, but Pan and Rosi could be ensured by an organization so that



it would not leave the country? Only time will tell... We'll have to keep a watch out to see how the Austria Supreme Court decides...

Janet Kuypers®

Janet Kuypers, Editor in Chief

poetry
the passionate stuff

Snake

Hank Sosnowski

She dances to the edge of the stage
to the corner of the bar
to the stool next to mine
to the next best thing
to the last best thing
and her scars were real
and she wore them like gold
and her old school grind
to witch Woman
is tattooed
forever
down deep
inside
me.



Homecoming

Mel Waldman

At the homecoming, we never talked about what had happened. And I couldn't recall.

The town welcomed me home. That's all.

Yesterday (or perhaps, many Yesterdays have vanished),
I kissed my wife on her forehead and went to work.

There was an accident, you see.

I've been "asleep," they tell me-in a deep coma for one year.

Where have I been? Have you seen me somewhere? Have you?

I'm back, but part of me is far away. I wish I were there. What can I say?

Perhaps, there's a purpose to this-being here and not the other place.

Yet I can't find a trace of humanity. Back home, the human race has vanished, like Time, I believe, although the faces seem the same.

Still, not a vestige of soul caresses me, even when I gaze into the

fragile eyes of my beloved. She used to wear a vast gentle sadness.
Now, her lost eyes, distant and unreal, dart and flit across a

Waste Land where the glow of a full moon covers us at night,

penetrating, watching from above, within. I believe the sun
never rises here. And that's a sin! Yet I know it's so!

Where am I? Where?

At the homecoming, I kiss my wife on her forehead.
But is it she?

Gazing into her hypnotic eyes, I discover a chilling

image that cuts my soul in half. Within the icy
glow of a full moon hidden in her eerie eyes,

is the strangely familiar image of my dark

twin beckoning me to come home,
commanding me to forget... forcing me

to vanish, like Time, inside the Void...



Settig 03, art by
Melanie Monterey

My Lady, Maria

Michael Lee Johnson

Like a good Rembrandt,
or a unique bar of soap
carefully handcrafted,
shaped into a delicious
figure with hot butter knife,
you are natural, beautiful, proficient,
honest as opposed to fake.

Premise

G.A. Scheinoha

What if you grew a second belly button,
like a third eye, just above the other two?
Would you uncoil, stretch forth the umbilical
cord of your thoughts, a clinging vine that
craves nourishment from the womb, the
chlorophyll enhancing sunlight of another's
soul? Or do the leaves always drop, the
fetus only wither, stillborn during the
prolonged contractions of a motherless
night?

Indoctrination

Kenneth DiMaggio

Indoctrination
with the medication

it just takes a swallow
of Coca Cola
to become totalitarian

Zero zero zero

And no matter how many you accumulate
you can never work hard enough
to put a number in front of them

My soul must have had plastic surgery
to leak toxins like a ruptured
implant of silicone

take whatever remaining
artificial beauty
to ignite into flames

Without
any attempt at creating
spiritual chaos
you will never become
an individual

But even if you manage to win
against the machinery
you will still come out dead

Ape ape

It is you
we need to imitate



Clothes, by Nick Brazinsky

it is your turn
to make us science fiction
and our turn to be spared
the psychic degeneration
caused by morality
and God

And instead of swinging
from tree to skyscraper

let us just take
the next twenty or so
centuries
to rediscover

the beauty of fire

The Man In The Corner

Amber Rothrock

The man in the corner
Is drinking his coffee
He looks in my direction
But sees right through me
He's getting nervous now
There are so many people here
He thinks he can't do it

The girl behind the counter
The woman tending to her baby
This crowd of people
Never noticed him leave for the bathroom
We never knew how long he was gone

Before the man in the corner
Became the man in the body bag
He got what he wanted
Everyone noticed him
No one will ever forget

The man in the corner



DSCN
1409,
art
by
Paul
Baker

A Return From Retreat, Pt. II

Joe Frey

Along the memory banks
where the mud lets your feet
sink further than you'd expect

a twig - with natural influence
caresses the smooth
flowing water

sunlight warms my skin
and reflects sparkling images
I retain in the folds of my
pants

all this I collect while I bask
in its essence, like squeezing
sardines into a can

Will Work For Food James L. Daniels

I am many things; most of all depressed like a homeless man asking for change,
Someone said they sitting on a cardboard box,
but unfortunately I can't take the credit,
I was standing by the street light writing poems and taking donations

I had a job, counting the tears that feel from my face, guess I wasn't fast enough.
I forgot time wait's for no one.
They gave me some pink slip and said they'd call me,
I haven't heard anything in months

I put on my best suit and took a marker and inscribed,
"Will Work For Food,"
and walked back to the street corner hoping someone would sponsor me,
I stood next the woman who sells roses,
We even talked for a few moments,
She said, *"I picked roses, because they resemble life,"*
"You don't water them, and encourage they're growth
they'll die."
"Here are a few, try it"

Untitled

Cancel the coffee Jinesh Patel
I'm awake now
The lamp is piercing my eyes
The sun is glaring in
I can finally see
No more dreams to live

Tell me once again
What you think I should hear
I'll turn a deaf ear
Close the curtain
Turn back the clock
Make me blind again
Ignorance is bliss



art & poetry
by Rose E. Grier

Star-crossed

Je'free

It all seems like pre-teen years
when mama said I was too young,
that May-December affair
veiled from critical eyes;
Still, I wonder how society can lose heart
for Chuck & Larry, Mary & Sally

Place & time mean everything
for an eager bride with a sick & dying fiancé;
like this circumstance that corners me
to no other prayer, but -
Maybe in the next lifetime

I taste the bitter tears of wives
whose husbands were casualties of war,
the crucifix of the great lovers-
Ebony & Ivory;
And, I get overwhelmed
by high walls the church has built,
imagining Father Ralph & Meggie,
the Thornbirds romance

What a trap, what a test-
The more they forbid,
the more love stubbornly grows inside
Without fault, without choice-
Ready or not, I am bound
to defy laws, gravity & boundaries
for something the world says is taboo,
but undeniably feels so right

morning child

Stanley M
Noah

the sun is peeking
itself

above the flat
ground

like a child
looking

across the level
of mom's

kitchen table, and
just tall

enough to reach
and spill

lemon drops rolling--
giant steps

are heard coming,
attendantly

Calling the Kettle Black

Sarah Marie

your chest is an icebox'
a Japanese girl
wearing white hair
and shining go-go boots,
sings to me during
a hazed night as she
walks on bar tops,
stripping to the typical crowd
of sulking white males
mesmerized-- their eyes glowing red.

I blink, time passes.
a man so dark,
donning diamonds larger than
uncoiled intestines
blurts out dirty words
aggressively.
parting the crowd of
vibrating, shaking young girls
grinding away their virginity
To the beat of a forgotten ballerina box,
all within a white, pillowy dream
inside their heads.

I sigh, the clock proceeds.
I turn the channel to a
Thirty year old actress
with mutated lips-
puffing tissue like sausage.
lying in the bathtub
straddling a hairy, mysterious stranger
all in the name of fake art.
cameramen avoid erections as
girls exhale with envy-
what a lucky girl, they whine.



from *State of Desire,*
State of Being,
art by Stephen Mead

all as
undersized girls-
two feet tall with
blonde hair past their feet
and altered, enlarged breasts
cry,
starving,
askew- desperate to fit in with this
Holl[ow]wood deformity.

You Will Never Know Her

Julia O'Donovan

She will walk by you
And smile
You will see that smile
In your dreams
Ask her
Her name
And she will tell you
With a shy smile
You will want to be with her
Spend time with her
You will try to make conversation
She will only force herself
To answer your questions
And you will wonder why
The conversation
Does not flow
She will lead you on
Then shy away
And you will not know
If she can only bring herself
To go so far
Or does she do it all on purpose?
You will be forced to wonder
If she dominates you
Or if you dominate her
You will see her
Talking with close friends
You will wonder
What it takes
To be there too
You will watch her
From a distance
Hoping she does not see you
For you fear
She may be fragile



Haunted Poe, art
by Melissa Reid

Her eyes show wonder
And you wonder
How easily
Do they display fear?
You must be gentle
And patient
For she could be gone
The moment you turn your back
Just when you give up
Try to forget her
She will appear
Out of nowhere
And say hello
Smiling
That alluring smile
Your emotions
Will get the best of you
Wanting so badly
Her trust
And you wonder
Why are you drawn to her?
What does she possess?

Days - Months
Even a year
Can go by
And you will find
You really don't
Know her at all

Gossip Table

Eric S. Mackey

Teeth chatter and
Rip the flesh
Of the victim
That's not even there.
Words like bullets
Fired by an insane
Blind man fly
Around the gossip table.
Small and pitiful
Souls feel strength
And power when
They stab the
Back with their
Poison tongues.
Not even taking
Time to taste
The meat,
Just moving on
To the next victim.

Anti-Anticipation

Shannon Krol

Anticipation will be the death of me.
I am a schoolgirl,
Waiting to get lectured,
I am waiting for that be all, end all moment.
I am a housewife,
Destined for yoga.
I am not where I'd thought I'd be.
I am a glance into the future,
I never thought I'd see.
I am saying yes to my end, the end of my dreams.
I am locked into this fairy tale.
I am not adjusting well.

A Sermon to the Select

Serena Spinello

Worship me
I'm a naughty novelty
a defiant deviation
a provocative proliferation.

Haggard hide
ebony eyes
crumbling constitution
crude because I don't comply.

I'm here to afflict you
deteriorate with desperation
you wanted a messiah
you got a malefactor.

Bouquets of blunder
make my mouth salivate
submission starves me
tyranny tickles me
appraisement arouses me.

Who begat fulfillment?

Noticeably not you.
I have credence
in my crucifixion;
perceive me as I prosper.



Dirty World, art
by Peter Schwartz

Job

John Grey

I'm watching an ant
haul twice its body weight of crumb
along my kitchen cabinet.

I kill the damn insect.

The following ant stops
at the corpse,
takes on its dead pal's burden,
now bears four times its body weight
as it continues on its way toward the nest.

No place for sorrow in this kingdom,
just do your job,
make up for the ones who can't.

Yes I watch ants, kill ants...
all so you won't have to.

In Clothes

Holly Cross

"Yeah but,
you look good in your clothes"
 she says.
I stand naked
in front of the mirror
never mind the rolls and dimples
never mind the breasts --
they light the path I walk.
That doesn't matter when I am clothed.

I don't care about clothes.
I don't want to wear them.
That is why I care
about this reflection.
What if one day there were no clothes?
What would I do then?

I'd hide behind a tree
or maybe in a barrel.
I'd bury myself in the grass.
Maybe I could find a nice 5' wall
to carry around with me or maybe
I could make a sandwich board.

O the great lengths I would go to hide
the shame of my unappealing shape.
(The shape I secretly love)
The shape that she says
only looks good in clothes.

Entrepreneur

Gerald A. McBreen

Scars across his back a
painful reminder, made Saul
cautious even in a friendly
crowd like this. A lesson
learned the hard way curtsy
of Roman whips.

He was leery about
approaching women. They
were seldom alone and rarely
did they have payment. But
there was something about
this young girl's well scrubbed
face that told him she was
approachable.

He stood next to her. With
his toe he drew the symbol.
Cautiously Saul opened his
robe enough for her to see the
necklaces. Her nose turned up
and her lips curled as she
scoffed, "Rocks?"

"Ah! Not any rock my
child, my lamb," he continued
in a lower conspiratorial voice.
"My fellow follower."

Her foot scrapped the dust
obscuring the clumsily drawn
fish symbol.

"These rocks were chiseled
from the rolling stone at the side



of the crucified one's grave," he told her. "Surly you have heard of its power."

Her eyes grew wide wanting to believe. "I hear it can cure the ill," she offered. Saul was shamed by her innocence. He almost walked away. Instead he shifted his robe to the other side revealing pendants of tiny crosses more pleasing to a woman's eye. Leaning closer he whispered, "Made from his own cross. The Romans cast it aside because they were afraid to use it again."

She chose a cross not haggling over the price. Actually Saul took any price offered and if a client was truly poor, as many were, he simply lowered the price until they could accept it. After all, to him, it was all profit.

He had already made several sales when he saw the man he had made a deal with earlier. The man, calling himself Joseph, didn't have funds then, but he promised to see Saul tonight. Saul approached tentatively. Making sure no one was close behind them he squatted next to the younger man forcing a disgusting sound from his back side. Both men ignored the vulgar rumble. Saul's gnarled fingers drew a crude symbol in the dust.

Looking around Joseph quickly rubbed it out.

Saul reached into his robe and pulled out a rock which was cradled on the end of a piece of twine. Joseph clutched it to him. Eagerly he gave Saul his price and moved away tying the pendant around his neck. Tonight he would wear it openly in honor of the disciple. Tomorrow he'd hide it under his garment where Roman Centurions couldn't see it.

People who came to hear the disciple were always in a festive mood. They were quick to smile and greet their neighbors even in a host of strangers. Saul was aware that when the the disciple started catechizing people would stop whatever they were doing and pay rapt

attention to his every word. Business would halt. That's why he came early, to catch his prospects at the peek of their excitement anticipating the sermon.

Thus, the entrepreneur made his fortune. Selling rock and cross pendants among the followers. And Saul never ran out of stones or wood even though the gullible multiplied.



The Ultimate Antioxidant

Pat Dixon

5

"Given your prior trainin' as a nurse, dear Momolicious, your advice 'bout eatin' foods with tons o' lovely antioxidants is *most* persuasive," said Joel Hazard to his housemate.

Mo'reen Robinson watched Joel carefully pick out pieces of multicolored lettuce leaves from the salad she had placed before him. The light green ones went straight into his mouth, while the dark green leaves and the ones in "the red family" we subjected to differing degrees of closer scrutiny.

"Hmm. This bugger's almost purple!" said Joel. "I never saw that kind o' lettuce when I was weedin' other folks' gardens when I was a kid. Maybe it's a new variety. Or maybe it's a species that Connecticutters like that Rhode Islanders don't—or didn't—or didn't in my part o' southern Rhode Island, back when I was a kid."

"Didn't your mama ever tell you, 'Don't play with your food, fool?'"

"She didn't have to. We never had food this interestin', babes. 'Sides, she had more important stuff to get twisted about. If my daddy'd seen this sort o' mess o' greens on his table, for sure he'd'a' given it a good, hard look-at before lettin' it cross his lips an' gums. But my interest is totally scientific."

Mo'reen took a deep breath, mentally bracing herself. Joel's mood and body language suggested he was about to make a detour into his personal Twilight Zone, with her salad as his blast-off pad. Joel continued to study the purple leaf silently, however.

"And?" she finally said at the end of forty seconds.

"Pardon?" said Joel with a faint smile, as if she had interrupted his train of thought. The little twinkle in his eyes gave away to her the fact that he had been deliberately creating suspense before he made some more or less elaborate joke.

"And what conclusions have you reached about that leaf of red lettuce?"

"Well, they would be tentative, o' course, based on entirely insufficient data, o' course, but provisionalistically speaking, I would suspect, subject to further researchification, that this came from some Caribbean island—perhaps the very one on which the person lived who was the basis for Robinson Crusoe—Al—Al—uhhh—Alexander—Alexander Selkirk—or whatever."

Joel bent forward and pretended to study the other purple lettuce leaves in his bowl for fifteen more seconds, prodding them and turning them over

with his knife. He began humming Duke Ellington's tune "Deep Purple" softly to himself, but in a kind of Dixieland arrangement of his own devising.

"You might be right," said Mo'reen, deciding to play a different game. She began eating some of the yams he had prepared as his contribution to the dinner.

"Yummy yams, buddy," she said. "Nice idea to add olive oil to them instead of butter or fake butter."

Without looking up, Joel said with a frown, "Thank you, yummy Mo. I'm almost certain now that this species of lettuce mutafied from good ol' 'normal' lettuce somewhere in the Caribbean—on one of those islands used by pirates in the sixteen- and seventeen-hundreds to abandon whatever captives and enemies they chose not to murder by faster means."

He looked over at Mo'reen, who was making an elaborate theatrical production of cutting three long asparagus stalks into bite-sized pieces.

"Yes," said Joel, "absolutely, and I would even go so far as to assertify there can be little question that the pirates of the Caribbean were directly responsible for this species."

Mo'reen decided to show mercy. *If not now*, she thought, *then at some future meal, perhaps months or years from now.*

"And the reason is?" she said, looking at him with her sweetest smile.

"And the reason is—men who'd maroon a person on a little island would be just the kind of folks to show even less mercy to lettuce. They'd not settle for just *marooning* it. They'd *purple* it if they could. And *this* leaf is undoubtedly—or almost undoubtedly—the result!"

"Omigod—did you hurt yourself, Joel—giving birth to that? Perhaps we should get you to the E.R. down the road for a checkup. At the least, you could have a double hernia from the *strain* you just put yourself through."

"Uh—thank you—thank you verra much. Unh-huh-*huh*," he said with a little nod of his head. "Oh, by the way, I've been wonderin' for the past five minutes—what's the *ultimate* antioxidant? I mean, these dark 'greens' are great an' all, I'm sure, but what's the ultimate antioxidant? Any ideas?"

Mo'reen bit her lips and stared down at her plate for a long moment.

"I really don't know. I suppose we could look it up on the Internet later."

"Mm—we could do that, but I was just thinkin' that it might be a kamikaze pilot. That would be, maybe, the ultimate individual anti-occident—though Iwo Jima or Midway or maybe Pearl Harbor would be the ultimate group anti-occident. Or is that too stupid an answer?"

Mo'reen covered her mouth as she laughed against her will.

"I didn't see *that* one coming, buddy," she said. "It was a lot better than your labored crap about marooning and purple-ing lettuce in the Caribbean."

“Unh-huh-*huh*—I’m all shook up. Just stealin’ back from the pale fella that stole from the brothers. Mm—you’re right: it is the better of the two. Care for another little slice o’ my secret recipe meaty-loaf, or would you like a bowl of sorbet now?”

“Yes,” she said, smiling at catching him with his own either-or joke.

4

By 10:30 the next morning, Mo’reen Robinson, office manager to Dean Francis X. Perkins at Witherspoon Academy, had e-mailed three friends her version of Joel’s pun: “Q. What’s the most effective antioxidant? A. As far as GM and Ford are concerned, it’s Toyota.” At 11:15, Doctor Harold French, the Registrar, and Captain Carl Wallace, the newest Assistant Academic Dean, overheard her saying essentially the same thing over the phone to the secretary of the Department of Chemistry, who had called to ask what forms a professor should fill out to report a case of student plagiarism.

Ninety minutes later, Captain Wallace told it to Dean Perkins during lunch, changing Toyota to Subaru, and two hours later, during a staff meeting, Doctor French told it to his staff, changing the product to transistors.

“Oh,” said Doctor French, “I hope nobody here takes that as any kind of racial slur about Asians—I hope *you* aren’t going to claim that a joke told to me upstairs in the Dean’s office is any kind of racism, Miss Hen. We certainly don’t need any further talks with the E.E.O. Counselors about humor being discriminatory.”

“My name is pronounced *Han*, Doctor French—and I am not Japanese or Korean or Chinese. I am as American as anyone at this table. In some ways, maybe I am more so. Please refer me—refer to me as Linda or as Miss *Han*.”

Harold smiled to himself, wondering if it would be too dangerous to begin calling her “Rinda” at this meeting. Noticing that glances were being exchanged by three other members of his team, he decided against it.

3

At 2:15, when Doctor Brian Weinstein, Assistant Professor of Chemistry, came into the main office for his mail, Mrs. Doris Wilson called out loudly to him.

“Here’s that form you need to fill out to report that cheater, Brian! Mo Robinson, that black gal in the Dean’s office, put me straight about it!”

Wincing at the volume, Doctor Weinstein shouted back, “Thanks, Doris! I’ll get it in to you for Doctor Martin’s endorsement by four o’clock today! Then I’ll hand-carry it over to the Dean’s office first thing tomorrow! We don’t want to trust the campus mail with something sensitive like this!”

“Oh—Brian! Here’s a new joke! What’s the best antioxidant in the world!?”

"Sounds more like a riddle! The real answer isn't important, Doris, so I give up! I'm not good at guessing! So tell me—what is the best antioxidant in the world?!"

"It's *Toyota*!" shouted Mrs. Wilson.

Jesus H. Christ! thought Doctor Weinstein, trying to smile politely. *What the hell is that supposed to mean? Probably means she didn't even hear half the setup of the joke or half the punchline—again.*

"Good one, Doris! I'll have to remember that! Thanks for getting me the form!"

2

At 3:17, Dean Perkins shared the same joke with the nine department heads, the Director of the Academy Library, and two of his three assistants, including Captain Wallace. In his version, the best anti-occident was "that Oscar-winning film, *Hidden Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—whatever—the one that stole Oscars from American films, you know."

The people seated around his oval conference table competed for the award of Most Amused Administrator, and, in Dean Perkins' mind, it was a seven-way tie for first.

Lieutenant Bradley Olsen, one of Dean Perkins' assistants, came in last in this contest, because of his serious facial expression. Lieutenant Olsen was recalling several of the sexually explicit Hentai pictures he had collected from the Internet during his lunch hour and was considering how he might adapt the pun to that topic when next he e-mailed his former college roommate.

1

At 4:32 p.m., Joel Hazard put the final touches on his paint job—the huge heating-and-cooling unit in the office of Doctor Lindsey Ames, Professor of English. He taped five "Wet Paint" signs nearby. Then, gathering up his drop cloth, his brush, and his small can of ivory semi-gloss paint, he opened the door to the corridor.

He pulled small earphones from his ears and patted the CD player in his left overall pocket to be sure it was deep down and secure. For the past fifty minutes, he had enjoyed highlights from *Madama Butterfly*.

Ninety-four khaki-clad students were ambling down the hallway toward the stairwell to his right. Joel paused to let them "play through." The circular brass insigniae on their collars were totally blank, informing him that they all were freshmen. Every white student walked past as if Joel were invisible, but he sensed that the three black students, with whom he made brief eye contact, were instantly breaking that contact because of some embarrassment, even hostility, they felt at his presence there.

You don't know me, thought Joel, momentarily experiencing an inner twinge, yet keeping an expression of calm, polite interest on his face as they passed by.

I've got to get a CD copy of The Mikado at the 'Cademy Library before I go home with Mo, he thought. *I'm sure both Butterfly and it have occidental versions of the Japanese national anthem in 'em—'t would be nice to listen to 'em both, back to back.*

The crowd was thinning out quickly. It would have been easy for Joel to step out of Doctor Ames's office and head for the stairs before the last five stragglers arrived.

"Son of a bitch!" said one of the approaching students. "Wanna know what's the worst ****in' antioxidant in this ****in' school? It's Doc Horner's ****in' Jap quiz! That's what my senior tutor tol' me during my review hour with her today, and god-****in'-damn it if ol' Doc ****in' Horner didn't just ****in' prove it this ****in' class! I don't think I'll ever pass ****in' Calc 1! How the **** are you doin' in it?"

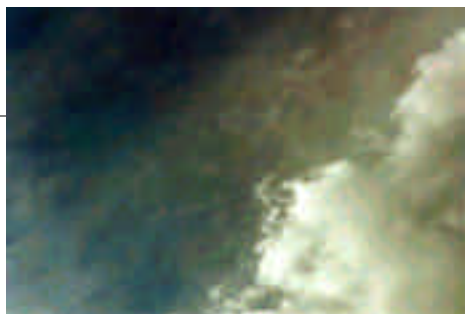
"****, man, I'm scrapin' by. What the ****'s a Jap quiz any-****in'-how? I mean, man, what the ****'s it mean to say 'Jap' quiz?"

"It's just one more ****in' expression at this ****in' school, man. 'S just one o' them Witherspoon 'traditions.' Who the **** knows?!"

After they all passed by, Joel Hazard whispered to himself, "I do—man. 'S a surprise quiz—by analogy with Pearl-Day-of-Infamy-Harbor—man—y' ignorant honkey. An' where'd you get the other stuff—'bout antioxidants—man—which y' don't understand either—man?"

Clouds 57, art by
Tracy M. Rogers

Behind the Lines: Gerald Bosacker



Our country is obsessed with obesity, and I, loyally, try to do my part. Each morning, before I step on the scales, I trim my toe nails, shave off my whiskers, remove what teeth come out, take off my heavy wristwatch and pajamas and then take a deep breath so I am inflated with weightless air.

Since none of this helps, I take off my thick and heavy glasses, and then, blind as a bat, guess at what my weight is. Works every time.

Kampuchea

Jon Wesick

No one steals from Stereo Thay and gets away. I should have known better, but arrogance from years of being his white puppet blinded me to the danger. Sure, I could have hopped the first plane home, blown my cash in a few weeks paying retail for diluted heroin, and ended up breaking into apartments to pay for my fix. That wasn't much of an option, so I stayed put waiting for my chance at a big score. When Nahwee told me she knew the combination to Thay's safe, I put together a plan.

The next time Thay traveled to the Laotian border to meet his supplier, Nahwee smuggled the box out of Thay's villa and brought it to me. Things went wrong almost from the start. Mechanical problems delayed our flight. Nahwee returned to the villa, so her absence wouldn't arouse suspicion.

Thay was supposed to be gone for three days, but when Nahwee showed up wild-eyed at my door the next day at midnight, I knew we didn't have time. I got out with the clothes on my back and a rucksack containing my stash, the money I'd hidden in the toilet tank, my nine-millimeter Beretta, and the box.

The airport was too dangerous, so we boarded a crowded bus south through the jungle that still echoed the memories of mortars and automatic weapons fire. Nahwee rested her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. An old man with skin the color of strong tea stared. His dark eyes smoldered with hatred for her for sleeping with a foreigner. The stench of unwashed bodies and diesel exhaust filled the air. We passed abandoned trucks and the flyblown corpse of a water buffalo that had stepped on a landmine.

When we arrived at Koh Kang, I paid a toothless old woman for a room in a hotel with a façade of mildew-stained stucco and rusted wrought iron. I went to check the ferry schedule for the quickest way out. Nahwee stayed behind.

I spotted Thay's henchman. Thin, quick, and deadly as a butterfly knife, he wore sunglasses and leaned against the ferry terminal's glossy green walls near the entrance. Thay sure must have wanted the box back. Either that or it was a matter of principle. I turned, struggled against the tide of people, and made it to the street before the thug saw me.

With no way out by sea it was only a matter of time before someone ratted us out. Of course we could go overland, but I didn't relish

hiking through leech-infested jungle while wondering if a landmine would blow my leg off on the next step.

By the time I got back to my room, Nahwee had gotten into my works. Wearing only panties and a T-shirt, she reclined on the bed with her unblemished forearm draped over her eyes. Nahwee preferred shooting up between her toes to keep unsightly tracks from her beautiful arms and legs. The syringe lay on the floor beside a burnt spoon and bag of white powder. A languid breeze swayed the gauzelike curtain.

"Nahwee, how many times do I have to tell you to get your own needle?"

She didn't respond. What did hepatitis or HIV matter, when we'd probably be dead in a few days anyway? I put some heroin in the spoon, added bottled water, and cooked the mixture over a butane lighter to dissolve the solids. A torn piece of cigarette filter removed any remaining sediment from the liquid I drew into the syringe.

I needed a rubber tourniquet to tie off my arm. I removed it along with the silk-covered box from my rucksack. In the panic of our flight I didn't have time to get a good look at what was inside. I set down the syringe, took the box from the silk wrapper, and removed the golden statue from inside. A full-breasted goddess rode a tiger. Her torso swayed in a delicate S-curve. Eight arms sprouted from her shoulders. In each hand she held a weapon such as a disc or an arrow.

"Durga." Nahwee rested a warm hand on my shoulder and yawned. "When the gods couldn't defeat the buffalo demon, they appealed to her for help."

"What makes it so valuable?" I turned the statue over in my hands.

"It's one of a kind, over fifteen hundred years old."

I set the statue on the nightstand, wrapped the band around my bicep, pumped my arm, and tapped the needle into a vein. I pulled back the plunger. Blood swirled into the syringe. As I injected the needle's contents into my bloodstream, I wondered whether the goddess could rescue me from Thay. I removed the band and felt the golden rush of bliss soothe my troubles away. They shrank to a pea-sized voice babbling insignificance from the left side of my mind. I nodded between dream and reality. The warmth in my veins formed into a woman's smooth skin. A tangle of arms held my head between her breasts. Something wet and rough tickled my soles. I glanced down at a tiger licking my feet. The room spun, my head felt heavy, and I slept.

The stench of cigar smoke woke me. Somehow I'd made it into bed and had lowered the mosquito net. I extracted myself from Nahwee's arms, sat up, and rubbed the hallucinations from my eyes.

"You disappoint me, Alistair," a chilling voice said.

I looked through the mosquito net to where Stereo Thay sat holding a cigar in one hand and the statue in the other. The flap of torn cartilage that had once been his ear begged me to stare. Thay cultivated the rumor

that a tiger had attacked him when he was a boy. I'd heard it was a stray dog. I forced myself to look at his chest.

"I could have almost forgiven you for the girl." He took a puff from the cigar and blew out a stream of gray smoke. "After all, I could buy a hundred like her from the villages. But this." He held up the statue and set it on the table. "There's only one. How long do you think I'd remain in business if news of your betrayal got out?"

By now Nahwee was awake. I felt her tremble behind me.

"It's all a misunderstanding, Thay. I'm just trying to do the right thing." My hand moved slowly under the pillow. "Nahwee confessed that she'd stolen the statue, but you'd already returned. Since I always had a soft spot for her, I brought her here. Once I'd gotten her on the ferry." My fingers brushed the Beretta's stock. "I'd have returned the statue."

"Sak!" Thay yelled.

In an instant the thug from the ferry held the biggest hand cannon I'd ever seen to my face.

"Remove your hand slowly." Sak took my pistol from under the pillow and tossed it to Thay's bodyguard, Yem.

"Get dressed." Thay stood. "We're going for a ride."

The two henchmen marched us down the staircase. Thay followed carrying the rucksack with the box inside. The pistol barrel bruising my floating ribs discouraged me from attempting escape. When we got to the lobby, the old toothless woman looked away. She'd sold us out.

They herded Nahwee and I out the door and into Thay's black Toyota. Sak drove, Thay rode shotgun, and the rest of us crowded into the backseat. It took forty minutes to navigate the narrow streets and get on the narrow road that led northwest. Soon we left the town behind. The pavement ended and thick jungle sprang up on both sides of the road. Each time we hit a rut I tensed, fearing the pistol Yem held would discharge into my side and splatter a huge chunk of intestines over the upholstery. My bladder ached, but I wasn't about to suggest a rest stop. It didn't matter anyway. Fifteen minutes later Sak stopped the car. Yem opened the door and stepped onto the shoulder.

"Out!"

As I climbed through the doorway, he yanked my arm. I lost balance and landed face down on the ground. I spat dirt and struggled to my feet. He shoved me down a path leading into the jungle. Sak hustled Nahwee behind me, while Thay brought up the rear. I never regained my balance. Each time I slipped in the mud Yem pushed me. After a few minutes I stumbled into a clearing, where half a dozen skeletons lay half buried.

While Thay held his pistol to Nahwee's head, Sak and Yem motioned me toward a small tree. Sak kicked away the bones near the

roots, and Yem forced me against the trunk. He cinched my arms around the trunk behind me so I could not escape.

"We used this place when I was in the Khmer Rouge," Thay said. "It's private enough that we won't be disturbed by people coming to investigate your screams. In the old days we took bets on how long a prisoner would live without his skin. Four days was the record, but I think you can last for five. Maybe I'll start with your eyelids, so you'll have to watch what we do to Nahwee."

In a blur of silver Yem flicked open his butterfly knife and held the blade to my nose. I felt something warm and wet in my pants, and realized my bladder had let go. Yem sliced open my shirt, leaving my chest bare.

"It was all my idea, Thay. Why don't you show mercy to the girl?"

Bang! The bullet from Thay's pistol sprayed Nahwee's brains in the air. Her body slumped to the ground at his feet.

I felt a white flash of pain. Yem smiled and held my ear in front of my eyes. My screams crowded out thought.

"You think I don't know what you call me behind my back?" Thay hissed. "You're weak. When the tiger mauled my head, I didn't make a sound." He patted his shirt pocket, where he kept his cigars, came up empty, and sent Sak to the car to get them.

It looked like my life was all over. I wished I'd never come to this God-forsaken country. The wound, where my ear used to be, throbbed. When I felt the maddening itch of flies landing on my blood-slicked cheek, I rubbed it against my shoulder and set off another round of searing pain.

Gunshots and a scream came from the direction of the car. Pistols drawn, Thay and Yem ran up the path. I struggled to get free. The cords tying my hands burned the skin of my wrists. Something tore in my right shoulder. More gunshots and screams. My hands pulled free. I crashed through the jungle until the execution ground was far behind. Then I stopped. Everything was quiet except for my hammering pulse. I tore a sleeve from my shirt and wrapped it around my head to stop the bleeding. Once I caught my breath I doubled back toward the road. I inched forward clearing the bushes from my path with my arms. I paused behind a stand of bamboo and looked up the road. Three mangled bodies lay in pools of blood by the car. I waited. All I could hear was the middle C whine of mosquitoes. No one moved. I crawled out of my hiding place and approached the car. The footprints of a huge cat led from the carnage into the jungle. Evidently the rumors I'd heard about the extinction of tigers in Cambodia weren't true.

I got behind the wheel and reached for the ignition. The keys weren't

there. I got out of the car, walked to where Sak's body lay, and rolled him onto his back. The tiger had taken huge swipes out of his chest and throat. His mouth open in a silent scream, Sak stared at the sky in disbelief. Half expecting his dead hand to grab my wrist, I reached into his slimy pants pocket and removed the keys.

I boarded the Star Ferry at Kowloon and sat up front, where I could admire Hong Kong's modern skyline and the freighters flying Chinese flags in the aquamarine water of the bay. When we docked at the Central terminal, I flowed down the gangway with the crowd. I walked west on Des Voeux Road to Sheung Wan, climbed the hill, and scouted antique shops until I found one that looked upscale.

A tone chimed when I entered. I wandered among the gold Kuan Yins, huge stone Buddhas, and Kwan Tis with their beards and halberds.

"May I help you?" a Chinese woman with a few strands of gray in her hair asked. Her tasteful clothes and the reading glasses propped on her head gave her an air of wealth and scholarship.

I slipped the rucksack from my shoulders and looked at its worn canvas exterior. The statue inside would bring enough money to keep me in heroin for the rest of my life. I turned the rucksack over in my hands and thought of the horrible deaths of Thay and his henchmen.

"No," I said. "I'm just looking."

Some forces are too powerful to provoke. A library would have the address of the Phnom Penh Antiquities Museum, and there was a post office not far from my hotel. I had enough heroin to last a few days, enough for me to hook up with Three Fingers Wang. He was always looking for talent.



***Bottle
and
Beast,***
art by
Aaron
Wilder

Lob rose from his knees and leaned looking out the window, clutching the steel grating covering the pane. He was not afraid anymore—nothing had disappeared, not yet, since the last time. He stopped shaking, he wiped the last tear from his eye. He breathed easy. It had been a bluff, again. As always, far off on the horizon still stood the tall white steeple. Under that steeple, Lob knew, lived God, in a cold golden tabernacle, with a small candlestick standing next to the tall white rock the tabernacle was set in. The small candlestick had a red glass shade and its soft glow meant God is still here, be reverent. As a boy he'd been told by a nun in grammar school that there's a great tall golden candlestick like that in heaven, glowing brightly within a red glass shade, that stands by the throne of God, in the bright light, in the clouds. And if that candle ever goes out, God and everything else would cease to be. The red glass covering shielded the flame from the soft cool breezes in heaven. And after she said that the nun would cross herself and take out a black rosary and kiss the silver cross, with her large eyes closed. And then she'd open them and tell Lob, Don't tell anyone about the candle, though— it's one of God's secrets. Lob flexed his hands on the grating and thought how lucky it was that everyone did not know this, how fragile our existence is, held at the mercy of a flickering flame. He always wondered how many other secrets God had. He always wondered why he'd been told this one. The steeple faded off into the horizon and the steel grid of the grating pushed his hands away and he turned facing the room where Frankie Super sat in red pants and a green shirt at the edge of his bunk, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

Do you have any secrets, Frankie? asked Lob.

Oh so you're going to ask me that again? Well, secrets— let's see—

Frankie leaned his head over and closed one eye and stroked the tip of his short goatee before answering.

No, said Frankie. Same answer as always. I have no secrets.

None? said Lob, raising his eyebrows and putting his hand against his sunken cheek.

Nope. None. Like I always tell you—what you see is what you get.

Lob went over and sat on his bunk across the room from Frankie. The worn parquet floor stretched between them and the yellow walls of the small room tightened about them.

Sure you have secrets, said Lob, pushing a strand of black hair from his face. Everybody has secrets. Things they don't want anybody to know. Skeletons in the closet, and all that.

What are your secrets? said Frankie.

Huh, said Lob, hunching his shoulders. I can't tell you. They're secrets. But at least I can admit that I have them. Why can't you?

The bare light bulb above them cast down its warmth. Frankie leaned back with his elbows on his bunk and tossed his head and widened his large blue eyes.

You said skeletons in the closet, said Frankie. What do you mean by that—skeletons in the closet?

Lob frowned.

Oh come on Frankie, you know that term.

No I don't, said Frankie, shaking his head.

Everybody's heard that term.

Not me.

So—let me get this right Frankie—you don't have any secrets and you've never heard of the term skeletons in the closet before?

That's right, answered Frankie, shifting in the bunk.

You're lying, said Lob sharply, eyes half closed. Why are you lying like this?

Frankie sat back up. The bunk springs squeaked.

Here we go again, Lob. You're calling me a liar again?

Yes I guess I am, said Lob, turning his head from Frankie toward the large heavy door. Everybody lied about things, thought Lob. Why are people allowed to lie about things? The tabernacle appeared in the center of the door with the candlestick with the small red flame beside it and God's face came up from behind the golden doors. God's face was round and his cheeks were ruddy and he had large full sensuous red lips and small black eyes. Lob was glad God had come. He asked God a question.

Why do you let liars walk the earth, God? Why is it?

God's eyes formed into slits then opened wide.

Because people are free to act as they choose.

Lob tossed back his head and spoke louder. Frankie looked on from his bunk.

But lying is wrong, said Lob. You let people lie when you could stop them. Their sin is also your sin, God. You're no better than them. You're no better than Frankie over there.

Frankie's eyes widened and he rose from his bunk.

Lob straightened his back and lifted his chin. He had spoken up to God, he had given God the what for. God's mouth formed into an O and his eyes opened wide and he spoke deeply, his lips writhing.

You should be careful how you speak to God. I have my reasons for doing things—I have my secrets. You should not question me—

The Ruddy face receded back behind the golden doors and the tabernacle and red candle disappeared and Frankie stood between Lob and the door, pointing.

I don't know why you say the things you say, Lob, said Frankie—but I'm never going to get used to you calling me a liar.

Frankie scuffed his steeltoed boots across the wooden floor. Lob leaned back and looked up at him.

There are things I don't like, too, Frankie. But I put up with them—

I don't care what you like or don't like, snapped Frankie, wagging his finger at Lob. I just know I don't like being called a liar every God-damned day.

Lob clasped his hands together and looked up at Frankie with wide blue eyes.

You really don't care what I like or don't like Frankie?

No—not if you're going to call me a liar—

Lob sat straight, swept his hand across and threw out words.

Never mind that—tell me if its true that you don't care what I like or what I don't like.

Well then—no! No I don't!

Frankie stepped back, his arms folded. Lob's voice grew low and even and his lips barely moved.

What if everybody in the world felt that way, Frankie? What kind of world would this be?

Frankie shrugged and held out an arm to the side, the hand wide open.

I don't know—for all I know nobody cares about anybody else. Why do we go over this every day, Lob?

Ignoring the questions, Lob looked up and pushed a finger into his cheek.

Who do you care about, Frankie?

Frankie pushed a hand into his pocket and scowled.

Like I always tell you—I don't know.

Think. Give me an answer. Who do you care about?

Well—I care about myself.

And who else. Do you care about me?

Not really. Not when you sit there and call me a liar. But we go over all these things this every day why do you always bring all these things up Lob, why—

Lob tossed his head, to cut Frankie off.

And what if I didn't call you a liar, said Lob. Would you care about me then?

Frankie folded his arms again.

I doubt it. Listen. It's like I always tell you. I care about number one. Me, myself, and I.

Frankie stomped over to his bunk and threw himself full length onto

the woolen blanket, on his back with his arm over his eyes. Lob turned once more to the door. The dark grained wood swirled and the tabernacle doors came up in the wood once more, and the ruddy face of God came up again and the small golden candlestick with the dim red shaded flame burnt off to one side. God said nothing. His mouth was set into a hard line, full lips pushed out.

Why do you make it so people don't care about each other, asked Lob.

Frankie raised his head, watching Lob speak.

Make it? said God, tilting his head. I don't make it any way at all. People make their lives for themselves. People choose to be uncaring. I can't help that.

Lob stood up with his hands out.

But you can help anything. I thought you were God—

God's eyes widened and his lips writhed once more.

Hold it right there, son, he said. Think who you're talking to now.

Oh—what are you going to do. Punish me?

I might.

God looked away toward the window.

Oh, said Lob—you'll punish me for being honest with you but you let the rest of the people just go on lying and not caring about each other—like Frankie over there. I don't see you jumping into his face and saying Watch what you say now when he says the things he says about not caring about anybody.

Frankie sat up. The face of God grew silent and still. The black eyes gazed half-closed. The red flame alongside God flickered.

Be careful how you speak to me, said God. Or bad things are likely to happen—

Frankie got up and stepped between Lob and the heavy wooden door, shutting off God and the golden doors and the golden candlestick. Frankie leaned down and put his face close to Lob's.

What are you saying? said Frankie. Like I tell you every time—If you're going to rant and rave to an empty door, keep my name out of it.

Lob's eyes widened.

Oh? And what if I don't keep you out of it Frankie? What are you going to do?

Frankie stepped back, hands out.

I don't know. I'll do something—Jesus Christ, Lob, I'm sick of this—

What will you do? snapped Lob, jerking his head and pushing his black hair away from his eyes.

I don't know what I'll do, said Frankie.

Are you going to smack me in the face? asked Lob.

I don't know—come on, Lob, let's not go through all this again—
Tell me, said Lob, rising, one fist out, voice raised. Are you going to smack me in the face or not?

No. But I—

Lob's eyes burnt into Frankie's.

Do I piss you off, Frankie? Tell me—do I really really piss you off?

Sometimes, said Frankie, backing up and leaning against the yellow wall. When you go on and on like this, I get pissed off. But I always tell you this—

And what have you ever done about how pissed off you get, Frankie?

Frankie dropped his eyes to the floor, then looked up.

I've never done anything about it. But that doesn't mean I won't—

Ahh, you never will, said Lob, bringing his arm down hard to his side and half turning away.

Don't be so sure, said Frankie, stepping forward.

I said you never will! shouted Lob, as he sat on the edge of his bunk and turned toward the wooden door. The golden candlestick appeared and the golden doors and God's round red large-lipped black-eyed face. God opened his mouth to speak but Lob beat him to it.

I'm glad you came back, said Lob, pointing at God. There's more I need to ask you. Why do you let people keep it all bottled up inside? It makes people sick to keep it all bottled up inside, like Frankie here—

He waved his arm toward Frankie, as he went on.

He gets pissed off over and over and over again and you let him keep it all bottled up inside! You ought to tell him to come up and give me one right in the face! That's what you should do—

Frankie's hands formed into fists. God half-closed his eyes and spoke low.

Listen Lob. First of all, its wrong for anybody to smack anybody else in the face—

But you could make him do something—

If people decide to bottle things up inside, that's their business.

Even if they make themselves sick?

God glared.

You should not question me so. Beware.

God's face faded back into the golden doors and the golden doors faded back into the large wooden door and the candlestick disappeared once more. Frankie stepped forward quickly and lightly.

You're nuts, he said to Lob, pulling a cigarette from his pocket and thrusting it into his mouth. It bobbed in the air as he went on. This is why I don't know what to make of you, Lob. How to talk to you, or how to treat you. You're nuts.

Frankie lit the cigarette with a green lighter as Lob looked up wideeyed again and spoke.

It's a sin for you to tell me I'm nuts, said Lob. Don't you know that? Sure I know that. So what?

Frankie pushed the lighter away into his pocket and took the cigarette from his lips and blew a cloud of smoke in the air that snaked about Lob as Lob answered.

God will punish you for your sins.

He hasn't yet, said Frankie, taking a deep drag.

What other sins do you commit every day, Frankie?

That's my business—

But you do commit sins.

Jesus Christ, here we go again, said Frankie. He turned away and took a quick drag then went across the room and crushed the cigarette out in a small silver cardboard ashtray. He turned to Lob.

Sure I commit sins. Everybody does. Don't you?

Lob glanced toward the yellow wall. Yes, he committed sins—and he'd never been punished for them either. He turned his head toward the large wooden door. He had another bone to pick with God. God came into sight again, within the golden doors, the candlestick beside him. Lob spoke to God.

Why do you let people sin and sin and you don't punish them—you let them keep sinning until it's too late and then boom, bang, you throw them into hell when its too late for them to confess—

Wait a minute, Lob, said God, his shining black eyes piercing Lob's. People can choose to sin or not, confess or not, it's their choice they've got free will—

Right, snapped Lob sharply, throwing up an arm. They've got just enough free will to end up in hell! You give them just enough rope to hang themselves—

Now hold it right there Lob—

No! exclaimed Lob, rising, breathing heavily, fists raised. Every single soul who's in hell today, you put there! You let them sin and keep sinning until it was too late—Jesus!

God's mouth fell open and Frankie went back over onto his bunk as Lob spun around, spewing words, his eyes blazing.

Let's see, God, let's see what we've established—you let liars walk the earth, you let people go on not caring about each other, you let people suffer with things all bottled up inside of them, and you let people sin and go on sinning, and then you have the balls to throw them into hell. You're worthless!

A curtain of calm drew down over God's large face.

What did you say Lob? Say that again.

You're worthless!

Lob pointed at God, breathing faster, his finger shaking. Frankie watched wide-eyed, his mouth fallen open, from the safety of his bunk. They stayed frozen this way a full minute. Then God spoke.

I'll show you how useless I am, said God.

God reached down with a long muscular arm and took the red shade off the candlestick and leaned over and blew out the flame. He raised his face to Lob.

There. The light's out. And I've seen to it the one in heaven's out too. Now you'll see what I'm good for Lob, said God, breathing heavily, his face flickering in and out of sight—now you'll see. I exist to keep my creation alive. And now I am no more—so you'll see how useless I am Lob. You'll be no more. There will be nothingness. As there was before. No Earth, no Heaven, no Hell—

Nothing.

Then God disappeared, as if flicked off with a switch, and the golden doors were gone and the candlestick was gone—and Lob looked toward Frankie, his face beet red.

God, what's wrong with you, said Frankie.

I've gone too far again, I think, said Lob toward the wall. His face fell slack, he turned ghost white. He turned from Frankie to the wooden door and toward the window with the metal grate.

I've gone too far again—why do I always take it too far— What's wrong with you? said Frankie. What the hell is wrong with you Lob, to go on and on like this five times a day—

Slowly the grated window approached Lob. The sun still shone brightly through the metal. That was a good sign. The sun hadn't yet disappeared—

What's wrong with you? continued Frankie from his bunk— Jesus Christ, Lob, I can't figure you out—

Lob went up to the window and clutched the grate and looked out to the far horizon, the trees, the steeple, the scattered houses, and wondered if things would disappear all at once, or one at a time, or if God was bluffing this time again. Letting go of the grating, he sank to his knees and began to pray—but if God was bluffing there was no need to pray—but if God wasn't bluffing there was nothing to pray to—the room began to spin and he raised his hands to his face, kneeling there, not knowing what to do, again, the tears streaming down his face as he cried and cried.

Globalization: Plan or Plot

Gary Beck

The illusion of freedom is a dangerous deception that effects many educated Americans, insufficiently aware, if at all, of the feral nature of our capitalist based system. Corporate megaliths, gone global, are increasingly abandoning the face of responsibility to national interests. The welfare of American citizens is of little or no consequence to the mostly anonymous dominant stockholders and corporate officers, whose only concerns are for the well-being of their vehicles of capital. When a corporation becomes diversified internationally, so that the course of local events does not interfere with over-all profits, the concept of domestic obligation is no longer valid.

In feudal times, one's masters were known, perhaps even susceptible to a petition of grievances, or a request for redress. The lords ruled their holdings, small or large, for their own advantage, not for the benefit of the people. Yet the crafts and tradespersons, progenitors of the middle-class, understood the system and however reluctantly, accepted their place in it. In the information age, the lords of profit are mostly removed from public access, shielded by great wealth and the power to control the content of the media. Their immense resources allow them to select politicians to reassure the public that we live in a democracy. But it is closer to reality to conclude that we live in an oligarchy, where policies are determined by a small cabal that are not necessarily in the public interest.

The twentieth century struggle for equitable allocation of resources between management and labor has been resolved by outsourcing blue collar jobs, or obsolescing workers by using electronic technology. The workers who once answered the call to strike, walked the picket line, confronted scabs, fought company goons, endured hardships to obtain a fair share of the American dream are virtually extinct. They have been replaced by lower middle class computer specialists, strategically divided by cubicles that discourage unity, or low wage service personnel, insufficiently equipped by education or inclination to influence policy. Yet the media and our leaders persist in proclaiming that we live in a democracy.

In a world still consisting of nation-states, each concerned with national interests, globalization only benefits those who gain from the diffusion of capital. The average citizen will receive a lower standard of living. The disadvantaged will have few alternatives to low paying service jobs. When American oligarchs were confronted with foreign competition in the 1960's, they packed up their cash and went abroad. They chose to invest internationally in advanced industrial enterprises, pioneered in Japan, Germany and other innovating nations. They left rust belts behind for their former employees and families, because it wasn't profitable to retool obsolete factories, burdened with high labor costs, that now could be dispensed with.

The complex economics of Globalization make it exceedingly difficult for the average citizen to intelligently decipher the benefits and disadvantages accurately. Certain facts have become clear. Those capable of participating in the dispersal of capital and business will profit from the new opportunities. The diversification of capital will reduce the assets of middle class Americans, as the playing field they were accustomed to is leveled to allow for newcomers abroad. This will result in lower incomes and diminished opportunities for a better life for their children.

The working poor and disadvantaged will also suffer as the American tax base declines, thus reducing funds for social services and other supplemental assistance. The loss of support will not be compensated for by private charities and foundations with their own mission agendas, who will not disperse funds mainly to support a poverty population. The working poor, struggling to subsist on low-paying service jobs, will not have the resources to better educate their children to prepare them for the opportunity to compete for a better life. That opportunity will now be offered to select third world children, beneficiaries of the new global system.

American corporations are increasingly seeking tax shelters abroad. The reality of our economic future is painfully obvious in a simple premise. Reduced corporate taxes, plus reduced income taxes, minus increasing government and personal expenditures, equals disaster. Limited groups and individuals will profit immensely from the global marketplace. The American middle class, that once luxuriated in amenities that were formerly for the privileged class, must now make do with less. There is little doubt that Globalization will benefit many people in third world countries who can take advantage of the new world economy. Since capitalism is never concerned with ethics, the harm done to the American way of life has become a moot issue. It remains to be seen if the benefits of the Information Age will accrue to hard working Americans, who may not be qualified for the jobs of the future.

children churches & daddies



the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag

the unreligious, non-family oriented literary and art magazine

Produced By Scars Publications and Design

Editorial Offices Children, Churches and Daddies; Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

Internet ccandd96@scars.tv ▶ <http://scars.tv>

Publishers/Designers Of Children, Churches and Daddies magazine; cc&d Ezines; Scars Internet Radio (SIR); TheBurning mini poem books; God Eyes mini poem books; The Poetry Wall Calendar; The Poetry Box; The Poetry Sampler; Mom's Favorite Vase Newsletters; Reverberate Music Magazine; Down In The Dirt magazine; Freedom and Strength Press forum; assorted chapbooks and books; music, poetry compact discs; live performances of songs and readings

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• **Children, Churches and Daddies** (ISSN 1068-5154) is published monthly by **Scars Publications and Design** Janet Kuypers.

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