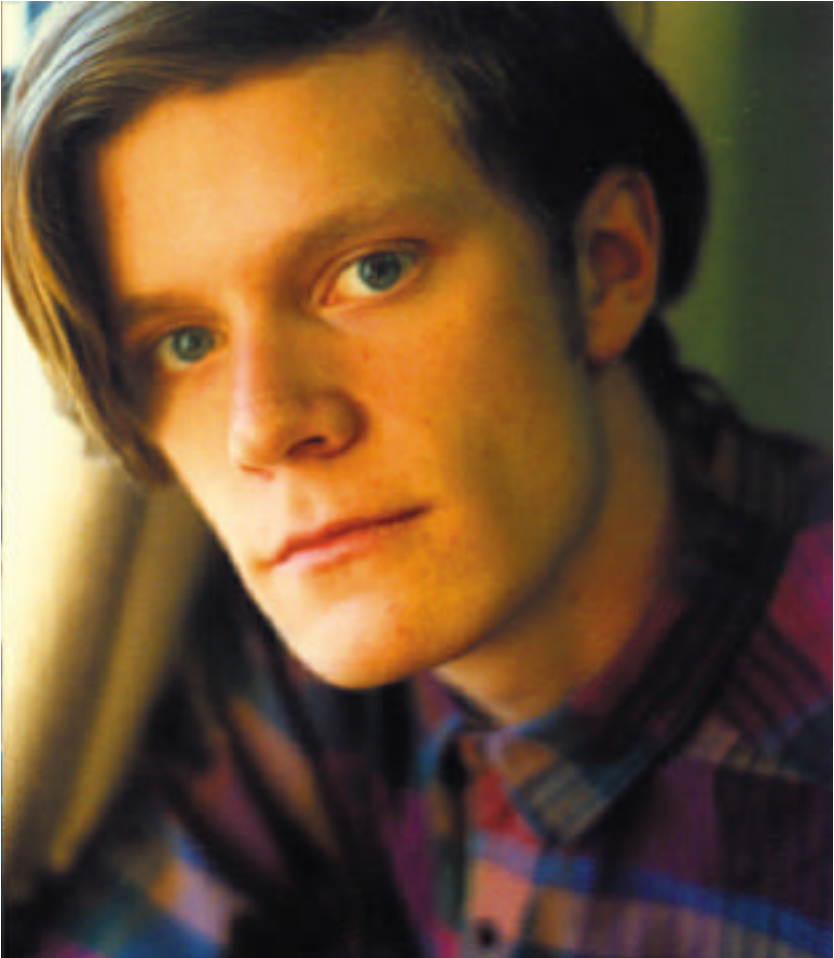


A young man with short brown hair is sitting on a large, weathered tree stump. He is wearing a light-colored, textured sweater and blue jeans. He is looking off to the side with a neutral expression. The background consists of bare trees and a grassy area, suggesting an autumn or winter setting. The lighting is warm, possibly from the sun being low in the sky.

down in the dirt

11/04
v015

revealing
all your
dirty little
secrets



“cathy’s boyfriend”

11/04, Down in the Dirt, volume 015
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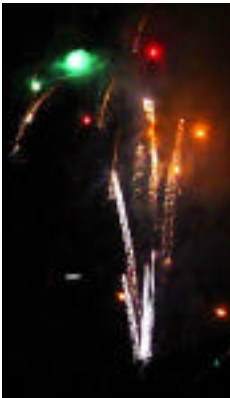
Scars Publications *art*fc, ifc,
1-4 with 2003 fireworks, 8 of Dan, 10-12
of "Kaiser and Sose," Sequoia & Katie,
14-15 of Zach & Sequoia, 17-19 of John
Galt ("Johnny"), the cat in the bag, then
a Pennsylvania gun, 32, 34-37 of Rich,
Janet, Eugene, Matt & Eugene, bc.

FOURTH OF JULY POEM



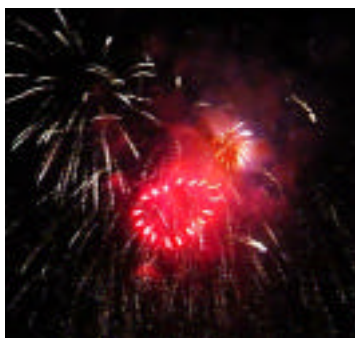
A. D. winans

stepped on, pissed on, cheated
and abused. Taken advantage
of blue collar man caught up
in the American scam.
don't tell me anyone can be
anything they want to be
if they put their mind to it
bullshit crap laid on like butter
on the working class stiff.
save your message for the
deaf, dumb and blind
it'll never sell in the ghetto
or to the immigrants
you have turned your back on.
high-fiving, jiving court jester
with an act old as death
out of step, reeking from bad breath
take you message to the church
tell it to the men on death row
tell it to the starving poor
tell it to the sick and lame
tell it to the rich men
tell it to the politicians
tell it to the serial killers
tell it to wall street
tell it to the man on the gallows
tell it to the innocent killing terrorists
tell it to the last man at the Alamo
tell it to the chiseled faces on
Mount Rushmore
tell it to Madonna
tell it to the whore
tell it to the last wino
on the bowery



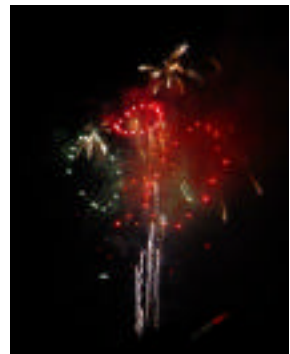


tell it to the banker
tell it to the butcher
tell it to the unemployed
tell it to the circus clown
tell it to the insane
tell it to the outlaw
tell it to the in-laws
tell it to the panhandler
tell it to the con man
tell it to the dead baby stuffed
in a garbage can
tell it to the displaced factory worker
tell it to the elderly
tell it to the re-po man
tell it to the academics
tell it to the last space alien
hiding out in Roswell
tell it to the FBI sharpshooters
at Ruby Ridge
tell it to the arsonists
at Waco
tell it to the junkie with dry heaves
tell it to the farm worker
tell it to the dishwasher
tell it to the orderlies
tell it to the flag waver
tell it to the Chinese peasants
working the rice fields
for a dollar a day
tell it to the garment worker
slaving away in sweat shops
in Chinatown and the Latin quarter
tell it to the garbage man
tell it to corporate America selling
torture devises to enslaved nations
tell it to big business
tell it to the illegitimate President
willing to poison the environment
for big money interests





tell it to the oil barons
tell it to the tobacco merchants
with blood stained hands
tell it to the molested children
tell it to the battered wives of America
tell it to the pharmacy industry
dispensing billions of dollars
of drugs each year
tell it to the millions of people dying
from pollution in Mexico and abroad
tell it to the man on his death bed
not sure why he lived
or what he is dying for
tell it to Jesus Christ
shout it to the stars
line the traitors up against the wall
rewrite the ten commandments
and start all over again



Boulevard of Agony

Michelle Greenblatt

It appears as it's appeared before. The scarred
ghettos, the pocked streets; I am walking
into the caves of the trashed projects, straight
into the hearts of the crack addicts
on the street corners, their money floating
above the sidewalks, bodies robbed, empty heart
chambers echoing. The streets flower
with pain.

If I walk down a boulevard of agony,
if I talk cautious steps upwind,
I will still be sniffed
out, my blonde hair,
my blue eyes

I will hear the sounds of
the mothers and children screaming;
I will fail to describe it.
I will fail as they are beaten down,
domestic agony bound behind locked
doors, three, four, five
weeping children, now grown, striding

down Opalocka with Smith and Wessons
loaded. In their skulls,
their eyes are opening.
While they sleep, their eyes remain
wide, watching
in the dark for allies or strangers,
for policemen, for roaches traveling
through the cracks
in the walls and scuttling on the tiles
of their dingy one bedroom apartments.

The families gather around
the single 19" T.V. They huddle,
watching the politicians speak nothing
of politics; they shred USA today
to start the fire in the fireplace,
which bakes the thick cold air
that circulates through their
small home.

Atrophy

Michelle Greenblatt

the air stays stagnant over the
the embalmed city fighting for breath
people trampled trashed scrambling in the streets
for scraps of bread on the wrecked ground
the barren homes of the helpless, hopeless
struggling; the in-betweens of every day
in-and-out breathing, fighting for
foodlovebreath the avoidance of
snakes
in the bedroom and rats
in the kitchen the ignorance of the trees
keeping their branches raised
shrugging saying, this is not my fault
and the moon fat with indifference
looks down with a certain
small, aloof smile.

INVASION

Brenda Ledford

Far away from the world
a holy hush fills the hills,
a temple beneath silken skies
where I can find peace
in the storm.

A field swells with goldenrod
and dogwoods wear scarlet beads,
a monarch butterfly casts
its shadow on scorched grass
and goose bumps prick my skin

as a poplar leaf rustles
in the rasping wind.
Warning posted on the coast,
a mean season for hurricanes.

Global warming, erratic weather patterns,
school violence, the war in Iraq,
fires raging out west,
a bomb threat near home;
the world closes in.

Asphyxiate

Jeffrey Lee Williams, Junior

The air is slowly escaping from my body,
And with my last breath I'd like;
To show my gratitude for my time here,

On earth

I have shared, loved, lived and breathed.
I have enjoyed, played, hated and sobbed.
There was so much left for me to say
But with this,
My last breath, I fear that I cannot speak too much

So I shall keep this sort.

I am turning blue, but not with envy.
I have felt that way before in my life
But those days are done
I am proud of what I have accomplished in my short;
Far too short two decades but,

What can I say?

That was my life, in a nutshell.
I guess for most of it I was a dreamer
A silly fantasist
But who among us wasn't?

I have not become all that I wanted
But I have made myself more--
Than anyone thought I would be.

So I remain grateful and hopeful
That once I return to this life



Things may have changed.
I hope that we would have grown
and matured
Laughed and loved;
Lived and learned.

For as long as I live,
However long that may be,
I shall remain utterly-
And totally

Grateful.

to Iraq and back

Michael Estabrook

Before I die I would love to experience
the Tigris-Euphrates Valley,
the Fertile Crescent, the Cradle
of Civilization, among the earliest
of the early civilizations
on the planet, a wondrous place I assume.
I recall learning all about this place
way, way back
in grammar school, the bold,
colorful pictures in geography books
of dark green palm trees,
sprouted and sprawling in ancient
rich beige seas of sand. Yes
I'd love to visit Iraq
or what's left of it after all
the murderous tribal factions
and hoards of religious fanatics
and wealthy greedy countries have torn
it all to shreds leaving only bullets
and bombs and blood
echoing across the sad sand.

suburbia

Michael Estabrook

Mist rises from the cold lawn
in the early morning sun blocking
the old rubble of houses beyond
and the cars and driveways
and wheelbarrows and cracked curbs
that make suburbia. Never thought
mist could block out something
and make it pretty but it can.

Cat Hair

By Victoria Turner

It always happens, no matter how hard you try to shed something. Mistakes stick to you like cat hair; you pick at it, but there's always more there. Sometimes pulling the fur off only results in it floating in the air next to you. It lands again on your clothing in another spot.



So you try a lint brush. It rolls over you and picks up all the pesky little hairs. But then you have to peel back the tape and that sticks to you too. It doesn't matter, because even after you throw it away, more appears.

The cat's still there.

Absentmindedly I stared at the tiny black hair, twirling it between my thumb and index finger. I stared at this strand of unfamiliar feline DNA until I felt a large hand on my shoulder. I turned my head slightly to see the tan, hairless hand, a shiny gold wedding band glinting at me with insincerity. Instantly, my stomach churned and the speed of my heart burst into a hammering pace. My nerves swelled and it took all of my courage to turn on my stool and face Steve. He stared at me with icy hawk-like intoxicated eyes, piercing me with frozen daggers.

Fuck.

Sucking in a deep breath through my nose, I inhaled slowly and curled my lips into a pained, toothless smile. Steve's eyebrows knit together as he stood next to my seat.

"We have to talk," he hissed in my ear, his smooth cheek grazing mine.

"No, we don't," I responded.

“Oh,” he mocked, “we don’t?”

“No,” I said through clenched teeth.

“I think we better.”

I glanced around the bar to see if anyone was paying attention. Sarah and her husband Mark were busy chatting over bottled beer. Janet and Richard were busy watching the ball game on the large screen behind me. Other unfamiliar faces were in the back playing pool. As my eyes surveyed the crowded bar, my sight landed on Aiden’s mother, one of the bartenders. She stood talking to Michael, a rowdy Irishman who never knew when he had enough, and had no idea that everyone disliked him.

“Ya don’t understand,” Michael slurred in a thick Irish accent. “What I’m sayin’ is--”

“I do understand!” said Aiden’s mother. “But what I’m telling you is. . .”

At least she’s occupied, I thought to myself.

Steve hit my shoulder. With some force he grabbed my hand and pulled me off the barstool. He led me through the dense blue smoke that encompassed the dingy sports bar this evening. Some of the lights above had burnt out and hadn’t yet been replaced. The tile floor desperately needed to be washed; cigarette ashes were strewn everywhere. Surprisingly, Steve’s footsteps were audible over the loud chatter. He led me out of the pub and turned to me once we were outside. It was raining steadily, water pounding and trickling

over the awning above us. Over the drumming of the rain I thought I heard the soft cry of a kitten. I shook my head. A gust of chilly air blew my hair behind me as I opened my mouth to confront Steve. His brown hair was combed neatly to the side, and he looked attractive in a cobalt blue shirt and jeans, for a man fifteen years my senior.

“There is nothing to talk about,” I said, force behind my words.

“Bullshit.”

“You’re married.”

He rolled his eyes. “That didn’t stop you the other night.”

“I was drunk!”



“No excuse.”

I pursed my lips. “It shouldn’t have happened. I admit that. And I’m sorry it did! I wish I could take it back!”

“I don’t.” He stepped closer. Angrily I shoved him away.

“You should have stopped it,” I said quietly.

“Look, it’s not like we had sex. It was just some making out that went a little farther. No big deal.”

No big deal. I’m sure that’s what your wife would think.

Taking a deep breath, I stared at Steve.

“I can’t take it back. As much as I wish I could just erase it, I can’t. But as far as I’m concerned, *nothing* happened. It *never* happened. And believe me, it *will never* happen again.”

As I turned around to go back into the bar, I heard Steve say quietly, “That’s too bad. I was falling in love with you.”

A mistake. What the hell were you thinking? That’s the thing; you weren’t. All you wanted was some attention. Is that so bad?

Yes. If you’re still scarred over that rejection from Ryan, forget about it. He’s not worth your time. And you’ve known Steve’s lusted after you for the past year. It was flattering, sure. An older man; rather, an experienced man. But you never would’ve done anything if you’d’ve been sober. You know that.

How could you have let yourself get so drunk? How did the bartender not realize it? Two Long Islands, two gin and tonics, and two tequila shots? Yeah, you laugh now in bitterness. After all, everyone said you’d be safe getting a ride home with him.

I entered the pub and went for a seat at the bar. Sitting down, I buried my face in my hands. Vigorously I rubbed my eyes with my fists, blessing myself for not putting on eye makeup today. I heaved a sigh and blurrily looked up into the face of Aiden’s mother.

“Hi,” she said to me, smiling. Her brown hair was pulled back in



a small knot behind her head. Her hazel eyes sparkled happily in the dim bar.

I managed a weak smile and blinked several times.

“Hi,” I said softly. I looked her over to see if I could decide which genes Aiden got from her. I didn’t get far enough to make any decisions before she asked me another question.

“What’re you having tonight?”

“Oh,” I sighed. “It was a rough day. I’ll take a Long Island.”

She smiled deviously at me. “I’m not even going to ask if you want a jumbo one.”

I managed a small laugh. She grabbed a large glass and filled it generously with several different liquors. I swiveled in my bar stool, and through the dense smoke I spotted Aiden leaning against the back wall, a bottle of beer in hand.

There it goes. You have a fling with a man who’s convinced you’re his soul mate in a desperate attempt to feel wanted. Five days later, you meet a wonderful man your own age, who’s not like anyone you’ve ever met before. Incredibly smart. Premed. Breathlessly attractive. Models part-time. Excellent taste in music and movies. Stones and Scarface. And that one damn kiss. . .

Aiden’s mother set the drink down in front of me and waved my money away when I tried to pay her. I threw the bills down on the bar as a generous tip instead. She went off to help someone else, and I sat alone. Without trying to look obvious, I pretended to check the clock above Aiden, but he wasn’t there. Instead, my eyes landed on Steve, staring at me with crushed desire. A stab of ecstasy pricked me in the womb. Shocked, I turned away. I bit my lip before letting out an overwhelmed sigh.

Hell. You feel guilty. And you should, no doubt about that. But now, it hits you; you love the way he kissed you. It was empowering, the way a man kissed you like that. So full of desire, such heated passion. Your whole body swelled at his touch. You even forgot how to kiss. But it’s all fake; he’s married and looking for some. Probably thinks you’re loose. No, he wouldn’t think that. After all, you never showed any sign of interest this past year.

Who knows? Maybe he is in love with you.

I turned my head back to my drink and took a long sip. After I rubbed my eyes with my fists, I opened them and saw Aiden standing a few feet away. Our eyes met and I gave a shy smile. He looked intimidating the

way he stood so relaxed, leaning against the wall, one of his long, thin legs bent backward, propping him up. He had a navy blue bandana tied around his head and a few pieces of curly hair escaped near the back. His blue eyes lazily gazed in my direction as he reached up and rubbed his stubbly cheek. He refolded his long arms and gave me a cocky grin. He darted his eyes from me to the empty wall space next to him, then back to me again.

“Ah,” said Aiden’s mother. I broke my gaze from his direction. “Isn’t my son cute?”

Cute doesn’t even begin to describe it, honey.

I smiled softly. “Yes.”

His mother beamed at me. “I did a good job on that one.”

I nodded. “Yes, you did.”

“You should go talk to him. I think he’d like you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think that?”

She took a sip of ice water. “He’s tired of girls at the modeling agency. Sick of girls who only eat salads on dates and don’t talk about anything of importance.”

I took a sip of my strong drink that made me want to cough. “And what makes you think I’m any different?”

“I don’t know. Just got a feeling, I guess.”

“Just a feeling?” I repeated. I leaned over on the counter, folded my arms, and tapped my fingers against my elbow.

She laughed. “Okay . . . I overheard him telling his uncle that he was incredibly interested in you.”

I blinked in surprise. “Really?”

She nodded, a secret smile on her rosy lips. “He said you two talked for hours, and when he asked you to go back to his place you shot him down.”

I sighed. *So that’s why he didn’t call. You’re not a slut.*

“He liked that you shot him down. He doesn’t want to date a tramp. Now go,” she said, waving me away, “or I’ll cut you off for the rest of the night.”

I laughed. “All right.”

Standing up, I took a deep breath. I smoothed my long black skirt and adjusted my tank top, picking off a short black



hair. I let it fall next to me. As I began to walk to Aiden, a hand was suddenly on my shoulder again. Before I realized it, I was being steered outside. I blinked in shock as I realized it was Steve.

“You,” I hissed as I was dragged through the door. “What the hell d’you think you’re doing?”

Rain still pounded on the awning, making a repetitive drumming that my heart began to imitate. A slow rumbling announced that was soon followed by a flash of lightning. The sky lit up and Steve looked almost frightening for a moment. His combed hair was jaggedly sticking upward in many places, as if he had fisted his hands in it and pulled hard.

“You know what, dear,” Steve slurred, coming closer. “I’m gonna give you a ride tonight.”

“No,” I took half a step back.

“C’mon, you know you liked it.” He leaned in closer. His breath smelled of beer and cigarettes. I wrinkled my nose and pushed him away.

“No,” I said firmly, and turned to walk back inside. Steve’s hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me backward.

“Stop it,” I shouted. Steve let go and walked off into the rain in a huff. “Just leave me alone!”

“What the hell’s going on?”

I whirled around to face Aiden. My anger faded as I looked up into his face.

“Nothing,” I muttered. “I think everything’s okay--I think he left.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes and stared around the parking lot. “I don’t see anyone pulling out. Should I look around for the bastard?”

“No,” I said hastily. “I think I got rid of him.”

Aiden grinned down at me and I realized then just how tall he was. He took my hand in his and swung my arm. I beamed back up at him.

“I enjoyed our conversation the other night,” he said, his voice low.

I laughed, my face feeling as if it would crack from smiling so much. “I did too.”



He pulled me a little closer, still swinging my hand. “It’s been a long time since I met someone that I couldn’t stop thinking about after saying goodnight.”

“I think that’s a good sign.”

“I’d say so. But . . .”

My heart pummeled. “What?” I said, trying not to sound worried.

“Well . . .” he trailed off. I felt myself being pulled so close to him that we were nearly touching. I craned my neck to look up at him.

“I was wondering when you were going to let me take you out somewhere other than our occasional run-in here.”

I relaxed. “Well,” I said loftily, “you never called.”

“It’s been two days since we met. I couldn’t seem too desperate.”

“Ah. The old ‘play it cool’ game.”

He laughed and squeezed my hand. “How about tomorrow?”

“What tomorrow?”

“How about we go downtown and see a show? Dinner too. Then walk around the pier and let me see if your lips are as soft as I remember.”

I blinked up at him and smiled. “I’m busy tomorrow.”

The smile on Aiden’s face flickered.

“After all,” I continued smoothly, “we are playing the ‘play it cool’ game.”

He pursed his lips. “What if I won’t take no for an answer? Will I wind up like the jackass you just got rid of? All alone in the rain?”

I sighed and took my free hand and put it on his bicep. His arms had looked long and gangly, but touching it I realized his muscles were a well-kept secret; it was a firm arm that I wanted wrapped around me.

Aiden pulled me to him. “I can’t take it anymore. I apologize in advance for this.”

Before I could reply, Aiden slowly bent down and placed a soft kiss on my lips. My body tightened as he let go of my hand and placed one of his on the small of my back, the other gently caressing my bare arm. I responded to his kiss and reached up and put my hand on his neck, letting it wander over his chiseled face. After a minute he stopped the kiss and smiled down at me. I bit my lip and looked into his blue eyes.

Damn. A soft kiss. Even better than the other night. Not like Steve’s at all. It seems that Aiden actually cares about you rather than just getting you in the sack. And look at him. He’s gorgeous, polite, smart, and his mother even likes you. That’s always important. You win the mom, you win the man. And once you win him you won’t have to come back here trying to find him. And Steve will be gone. And you can move on and not worry about that any more.

“Will you excuse me a minute?” Aiden asked.

“Sure.”

“Are you coming in or staying out here?”

"I'll be in in a minute," I said, smiling at him.

"You better be. I don't want you running out on me." He winked at me and walked back inside. I checked to be sure he was gone before doing a little victory dance. I know I looked ridiculous, but I didn't care. I shook my booty and waved my arms in the air. Closing my eyes, I moved around in my own little world. I don't know how long I danced for, but I felt a warm hand enclose around my wrist and I kept on dancing. Then, suddenly, I was pulled into another kiss. I responded back without opening my eyes. Almost instantly I felt my stomach churn; instead of warm, soft lips, I tasted stale cigarettes. Horrified, I opened my eyes to see Steve, and behind him, wearing a look of shock was Aiden.

"Uncle Steve?" he said dubiously.

Steve turned around and looked at Aiden. Shocked, unable to say anything, I stood in horrified stupor.

"It's--it's not what you're thinking," I said quietly.

Aiden turned around without acknowledging what I said and stormed back into the bar. Furiously I turned to Steve, who grinned at me.

"Come on," he said, moving closer. I felt my face twist in fury.

"Go to hell!" I shouted. "Just piss off, all right?" Somewhere nearby a cat was howling. Steve turned, and in silent anger stalked off into the rain. I turned and fled back into the bar, running right into Aiden. My throat swelled and heart went weak in my chest. All the wondrous feeling I had felt minutes ago vanished and washed away in the rain.

"I swear," I said softly, "it's not--"



He brushed past me and walked outside. Then, he turned around and looked at me as I stood in the doorway. I wanted to cry, but I bit my lip instead.

"I thought you were different," he said quietly. He turned around and walked into the rain. Instinctively I followed him right into the storm.

"How can you say that?" I shouted over the clapping thunder. Icy pellets of water stung my face. "You heard me shouting at him before, telling him to leave me alone."

A small cry came from behind me. I turned and saw a small black cat,

drenched with water. It looked at me with large orange eyes. Rain beat down on me, soaking my hair and matting it against my head. Aiden stopped walking.

“Then tell me,” he called over the rain. He stopped talking. I waited, breath caught in my throat. “Tell me that it never happened before.”

Lie. Lie. Don't tell him. Just lie. He'll never know. It's Steve's word against yours. He doesn't have to know.

Say it! Say it now! One syllable. No.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't lie. Aiden stared at me with intense eyes.

“It did happen before,” I said, voice barely audible over the rain. “But it wasn't supposed to!”

Aiden turned around and stormed off into the night. I wanted to run after him, to tell him I was sorry, how horrible I felt about what had happened. But instead, I stood, frozen in place, rain mixing in with my burning tears of anger and frustration. I balled my hands into fists and released them several times. I don't know how long I stood in the rain before the cat came and sat down next to me. I looked down at it and it blinked its lamp-like eyes at me. For some reason, I bent down closer to the cat and stared at it. Then, picking it up I pressed it against my chest, thinking about how much one mistake had ruined everything, and how hard my life was going to be from this moment on. I turned around and set the cat back down out of the rain.

“You bastard,” I said to the creature.

Looking at my shirt where I had just held the cat were tons of tiny little hairs. I tried to pick them off, but there were too many. Instead, I let them stay there. Sitting down on the wet concrete, I let the tears flow freely, and the cat crawled into my lap. I didn't try to get it off.





63rd STREET

Shaun Millard

I am a Man,
who is not a Man,
because Man
is the trigger finger
on the pistol.
Empty clips quicker,
watching gasping breaths.
Please,
shower him
with admiration and respect.
We are but monkeys
with tools,
Eternally caged by resistance,
beating our chests,
blood red.

This fall,
Models will fashion
AK's and Tech Nines.
"Never leave home without one,
Feel an illogical sense of empowerment,
Own your neighborhood,
Own a Smith and Wesson."

Knowledge died,
in the sixties,
Protest transformed,

Sky-scraping fists
to glaring barrels.
Youth,
community,
enlisting guerillas.
Know,
No Sandinistas for preservation,
Know,
mercenaries for paper trails.

Do these eyes have minds?
For the quick Fix,
family eats,
starving for next week.
Ode to thief again,
hungry,
when your magazine collects,
a heart of bullet holes.
Forget the grave,
dig tombs on 63rd Street.
Then, daughters mourn everyday,
to know one's father,
a number on the sidewalk.
She'll vow to never die
in vain.
Her hands reach,
never to strike again.

MINIMUM WAGE PARKING LOT POEM #2

Kenneth DiMaggio

Suburban teen
runaway

far from your secure
and safe world

After a friend
who put you in touch with
a dealer who told you to wait

for him at this
State Checks Cashed
& food stamps accepted
shopping plaza

In the meantime try
to blend in

by covering your Grateful
Dead psyche with your
grays sweat shirt hoody

Virgil will soon be back
to take you on a personal tour
of Inferno and also to deal

some Readies

Why

just a hand and not the rest of the body

in the fast food dumpster?

Why
all these satellite dishes
on the nearby tenement
porches about to collapse when
the glamorous reality that gets
tuned in ends by being snuffed up
as one more addiction

by people who make ends
meet

by mixing them with baby powder

And the cops who pour
sugar in their coffee now try to scratch
the winning lottery ticket numbers from a day they hope
will end in a cease fire

And the scum bags to them are the existentialist heroes
to others

Dante forgot
to write about Limbo

that permanent
holding pen
in the abyss

where suspects charged
with what crime

waste their lives

buying from the ring ring ring numb
grocery store and the sale sale shoplift fashion outlet

and if you still need more salvation there's the Pentacostal church
in what used to be the Laundromat Dante

never wrote about this rusting overturned shopping cart cosmos

but Virgil

can sell you a piece of Hell Purgatory and Heaven
all in the same vial

Suburban teen missing
boy

it might be you
body discovered within
the next dumpster heap of greasy French Fries
and hamburgers

the risk taken by this once
psychedelic pink flamingo kid

when he saw how life for him

would be a steady routine of purchasing a more expensive brand
of sustaining but soul-less groceries

It is called a chow line

Trevino L. Brings Plenty

I see them every morning
waiting for breakfast
in a line along a building
wrapping around the city block
homeless men and women
smoking cigarettes
nipping at bottles
wiping rain from brow
they squat or stand
then the line moves
into the soup kitchen
the meal is free
it is warm inside
as they sit at tables
swiping S.O.S. with
a flaky biscuit
and blow before
sip on their coffee
during the meal
there is laughter
a small prayer is answered
they stay as long as they can
until they walk the streets
and sleep somewhere out of the rain

Wrecking ball

Che Gutierrez

I am the wrecking ball
So they say

I try to sort
Calm
Encourage

But they call me
The enemy

In a book
I read
About a happy family
The book no longer
Exists

This house
Can be empty
But cries
Still bounce

I want to wreck this house

But I don't want to be
the wrecking ball

Landlord Dispute

Gary Beck

Jaime Perez crept up the fire escape as quietly as he could and stopped at the third floor. He leaned over the guard rail to the kitchen window that he had been told didn't have a gate. He waited patiently to be sure that no one on the street had noticed him, while vapor from the cold steamed out of his mouth. He pressed his short, skinny, drug ravaged body against the wall until he felt ready, then he took a metal tool from his pocket and stealthily pried the window open. He couldn't hear any sounds from the dark apartment, so he carefully slipped over the rail and climbed inside. The landlord had assured him that they didn't own a dog, so although still alert, he began to relax. The landlord had also carefully instructed him how to place paper next to the pilot light of the stove, run a paper strip to the nearest inflammable material and ignite it so it would appear to be an accident. There was a cardboard cake box on a table next to the stove and he ran the strip of paper to the box. He paused and listened intently, his body a menacing hulk in the darkness, then greedily opened the box. It was some kind of pound cake, not his favorite, like chocolate or pineapple, but better than nothing. He broke off a chunk with a gloved hand and stuffed it in his mouth, crumbs dribbling on the floor.

The landlord had insisted that he not take anything, but a piece of cake didn't count. Besides, the greedy pig would never know. Jaime needed a hit on the crack pipe and the sugar from the cake would settle his jangling nerves. He silently cursed the landlord for a moment. He knew why the landlord wanted this family out. Then he could renovate the apartment cheaply and triple the rent. When the tenants rejected what must have been a low offer and other pressures failed, the landlord sent for him. Jaime was known as 'the torch' to a few pitiless landlords on the lower east side, whose lust for profit at the expense of decency was aroused by gentrification. He could smell the paper by the pilot light smoldering, so he lit a match, put it to the middle of the paper strip and made sure it was burning both ways. Then he slid out the window to the fire escape and closed it behind him. As he hastily went down the metal steps, he thought: 'To hell with those gringos. Let them burn. They forced my people out of the neighborhood. Now they'll get theirs.'

Some kind of noise brought Peter to the surface from a deep sleep. He

groggily stretched, not sure what happened, then suddenly smelled smoke. He leaped up and dashed to the kitchen and saw the fire. The flames were high enough to keep him from reaching the sink with its flexible water hose, so he tore off his T-shirt and tried to smother the flames, but this only fanned them higher. He rushed back to the bedroom, pulled the covers off his wife and shook her arm. "What's wrong?" Beth sleepily asked. "It's a fire," he yelled. "We've got to get the kids out." She instantly snapped awake and took charge: "I'll take Jen and you take Andy." They hurried to the children's bedroom, where Jennifer and Andrew were sound asleep. As the children gradually awakened, they wrapped them in their blankets and carried them out of the bedroom.

The smoke was rapidly spreading through the apartment. "Should I try to grab my wallet?" Peter asked. Beth looked around and quickly decided: "Let's get the kids into the hall, then you can see if it's safe to go back inside." Flames were pouring out of the kitchen and the acrid smoke was blurring their vision. The children were wide awake now, frightened and crying. They made their way through the living room into the hallway that led to the front door. The room was rapidly filling with smoke and when Peter opened the door, smoke billowed into the hall. They paused at the head of the stairs and Peter looked back, considering if he should risk returning for his wallet and other valuables. Beth realized what he was thinking and said firmly: "No way you're going in there." He protested: "All our money and credit cards are in there, and our coats. It's freezing outside." She shook her head. "At least we're not hurt. We'll manage the rest."

Officer Herminio Corrado was just carrying a container of coffee to his partner in the patrol car, when he saw the flames burst out of the window from a house down the block. He knocked on the hood to get his partner's attention, pointed, then set off at a run. He moved faster than the usual officer's cautious approach to danger, since fire couldn't attack him from a distance and rapid response was essential. But he was already trembling and his insides were churning, because he was terrified of fire. He leaped up the steps of the building and knocked loudly on each door as he passed, shouting: "Police. Fire." When he got to the third floor, he found a family of four at the landing and yelled: "Get those kids out now." The man started mumbling something about losing all their possessions, but there was no time for that nonsense. "Get going. You can worry about your things later." He gave the man a shove and watched him start downstairs, as the woman tugged him along.

The flames were shooting out of the apartment door and smoke was

filling the hallway. He hesitated, afraid of being trapped by the fire, then started upstairs to warn the other tenants. He was halfway up the flight of stairs, when someone grabbed him from behind and he almost jumped out of his skin. He turned around and saw that it was a fireman in full protective gear, looking like a giant insect, ready to dip its proboscis. The fireman pulled up his mask and said: "I'll take it from here." Relief zoomed through his body. "Thanks, buddy." He watched the alien figure hurry upstairs and thought: 'Thank you, thank you. I don't know how you do it, but better you than me.' He quickly went downstairs and out of the building. His partner was waiting and congratulated him for his fast reaction. "You did good, Coro." He nodded thanks, then confided; "I could never be a fireman. It scares the shit out of me. I'd rather face a gunman any day." His partner grunted agreement. "Me too."

Firefighter Eugene Jones was dozing in his seat, heading back to the firehouse after shopping for dinner at an expensive grocery. When the call came in they were only a few blocks from the scene, so it only took a minute or two to get there. He put on his gear as they went, holding on to the safety bar with one hand as they tore around the corner. They were the first truck on the scene and he adjusted his mask and rushed into the building, followed by the rest of the crew. Tenants were streaming out and he carefully forced his way upstairs through the panicky flow. He saw the cop ordering some tenants out, caught up to him on the stairs and told him that he'd take over. As the cop started downstairs, he thought: 'I could never be a cop. I'd be terrified if someone was shooting at me.' He shook his head at the distraction, then went and knocked on each door on the fourth floor. By this time, the commotion, sirens and smoke had awakened everybody and he calmly urged them to leave the building.

One of his partners had evacuated the fifth floor and came down and beckoned him to help check the apartment directly over the fire. The door was ajar and they entered warily, concerned with a sudden blaze through the floor. They knelt and felt the kitchen floor which was hot, but not incendiary. They carefully checked the walls, then the rest of the apartment and followed the same procedure in the hall. They didn't find any indicators that the fire had spread upstairs. The smoke was already dissipating, so they went downstairs to the apartment where the fire started to help the rest of the crew. By the time they got there, the fire had been extinguished and they joined the search for any further hot spots. The kitchen and part of the main bedroom were thoroughly burned, but the destruction to the rest of the apartment was moderate. Gene studied

the scene and thought the damage looked peculiar, but left it for the fire marshal to examine. He saw that he wasn't needed, so he began to lug fire hose downstairs.

Peter was freezing in his pajamas and Beth wasn't much warmer in the bathrobe she had managed to put on before their rapid escape. They had been able to snatch down coats for the children, so at least they were warm, but they were still traumatized by the sudden evacuation. The organized chaos that had followed the fire had shattered the once calm night for them. Neighbors had poured out of their houses, eager for the spectacle of disaster. Although disappointed that no one had jumped, a fiery meteor plunging to earth, or had been carried out blackened and smoldering, the crowd avidly gaped at the building, faces tense with expectation, still hoping for something titillating. The flashing red lights on the fire trucks and police cars cast incandescent glows on the savage spectators, who didn't seem overly evolved from their ancient ancestors. Peter watched in utter bewilderment, unsure of what to do next. Beth sensed his confusion: "Ask someone if we can go back to our apartment, now that the fire is out."

Peter looked around and saw a fireman coiling hose nearby and called to him: "Excuse me. Can we go back to our apartment now?" The fireman turned his head and looked at him tiredly. "Sorry, sir. The fire marshal has to inspect the premises to determine the cause of the fire. Then they have to check the building for safety and stability." Peter's voice was getting shrill. "When do you think we can get in there?" "Maybe tomorrow afternoon, depending on the damage." "Can't we just get some clothes? We're freezing our butts off." "That's just not possible," the fireman said. "But I can give you some blankets that'll at least keep you warm." The fireman walked to the truck and pulled out some gray, heavy wool blankets and handed them to Peter, who just stood there and asked dumbly: "What do we do now?" "Do you have somewhere to go for the rest of the night?" "No." "Friends? Family?" "No." "Why don't you bring these blankets to your family," the fireman said. "I'll see if I can get someone to help you." Peter shuffled back to Beth, lugging the blankets, dazed by the distressing events.

Gene saw the cop from the stairs leaning on his patrol car and walked over to him. "Hey, pal, how're ya doin'?" The cop's face was streaked with soot, but he looked cheerful. "O.K. What about you?" "Good. We didn't lose anybody." They grinned at each other in the instant camaraderie that shared danger brings, especially to the uniformed services. The cop extended his hand. "I'm Coro." Gene took his hand. "I'm Gene." They

stood there for a moment, reassured by the bond that helped them protect civilians. Coro said confidently: "I almost pissed my pants." Gene whispered: "When you're a firefighter, they spray so much water on you that no one notices." They laughed comfortably together. "Thanks, buddy," Coro said. Gene smiled. "That's O.K. Listen, there's a family that doesn't have anyplace to go." "Where?" Gene pointed. "There." Coro recognized them from the stairs. "I'll see what I can do. Take care, buddy." "You, too." Gene waved cheerfully, then went back to coiling hose.

Coro walked to the family, who were huddling together, bewildered survivors of the sudden catastrophe. "Hi, folks. I'm Officer Corrado. I understand you don't have anyplace to go." He was a stocky welterweight type, with blond hair that for a Hispanic man must have been a source of teasing all his life. Peter looked at Beth, who shrugged. "If I could go upstairs and get my wallet with my credit cards, we could check into a hotel," Peter said. "It's on the night table in the bedroom." "They won't let you go up there, but I can ask one of the firefighters if he can get it for you." "Thanks, Officer Corrado, we appreciate your help. If he goes to our apartment, could he bring some clothes for us?" Beth asked. "I don't know, ma'am, I'll see what I can do." They waited tensely as Officer Corrado went to the fireman who had given them the blankets. They watched the conversation, trying to interpret the gestures. When the cop pointed to them and the fireman nodded, they felt a spark of hope. Officer Corrado walked back to them and said pleasantly: "The firefighter'll go up in a few minutes and have a look around. If you need me, I'll be by my patrol car. Good luck." He touched his hat in salute and walked off, as Peter and Beth murmured thanks.

Jennifer and Andrew had listened to the conversation with the policeman, so they knew he was going to their apartment. They watched him go into the building feeling that after a little clean-up, they would go upstairs to the comfort of their beds. Andy, who normally teased or insulted his big sister, asked in a quavering voice: "How long do we have to wait? I'm tired." Jen, who usually maintained a superior attitude and occasionally yanked Andy's hair when he was too annoying, answered gently: "I don't know, but it shouldn't be too long." "It better not be. I'm cold," Andy said. Jen was tempted to smack him on the head for being a spoiled brat, after they just escaped with their lives. Instead, she pulled the blanket they were sharing closer around them and put an arm around him comfortingly. "That should help. Do you want to sit on the curb?" "No. It's too cold.... I'm going to ask Daddy when we can go in." She held him

back before he could move away. “He doesn’t know yet. He’ll tell us when it’s time.” “I don’t like it out here,” Andy mumbled. “Neither do I, but we have to wait,” Jen said.

Firefighter Jones reached the third floor and assessed the damage in the hall. he concluded that the fire hadn’t spread to the rest of the building due to their quick response. He waved to the two firefighters still checking the kitchen and walked into the main bedroom. The side of the room with the night table and clothes closet had been gutted. He looked for the wallet and found some partial remains, but the credit cards were fused into melted plastic. The clothes had been charred beyond recognition and the shoes at the bottom of the closet were unwearable, except for some sneakers that he picked up. He looked around for a few minutes and could only find a few sweaters that might be useful. He went into the children’s rooms and collected some sneakers, pants and sweaters that he bundled into the adults sweaters. He couldn’t think of anything else to take, so he left the apartment and went downstairs. He had been through this same situation many times and wasn’t looking forward to giving the family more bad news.

Peter saw the fireman come out of the building and stirred expectantly. He couldn’t tell from the fireman’s expression whether the news was good or bad, but he nudged Beth and bubbled: “Here he comes. In just an hour or so we’ll be comfortably sprawled in a hotel suite.” Beth didn’t want to dampen his enthusiasm, so she waited silently. Jen and Andy moved closer to their parents, hoping that the nightmare would soon be over. Gene knew from experience what the family was going through and he also knew there was no way to soften the bad news. “I’m sorry, folks. Your bedroom was burned out. Your wallet was a total loss and the clothes were ruined.” “All of them?” Peter asked. Gene saw his disappointment and said consolingly: “Yeah. Maybe we can find something for you to wear at the firehouse.” “Thanks,” Peter muttered. Beth was more concerned about where they’d spend the night. “It’s too bad about our clothes, but we don’t have anyplace to go.” “Why don’t you talk to that police officer,” Gene said, and pointed to officer Corrado. “He’ll try to help you.”

When officer Corrado saw the family approach, he thought they resembled needy reservation Indians in the gray blankets. “I bet you folks are a little warmer now.” Peter said tensely: “We’re not freezing, but we sure aren’t comfortable.” Coro nodded sympathetically. “I know that. Did the firefighter find your credit cards?” “No,” Peter answered. “Well, what are your folks going to do?” Peter’s voice rose shrilly: “I told the fireman we didn’t have

anywhere to go. I thought you were going to help us?" "Take it easy, buddy. I'll see what I can do. Now you don't have any money, right?" "Right." "And you don't have family or friends where you can spend the night?" "No." "Are you sure?" Beth sensed Peter's growing tension and interjected: "We just moved here from Detroit a month ago. We don't know anyone yet." "Is there anyone there you can call and ask for money? I'll let you use my cell phone." Beth shook her head. "Not really. We borrowed money to come here." "What about your family?" Coro asked. "My parents are dead and so are Peter's," Beth replied. Coro didn't know what to do about them. "I'll ask my partner if he has any ideas."

They watched the cop walk away and Peter said bitterly: "It's just like Detroit. When you need help, they can't do anything." "That's not true, Peter," Beth said. "The fireman just couldn't save your wallet. The cop is trying to help. I know you're upset, but try to be patient." Jen tugged at Beth's arm. "Are we going upstairs soon, Mommy?" "Not yet, honey." "I'm tired." "I know, honey. We'll just have to wait." Andy started crying and Beth put her arms around him and whispered reassuringly: "That's all right. That's all right, sweetie. Jen. Stay with your brother and take care of him." Jen was alarmed. "Are you going away?" "No, honey. I may have to talk to the policeman and I want you to watch Andy, like a big girl." Beth turned to Peter, who was clutching at her other arm and he asked urgently: "What are we going to do? We can't spend the night on the street." "Let's wait for the cop. Maybe he can find out where we can borrow some money for the night and you can repay it with an advance on your salary." "You'll see. He won't do anything." "Don't be negative," Beth said. "We'll work things out."

Coro told his partner, Kareem Warren, a much more experienced officer, that the family didn't have any money, or a place to stay. "If they don't have any other place to stay, they could always go to an emergency shelter," Kareem answered. "I heard of it, but never dealt with it. How does it work?" "Once things are settled here, we'll take them to an E.A.U.," Kareem explained. "What's that?" "An Emergency Assistance Unit. There's one in the Bronx that'll arrange temporary shelter for them." "Some kind of homeless shelter?" "Yeah. What do you expect, man, the Ritz?" "I've heard those places are pretty rough." "Didn't you ever respond to a call from one of those welfare hotels?" "No. I don't know if those kind of folks can handle it." Kareem asked in annoyance: "What kind of folks are we talking about?" "You know, sort of middle class, not used to the streets." "Do you want to bring them home with

you?” “No, man.” “Then take some advice, man. Do your job. Help them as best you can, then forget them.” “They had some bad luck tonight.” “Coro, there’s a lotta bad shit out there.”

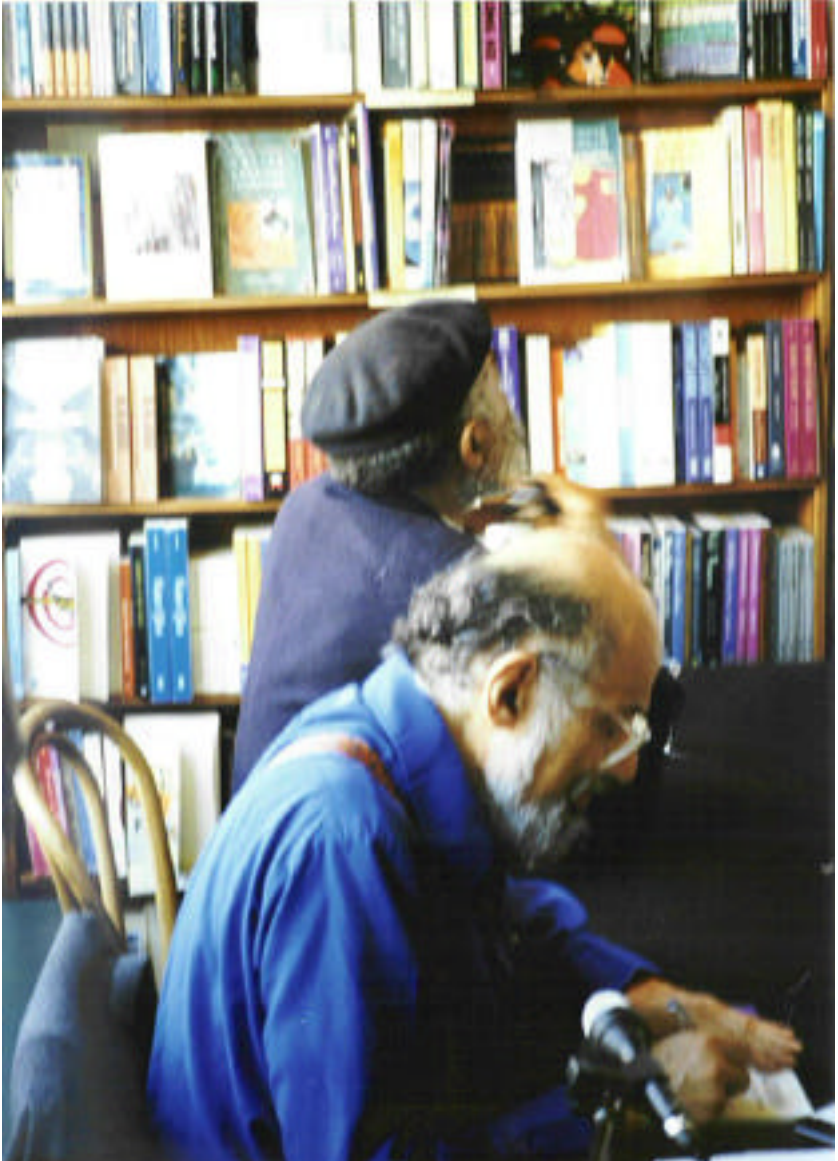
Peter and Beth saw the cop get out of the patrol car and beckon to them. They were already getting used to bad news and they could tell from his expression that more was coming. They herded the children in front of them and as they approached, Peter asked the cop apprehensively: “Did you find out how to help us?” Coro was a little embarrassed: “Officer Warren and I’ll take you to an Emergency Assistance Unit.” Peter was confused. “What’s that?” “It’s a temporary shelter and they’ll take care of you until you make other arrangements.” “Where is it?” Beth asked. “The Bronx.” “The Bronx? I don’t want to go there,” Peter blurted. “I’ve heard that it’s full of drug dealers and gangs. That’s why we left Detroit, to get away from that element.” “There are a lot of nice places in the Bronx. You’ll be all right,” Coro said. Peter was getting desperate. “There’s got to be another way. Is there any kind of emergency fund that could help us?” “Not that I know of.” “Can the police department lend us a few hundred dollars?” “I don’t think so.” Jen interrupted plaintively: “We’re tired, Daddy.” “Why don’t you sit in the back of our patrol car,” Coro said. “It’s warm and you can relax until we settle things here,”

Peter stood there helplessly, a battered survivor of an unexpected disaster, uncertain of what to do. When he didn’t react to the cop’s suggestion, Beth gently nudged him towards the patrol car, towing the children with her. Coro opened the back door, then introduced them to his partner: “This is Officer Warren. What’s your name, folks?” Peter sat there numbly, so Beth answered: “Harmon. Peter and Beth Harmon. This is Jen and Andy.” Jen managed a weak hello, but Andy huddled against Beth and didn’t look up. Officer Warren greeted them courteously: “Sorry to meet you in these kind of circumstances. Why don’t you folks just relax and we’ll get going as soon as things wind down here.” “I don’t want to go to the Bronx,” Peter mumbled. Officer Warren asked patiently: “Where do you want to go?” Peter shrugged. “I don’t know.” “Unless you’ve got some other place to go, that’s all we can do,” Officer Warren said. “Now, do you want to go or not?” Before Peter could answer, Beth said: “We’ll go to the Bronx.” “Good. Now take it easy. We’ll leave soon.”

They sat there silently and waited. Peter stared straight ahead at nothing, with Jen curled in his lap. Beth watched the fire engines drive off, as their fellow tenants straggled back into the building. A neighbor on the floor above them, who Beth had never spoken to, stopped at the

patrol car, knocked on the glass and shouted: “You bastard. You could have burned us in our beds. Too bad you didn’t fry.” Peter cowered and Officer Warren shooed the man away. Beth didn’t understand why he was blaming them, but she dismissed him without much concern. She had bigger problems to worry about than an upset neighbor. She noticed that the crowd had mostly dissipated and the curiosity seekers had drifted back to their beds. The ghouls, deprived of blood and lamentation, had evaporated to wherever they lurked, until dreadful events materialized them again to feast on the suffering of strangers. The flashing lights and screeching sirens were extinguished and the indifferent street now was silent. Beth watched the nice cop come back to the car with his gruff partner and open the door. “The fire marshal sealed your apartment, until the investigation into the cause of the fire is completed,” Officer Corrado told them. “He gave me a telephone number that you can call in a few days to find out when you can get back in there.” Peter repeated hollowly: “A few days.” “What do we do until then?” Beth asked. “I guess you’ll have to stay at the shelter,” Coro replied. “Isn’t there anything else we can do?” Peter asked desperately. “We don’t want to go there.” Before Corrado could answer, Officer Warren broke in harshly: “You ain’t got no money. You ain’t got no friends. So whadda ya want to do? It’s either the shelter, or the street. It’s your choice.” Coro tried to moderate his partner’s harshness: “Be cool, Kareem. You know what they’ve been through tonight.” “Yeah, man, but it’s decision time.” Beth ended the discussion: “Let’s go to the shelter.” As they drove off to the unknown perils of the Bronx, Peter kept thinking: ‘Well, at least the landlord dispute is over.’





*Allen Ginsberg and Ted Joans at City
Lights Bookstore book sitning, 2000*

photograph by A. D. Winans

Grin

E. H. Melton

Death came to me a little before noon. I know this only because it knocked on the door, I woke up, looked at the alarm clock, and was a little ticked off that I still had about ten minutes left to sleep. I threw on a pair of jeans and stumbled through the living room just to see who it was I was going to ignore. Then I looked through the peephole. I opened the door.

“Your friend has died,” it said. Then the phone rang. I walked into the kitchen and picked it up—Death inviting itself in—and listened as Nathan told me Mark was dead. I turned around and looked into this empty hood at about the time Nathan started crying. I hung up.

Death said, “He is yours now,” and left. Just turned around, walked through my living room, out the front door, and strolled on down the street.

The whole grieving process got a monkey wrench in the gears when I went to the visitation. There was a whole room full of people, everyone either talking about unimportant things, or telling jokes about Mark. Each joke has a quiet mantra repeating like a background noise beneath it, muttered fervently like it would protect them from vampires: He would have wanted it this way.

Then I saw him, and—let me tell you—that complicated things.

Mark was walking around, grinning like a meth-head, listening to the little groups of whispering people. They kept talking, but I saw glances at him out of their peripheral vision, then nervously look away. After all, it’s rude to talk about someone when they’re standing right by you.

Every time Mark saw someone look away from him, he’d laugh a little. He’d walk right up behind someone and stand just over their shoulder, listening to prepared, eulogized stories about him, chuckling like everyone was an inside joke that only he got. His aunt started crying, putting a hand up to her face. At first, I thought it was to compose herself,



but then I saw she was trying to hide Mark, to not look at him.

Mark bent over at the waist, and I saw that his suit was cut down the back. When he smiled, I couldn't help but wince. His makeup was atrocious. Maybe it would've looked better if he'd been lying down in his coffin, but up and moving around, smiling like a schizo, laughing, it looked fake and plastic and sickening. He looked right at his aunt, his face just on the other side of her hand, and said, "Now you see me, now you don't." He straightened, turned, walked a few steps away, then spun and yelled, "Cry about it!" Everyone flinched.



He turned back around, laughing, then saw me.

In one moment, my chest seized up, my muscles froze, and I stopped breathing. They could've set a plaque at my feet and put me in a display at the Smithsonian. It's true that a person only knows himself through the eyes of other people, I guess I didn't like what I saw in his.

He walked up, shrugged, and put his hands in his pockets like a kid that just realized his dad was standing nearby. "Looks like I'm all yours." He looked away, and most of his smile faded, except one corner that stayed cocked up like the hammer of a gun.

I looked around, and everyone had stopped talking. They were all looking at me. Every face had a wordless plea that was as clear to me as anything. So we left.



I took him to a restaurant. It's an understood tradition at visitations and funerals. The waitress walked up and—I guess by how I was dressed or the look in my face—seemed like she knew where I'd been. But then she saw Mark and frowned something huge. I saw her close her eyes, lower her head, and take a deep, slow breath. I just got a glass of milk. Mark said he'd take two children, a nice house, and a pool, with a side of regret. Things went downhill from there.

I hadn't got through a single cigarette before he starts looking at other tables and talking to people. They were polite enough, I guess: didn't make eye contact and kept their faces low. But some of the things he said really got to them.

Deep, personal things. I mean, these words just poured out of him like he had a crack team of little imps with little typewriters hard at work.

“You don’t love your mother. Go home. Look in a mirror/ Say it to yourself. ‘I don’t love my mother.’” “You think this guy’s gonna give you what you want? Listen: five minutes of pumping and groaning isn’t gonna stop your clock from ticking. Get a dog.”

“Yes, you’ve been a bad father. No, you can’t make up for it now. She’s nineteen and doesn’t care. She doesn’t care about you, her boyfriend, or any other man.”

I don’t remember sinking lower than my seat, but eventually I was eye level with the table, and I had chain-smoked every single cigarette I had. I kept thinking, Why doesn’t anyone do anything? Why doesn’t someone say something back? And the only answer I got was written on their faces: it was all true.

I mean, if a guy flat-out lies, you can call him a liar. But what to you do when a dead man starts running his mouth and yanking all your skeletons out of the closets? Sure, people got mad, but hat were they going to do?

Finally, this one couple got up and left, and that broke the barrier of social propriety for everyone else. In ten minutes, the place was empty, and waitress never got a better tip in her life. I didn’t tip because she never came back to our table.

“Why, Mark?”

“That’s the big question, innit?”

“Shut up. Why do you have to be like this?”

His manic smile faded and he screwed his face up, fit to burst. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I couldn’t breathe again.

“You. Have no. Idea.” He came over the table, crawling like a clumsy spider, and grabbed me by the back of my head. I grabbed onto his wrists, but that was all I could do. “You have no idea. I’ve seen it, and it wants to be seen. Be heard! I’ve got it in my head and it wants out!”

He put his lips against the side of my head and hissed. “You get to wit-



ness. Shut up and deal. You're a mirror: it only looks like you hold things in you, but you're empty. You're empty and flat."

He let me go, sat back in his seat, and scowled like a demon.

"Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about."

I put my hand to my face, then wiped my eyes with a napkin. He leaned forward, reached out, and tipped over my glass of milk. He looked at me and laughed until formaldehyde came out his nose. Then he left.

At the time, I didn't feel anything at all. I sat at the table, milk running off onto my lap, and stared at where he had sat. I heard people back in the kitchen, but they never came out. I didn't know it was actually possible to actively be, but I did. I just sat there... Being.

Then I got sad remembering what he said about me. Then I got mad and told myself I'd prove him wrong. Then I got sad again that he was gone and I was supposed to watch him. I cried again. Then I got up, didn't even bother to wipe off my lap, and left.

I haven't heard from him since, and that used to really get me on edge. I kept thinking I was supposed to be with him, supposed to remember for him because I don't think he could. But time came, and there was no arguing. It even got to the point that I used to miss Mark. I started telling people about the visitation and the restaurant. It used to completely kill a party, but the more I told it, the more people liked it. I had the trump of all Mark stories. And sometimes I sit awake at night, eyes open, and try to say those unrelenting words. I would try to speak like him, mad smile and all, yelling truths so heavy they hurt. But they never came out right, and I was left wondering what other poisonous secrets I was hiding. I needed his voice. I missed him.

Until Nathan died.



Linn's Kid Says Mom For The First Time

Daniel Gallik

Linda was over Linn's busted up
Buckeye apt. checking out the Sears
ad in a Sunday paper that was left
two doors down and never picked up,
and that gave her justification for
stealing it afore she went to Linn's
aforementioned duplex to chat about

today's life in a world that is so
full of bullshit you can't even
wade in it without fucking drowning.
The shit continued to roll when she
said to Linn, I think I'm gonna get
the hubby to buy me a new dress at
Sears this Valentine's Day. Linn

goes, c'mon Joeey, say sumpin. She
turns away in disgust. And Joeey
whispers, mom. Linn looks around
and starts crying straight out loud
and smiling at the same time, and
laughing her balls off. Shouts, o
my fucking god! Linda starts to

also weep with wonder. Joeey looks
up and smiles. All is happy for once
in a single, old life. Then Joeey
adds, that's what I like about life,
you smiling, Linda smiling, my damn
diaper changed & enough fucking milk.
Keep doing them, or I'll leave ya.

little boys
should not
be broken

Peter Schwartz

I remember begging
though I had already bore all
your fists, arms and ominous heart
could muster, begging you not
to use the belt
as if leather not skin
was the ultimate rejection
as if it meant you'd never touch me again
except from afar

down in the dirt

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Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

AlexRand@scars.tv
<http://scars.tv>

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