



down in the *dirt*
revealing all your
dirty little secrets

v.035
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

6/05, Down in the Dirt, volume 035

Sharon Esther Lampert.....	2
jm avril	2
Thomas Rucker.....	3
Ben Barton	3
Umesh Ghoshdastider	3
Jenny Newman	3
Gerald E. Sheagren.....	4
Christopher Barnes.....	9
Mel Waldman.....	10
Jen Pezzo	11
Linda Webb Aceto	12
Pat Dixon	12
Ryan Downey	15
Cynthia Ruth Lewis	16
kamuran kelly	17
Jonathan Kuntz.....	18
Colin Fleming.....	24
Christian Ward.....	32
Peter Layton	32
Jaz	33
Walker M. Hughes	34
Charles Cuthill.....	38
Angela Little.....	40
Janet Kuypers	41

Scars Cover art of a gyroscope in
Shanghai, China.

TSUNAMI

Sharon Esther Lampert

How many tears can the ocean hold?
What the history books
Don't tell you is that
The Indian Ocean was formed
By thousands of years
Of tears that flowed from
The fishermen of Sumatra.
Their pain was unbearable.
Their poverty was immeasurable.
Little to eat, little to wear,
Little to learn, too little work.
Abandoned and forsaken
Deep within their broken silent hearts
An echo was heard, the little earth quaked -
As it could no longer hold their tears.

Tens of thousands of tears overflowed
Deadly waves, crashing ashore
Sweeping their pain out from under
Their tattered rugs of impoverishment -
Out onto the front pages of newspapers worldwide.
Finally, the world took notice of their tears:
They sent care packages of food, clothing, shelter, schools, and cash.
They sent care packages of compassion, mercy, tolerance, and love.
The tears of the fisherman brought new life to tens of thousands in pain.
Salty, salty, sea water, tears of the fallen.
Salty, salty, sea water, heals the wounds of grief.
What the history books don't tell you is
How many tears can a human heart hold
Before it cracks beneath the surface
From the strain and pain and swells open
And learns how to love.

THE FUR

jm avril

The beast
Avenges itself
And, in the Ganges
You drown
You
wearing
The fur of this
Creature
That was, for sure,
Living being.

THUNDER STORM

Thomas Rucker

The rain came pouring down.
Thunder jarred the earth's
foundation and stony bottom.
Lightning streamed in flashing
array.
Water, fire and rumbles, came
in on that summer day.

SELFISH MIND

Umesh Ghoshdastider

May I trust anyone-
or even me with a selfish
and undecided mind,
which fails to keep its words.
This body has given only
sorrow with little happiness
although it pretends the opposite.
It hates the truth but seeks the evil
and keeps me in darkness.
I must control it to know the truth.

TEA IN VIENNA

Ben Barton

Brewed-up like a bad mood
She serves me a scowl
with yet more cake

UNTITLED

Jenny Newman

man, it seems so simple
when day goes dark
songs from the 30's
define and undo the
knot in my spine
drown giddy in this
girly wine
all the best drinks
are pink
yes, i'm feeling fine
enough to uncork my heart
and let loose my
girly whine, whaa
how silly it seems
afterwards, why can't
we all just pull from
the universal mind what
stops at the lips, fingertips,
whatever.

THE KILLING GROUND

Gerald E. Sheagren

The man lurked in the shadows of a building, the brim of an Alpine hat pulled low over his eyes, upturned collar shielding his ears from the wind-driven snow. The night was bone-chilling cold and he yearned for the warmth of his apartment, one of the current bestsellers and a snifter of his favorite cognac. But all that would come soon enough. Right now – he had an important mission to accomplish.

The man loved New York City. He loved its restaurants, its Broadway shows and museums, its ethnic diversity. But – most of all – he loved the Big Apple because it was the best killing ground in the whole world. He could choose a victim at random, strike when the time was right, and, within seconds, be lost down any number of side streets or back alleys. Los Angeles and Chicago had been good to him, but New York remained the ultimate high.

This afternoon, the voice had come to him earlier than usual, and much more urgent, even before he could turn off his computer at the stock exchange. He tried to shake it out of his head, but he knew he had little other choice than to do its bidding. “Kill!” it had commanded. “Go forth and kill another bitch!”

The man counted his victims on his fingers and came up with eight. No – that was wrong. There were nine in all, he was certain of that. On the third try, he finally remembered Elma Rodriguez. How in the world could he have ever forgotten her? Those big, chocolate-colored eyes, and the long raven hair that had fairly gleamed in the street light. That firm body and those bountiful breasts. And so innocent that it was laughable. Even when he had driven his knife into her, she had looked up at him as though he was doing it for her own good. Ah yes, dear sweet Elma. He had tacked the front page of the New York Post to the wall at the foot of his bed, so he would be able to dwell on her beautiful innocence before falling to sleep, and, again, upon awakening.

It was time to move on before he attracted any unwanted attention – especially from the police. After all, what sort of idiot would be idling about during a storm of this caliber? Choosing a southerly direction to keep the snow at his back, he remained in the shadows, the fast-mounting snow crunching beneath his boots. Why had the voice come to him dur-

ing such foul weather? Perhaps it was testing his resolve as it had during that earthquake in San Francisco. But he had come through with flying colors and he would do so again.

He had covered only a block when he saw the woman coming in his direction. He couldn't be certain, but probably a young woman by the way she moved. Her long blond hair and knee-length coat were sopping wet. What really attracted his attention was the fact that she was hobbling through the snow in a pair of high heels. Obviously she had gotten out of work late and was totally unprepared for the surprise storm. With her head lowered against the driving snow, she didn't see him approaching. Perfecto! Reaching for the pearl-handled switchblade in his pocket, he looked around for a suitable place to drag her out of sight. But, suddenly, with no more than thirty feet separating them, she turned down a narrow side street.

The little voice in his head grew frantic. "Hurry you idiot! Don't let her get away! The time is perfect – there's not a soul in sight! Don't screw this up!"

He quickened his pace – nearly running – his gloved fingers tight on the knife in his pocket. Up ahead, the woman leaned against a stoop, snatched off a shoe and emptied out a clod of snow. The man's heart started to thump as he closed the distance between them. Then, suddenly, a door opened, casting a wedge of light onto the stoop.

"Karen? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mom – better late than never."

"You poor dear. This storm was completely unexpected. And just look at you – soaked to the bone. Hurry, get in here, before you catch your death."

Cursing his luck, the man passed by without paying them the least bit of attention. Oh yes, dear mommy – she very nearly had caught her death.

The storm was growing in intensity, whipping snow against the man's face like tiny daggers. Even with a parka and heavy sweater, he was chilled clear to the bone. If he didn't make a move, soon, he would call it a wash and head home. The throbbing headache would come, but what the hell – he would just have to deal with it. Getting his bearings the best he could, he made a number of rights and lefts, heading for a small, out-of-the-way park that he knew about. It was a gathering place for transients and run-aways, and, perhaps, even on a night like this, there may be one or two in attendance. A long shot, yes, but there was little other choice.

The wind whistled down the narrow street, clicking snow off window panes. The few cars at the curb were completely buried, reminding him of sheet-draped furniture in some long-abandoned house. As he side-

stepped a lump of white – probably a fire hydrant – he bumped into someone who had appeared out of no where.

“Excuse me, sorry,” offered a male voice. “I didn’t see you in all this mess.”

The man’s heart skipped a beat as he looked into the broad, ruddy face – a silver badge affixed to the front of a fur-lined hat.

“That’s okay, officer. It was me who bumped into you.”

The policeman arched a snow-whitened brow. “It’s a hell of a night to be out and about.”

“I just got out of work, officer. Two more blocks and I’ll be home.”

“You be careful.” The cop sniffled and shivered. “This night isn’t fit for man nor beast.”

Nodding, the man hurried on his way, taking a quick glance over his shoulder. Not fit for man nor beast. Now, which was he? A little bit of both, he thought with a chuckle. Ah yes, indeed – a little bit of both. He hung a left onto another snow-encrusted street. If he remembered correctly, the park couldn’t be much more than a block away.

The police had invented many an imaginative name for serial killers: The Boston Strangler, The Night Stalker, The Green River Killer. Some of the more ambitious serials had conceived their own names, like “Son of Sam” and “Zodiac.” Feeling a bit left out, the man kicked up a flurry of snow with his boot. So far, all that he had been called was the “madman.” Well, all that would have to change and pretty darn quickly. He would have to think up some cute, yet diabolical name for himself. And, then, perhaps – a folksy letter to some editor, with his name scrawled in blood. Yes, yes, that would be perfect! Maybe he could dub himself “The Iceman” or “The Snow Stalker.” No, that wouldn’t work. His first three victims had been in the spring, four during the summer and two in the fall. Hhhmmm. How about “The Killer for all Seasons?” Nope, no go. It sounded like some damn novel.

But despite everything, there had been a bit of good news: an FBI profiler had referred to him as “a loner of above average intelligence.” A loner for sure, but “genius” would have been more like it. After all, he had been a National Honor Society member in high school and at the top of the dean’s list in college – Yale no less.

Ten minutes later, he spotted his objective in the distance, barely visible through the swirling snow. The park appeared empty, but as he drew closer, he thought that he spotted someone hunched on one of the benches. Circling around, he came upon the person from the rear, the howling wind silencing his approach. Yes, yes, it was a woman! A woman wear-

ing one of those frumpy velour hats with a fake rose attached, her red hair spiraling out like the coils of some broken box spring. A soiled fatigue jacket, an ankle-length, floral-print dress and a pair of combat boots completed one of the weirdest ensembles he had ever seen. At her feet rested a knapsack, and a Raggedy Ann doll, its hair as red and wild as her own.

The man walked past and did a double-take, feigning surprise. “Well hello there. What are you doing, sitting here, in such terrible weather?”

The woman shrugged.

“You know, miss – you can be an ice sculpture in the next hour.”

The woman shrugged again. “So? What’s it to you?”

“I didn’t mean to intrude or anything, but you just took me by surprise – sitting here during the worst storm of the winter.”

“Aaahhh. It’s nothing but a dusting.”

“Look – what about if you come home with me and I’ll give you a nice warm place to spend the night – a home-cooked meal and a hot shower – maybe some quality TV time. How’s that sound? What do you say?”

The woman’s hazel eyes flared. “Now why would you want to do something like that? You need a bed partner for the night. Huh? That’s it, isn’t it?”

The man noticed that she was kind of cute – especially when she got her hackles up. A little pug nose, spattered with freckles. Pert lips. Mile-white skin. Her body was completely hidden, but he imagined it as being firm and supple. If the Post could supply a picture, he would mount it on the wall right next to Elma Rodriquez.

“A bed partner? Heavens no – that thought hadn’t even crossed my mind.”

“I just bet.”

“I’m a Good Samaritan, is all. I feel that it’s my calling to help those less fortunate than myself.”

“Less fortunate, huh?” The woman bristled. “Is that what you think, mister high and mighty?”

“Look!” The man thought of slashing her throat right here and now, but held himself back. “Quit nitpicking over my words and come home with me before we both freeze to death. If you feel uncomfortable when you get there, you can leave at any time.”

“Well, I dunno.” The woman bit her lip in thought and stared down at her gloved hands for a moment. “Okay – I guess it’ll be all right. I hope you got some chocolate chip cookies at home.”

“I just might be able to accommodate you.”

“Great! Lead the way, Samaritan.”

They walked two blocks, pellets of snow slashing their faces. Glancing warily around, the man halted at an alleyway and motioned for her to follow.

“Why are you going down there? It looks awful dark to me.”

“It’s a short cut. Trust me.” The man grabbed hold of her arm, surprised at how spindly it felt. “I use this route all the time. It’ll bring us out a few feet from my door.”

“Hey, let go of my arm!”

“I’m sorry.”

The woman stared into the alley, blinking. “I dunno”

“For crying-out-loud! If you can’t trust me, let’s forget the whole thing.”

“Okay, okay. You go first.”

The man didn’t have the slightest idea where the alley led to, but it didn’t make any difference. It was precisely what the doctor had ordered – dark, secluded and not a soul in sight. He moved cautiously along - trying to look as though he was familiar with the place – listening to the deep breathing of the woman as she followed close behind. His own breathing was becoming more rapid, as it always did when the moment was close at hand. Pretty soon. Only a few steps further. He felt for the knife in his pocket.

“Bastard!”

The man froze, heart thudding. What in the hell had she just shouted? It sounded like — like —.

He was in the process of turning around when he felt the woman jump onto his back. Before he was able to utter a word, something hard and sharp and very cold was drawn across his throat. He tried to cry out, but there was only a gurgle. Taking a few faltering steps – with the woman still on his back – he wobbled for a moment and dropped to his knees. Red-Hair’s breath was warm against his ear and he heard her whisper “Goodbye, sweetie pie.” It didn’t seem possible, but the alley appeared to be getting even darker.

*** * ***

Detective Antonelli knelt down next to the body, and taking out a pen, he carefully pushed aside the dead man’s collar. The neck wound was deep, stretching nearly from ear-to-ear, the blood reminding him of frozen gelatin. A sudden chill – not attributed to the weather – coursed down the length of his spine.

“Quite a piece of work, huh, Lou?”

THE FALL AND RISE OF SALLY'S FALL

Christopher Barnes, UK

His partner leaned in closer, releasing a frosty gust of breath. "Nasty. Real nasty."

"There was nothing in his pockets – no wallet, no keys. No jewelry – nothing, nada."

"It looks as though we got ourselves a John Doe."

Antonelli traced his pen along the shredded shirt, until he came to a patch of bloodstained snow. "What do we have here?" Carefully brushing the snow aside, he stared at the letters P.J. that had been crudely carved into John Doe's chest. "Oh, sweet Jesus. Do you recognize the handiwork, Lou?"

"Boy, do I ever! Polly Jorgensen strikes again."

Antonelli thought about the woman who had escaped an upstate asylum, eluding capture for nearly a year. "Crazy Polly. This is what for her – number ten?"

"Ten even."

"Where in the hell is she hiding out?"

"Probably in plain sight."

Despite the circumstances, Antonelli couldn't help a chuckle. "That is one woman I wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

"Me neither. She hates men – hates them with a passion."

Sally's skull was made of china
a frumpy rose with laced collar
she had a skull that was made of china

Sally's eyes were doll-blank
dog-sad, oh oh Sally
only cried a single tear

Sally's nose was Country-Joe
Sally's mouth a slug
and the airplane tattoo on Sally's cheek
pointed to another Sally

Sally's hair was ploughed and raked
Sally's borders country thatch
ribboned all her smoke

Sally became a rose-giraffe
changed and bartered, then exchanged
her love-bugs for mug-drugs

Sally's birds smelled of thyme
on their wings she sulked
right to the top of a tower-block
mascara-long, she sulked

DISEASE OF THE SOUL

Mel Waldman

“He’s got the disease of the soul,”
the
Doc
says.
“His mind’s split.
A diagonal hole
in
his
brain,
a gold arrow
mocking,
maiming,
mutilating memory.”

The words vanish.
Launched from the Doc’s lips,
they make thoughts that

pass through
the man’s skull

&
out,

vibrations
in
Berkeley’s
empty forest

leaving no traces
no synaptic connections

for
the old man
who is only fifty
has the *Big A*.

He's gone away
to a barren place where nothing leaves a trace
nothing is perceived
therefore nothing exists
especially
the old young man
with the disease of the soul.

Still, I exist
once,
every light year,
for a billionth of a second.

I watch him
from a distance.
I watch.
Help me!
Please,
help me!
Call me!
Call my name!
Catch me!
Catch my soul!
Before ...
I'm banished to Berkeley's empty forest forever.
Forever
lost in a place
where nothing is perceived, nothing exists,
not even an old young man
or his vanishing mind.

SHINGLES

Jen Pezzo

infectuous the words lay idle
somewhere deep in the spine
one day I will puke their lies
and be cleansed of your evil

DIRTY GIRL

Linda Webb Aceto

Throw in the trowel.
This dirt is enough
to fill
wheelbarrows of shame
while the mud slides
choke back my blooms.

SONS OF ADAM

Pat Dixon

Clyde Mongate has to be the crudest bastard I've ever known. Fifty years ago, when I was in the National Guard

up in Alaska, he was one of the platoon sergeants we all had to put up with. It was a raggedy-ass outfit of goofballs and screw-ups, like most Guard units back then, and we didn't do much for the pay and retirement time we put in, but I guess we did serve as some president's master plan for keeping the ol' U.S. of A. totally safe from Communism, Canadians, Bellinghamsters--or something.

Most of the men just drifted in late to weekend meetings, played cards, watched TV, went out for beers and pizzas, and took turns wrestling with their honeys in the back of the deuce-an'-a-half trucks. Some of us officers went through the motions of giving training classes on current and future weapons, chemical-biological-radiological warfare, the enemy around us, physical security, equipment maintenance, and the like, and a few of us fiddled and diddled with records keeping, especially whenever a brigade or an I.G. inspection was coming up. Most of our work was rated "disgraceful" whenever these inspections were given, but most of us, as they say in the real military, "could care less."

Sgt. Mongate was a man about my own age, 29, and about the same size, but in much better shape and seemingly fearless when it came to saying to everybody whatever was on his mind, including inspecting colonels. He also had a habit of getting physical with a lot of the men and some of the other sergeants, and none of us officers really dared to correct him, including our ol' man, Major Ziller, who was a bit of a joke in his own right. He could never stay in step at summer-camp parades, and, because he was always giving a little jump every four or five steps to try to get synchronized with the rest of us, we nicknamed him Major Hippity-Hopper. But that's another story.

Ol' Clyde Mongate was fairly damn gross in his humor, too. Besides smiling in a squinty way while he was slapping someone around, he was

full of the foulest so-called jokes and stories we'd ever heard, and he would come into the orderly room and tell 'em non-stop some days, probably knowing that we, especially Major Z., didn't like 'em but didn't dare say anything. At most, some of us lieutenants and captains would get up and say we had to give a class or had to go to the latrine or something.

Worst thing of all was Clyde seems to have been on a special diet designed to irritate us, because he'd often punctuate his stories by raising his leg and breaking wind in the loudest, longest, rippingest noises we'd ever heard come from a human body, and he would usually make some comment of self-congratulation such as "Boy, whatever died inside o' me sure smells sweet now, don't she, Major?" Usually some of us would open a couple of windows even in January, while Clyde laughed and fanned the air around his butt with Major Z.'s newspaper.

The closest thing to poetic justice came when we had one of those periodic earthquakes up here, and we were called out to assist, though some of us doubted anyone had the authority to do that to us. Our unit was sent to a nearby coastal town that had had heavy flooding destroy most of it. We were supposed to help keep looting to a minimum and assist in the recovery of any bodies. Sgt. Mongate looked forward to the duty as if it was literally a picnic. In fact, he made sure that the men under him had loaded six cases of beer and half a case of Canadian whiskey into his platoon's truck before we left, though the ol' man had expressly forbidden anybody to bring along alcoholic beverages of any kind. Before we moved out in our vehicles, Clyde even teased Major Z. by saying he was bringing one or two of his girlfriends with him, though he didn't really do that.

When we arrive at the disaster site we'd been assigned to, it was all pretty grim and pathetic. Little cats and dogs and a few full-grown huskies were dead and bloated in the wet, slimy streets, and Sgt. Mongate strutted around and poked many of 'em with an old ski pole he'd found to try to make 'em pop. Some times he'd pick up the body of somebody's pet and toss it at one of the men or at another sergeant as a kind of joke. Once he jumped up and down on a drowned collie to make its corpse fart when Major Z. was walking by.

We only found two human bodies, an old woman's and a young Indian man's. Clyde pulled the woman's shirt open to expose her bare chest and bloated belly, and most of us shut our eyes and turned away. The man's body, which had been in the sun, was even more bloated, and its right arm was nearly torn off from where a pickup truck had rolled over on him. While most of us stood back about ten feet from the ripe, water-soaked

corpse, Clyde went right up to it, grabbed its right hand as if in greeting, shook it heartily, and laughed in his characteristic way. Then, fascinated by the looseness of the arm, he bent down to examine the cause.

“This son of a bitch will need to be fingerprinted for I.D. purposes, Major. And we don’t want any material evidence to fall off and get lost, do we?” said Clyde, as he put his right foot in the corpse’s armpit and pulled on the arm with both hands, the way doctors or medics do when they’re trying to put a dislocated shoulder back in place. Ol’ Clyde, of course, was just trying to rip the poor dead guy’s arm off.

Strong as he was, though, Clyde could not get the corpse’s tendons and muscles to give way, so he bent down with his large pocket knife and cut away the flannel shirt sleeve and then began jabbing and sawing away at the dead flesh. It must have taken him five minutes to succeed, and then he held the arm aloft and shook it as if in victory. Finally, Clyde undid the dead man’s wide leather belt and jeans. All of us watched and said nothing, as if hypnotized by the grossness of it. Clyde stuffed the severed arm, stump first, into the waist of the corpse’s undershorts, made a gross comment about him having a huge five-fingered penis that would please all the ladies, even when dead, and then he fastened the corpse’s belt tightly over its elbow.

“There, Chief,” he said. “That should hold you till the coroner gets y’! Just remember to shake it well next time y’ take a piss!”

The ol’ man just stood looking off at the low gray clouds hanging over the inlet and sucked on his unlit pipe while one of the lieutenants had the two bodies covered with blankets and carried up to the field ambulance on a couple of stretchers. We continued to look for more bodies but fortunately found no more, and around two in the afternoon we had our late noon meal.

Luke-warm burgers, cheese-covered sliced potatoes, boiled carrot wheels, G.I. coffee, and a couple of glazed donuts were served up from our so-called field kitchen. Most of us had little appetite for a couple of reasons, but Sgt. Mongate sent one of the privates back through the line twice to refill his tray for him. Then he openly poured whiskey into his coffee cup, looking straight at our commander.

“Really great chow, Major Z.!” he said. “The only thing I miss is the G.I. beans we get served every weekend back at the Guard center. No appetite, Captain? ‘S matter, Lieutenant? You ain’t touchin’ your food. ‘S a shame to waste good food!”

Clyde smirked and then looked up and saw that a couple of the pri-

vates were passing out large apples among the men.

“Hey, turd! Yeah, you! Gi’ me three o’ them apples--now!”

One by one, Clyde took the three apples, held them up above eye level as if he was appraising pearls or diamonds, and then he carefully peeled them, cut them into eighths, and devoured them. We watched his performance as if we were watching him having sex in a porno movie. Each of his moves was exaggerated and self-conscious because he had an audience’s attention. He was the only person still eating, and he licked each wedge of apple in an almost obscene manner. When he was done, he licked his pocket knife’s blade carefully on both sides.

“Don’t want to lose any o’ the healthy juices,” he said. “They’re the sweetest part, and I understand from my informants that they’re chock full o’ vitamins. Got t’ keep up my strength for this mission, right, Major?”

Sgt. Mongate was looking right at Major Z. in a familiar, insolent manner as they each sat on the running boards of two deuce-an’-a-half trucks about twelve feet apart. The ol’ man, like the rest of us, had watched Mongate’s performance in silence for the last ten minutes. Now Major Z. took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, smiled in his mild way, and cleared his throat.

“Sgt. Mongate,” he said, “isn’t that the same pocket knife you used only an hour ago to saw off the arm of that bloated wet cadaver down there?”

Clyde’s smile froze and his eyes became oddly unfocused as he considered his commander’s question. His mouth drooped open, and then suddenly pieces of his burgers, potatoes, half-chewed carrot wheels, whiskey-coffee, donuts, and chunks of apple all came up. Clyde tried to lean forward, but from his slouched position on the running board he was unsuccessful. Most of his meal landed on his lower chest and lap, and some went as far as his knees. By the time he was vertical, the dry heaves had begun.

The ol’ man smiled, struck a match, slowly drew in on his pipe, and nodded his head twice in satisfaction.

**IF YOU
KNOW HIM,
AND
YOU DO**

Ryan Downey

Half magician, half man
All deception.
Tricks need not be named
Only observed.
Words need no introduction
Just sound.
And ears should not hear
But bleed.
Blood washes the sheets
Make the bed.

YEARS AFTERWARD, CROUCHED ON A COLD BATHROOM FLOOR

Cynthia Ruth Lewis

It all seemed like a million
years ago

we were sitting in the sun bright
kitchen talking about our childhood,
remembering the good times,
laughing and trying to recollect
exact events--which car trip it
was where you lost your G.I.Joe
at a rest stop and had a temper
tantrum for days on end, and the
time you played God and jumped
off the roof to impress your friends,
the little nerd down the street
who dared me to eat a worm which
I threw up moments later, the
endless clubhouse fights, bike
races and skinned knees, and the
time you hid Dad's wallet but
couldn't remember where and I got
punished for it, and we're laughing
so hard the tears are rolling and
all the while you keep fidgeting
with your sleeves, tugging at them,
trying to cover the scars on your
wrists

ALPHABET SOUP

kamuran kelly

.....

a+b+c+d+e+f+g+h+i+j+k
+l+m+n+o+p+q+r+s+b+t
+l+u+o+l+v+h+w+x+y+h
+i+z= 1

h+i+z+h+w+x+y+b+t+l+u
+o+l+v+p+q+r+s+k+l+m
+n+a+b+c+d+e+f+g+h+i+
j= 2

f+d+c+a+b+g+h+i+j+k+q
+p+r+m+s+h+u+x+y+z= 3

l+w+o+i+u+h+n+r+v+y+
h+x+b+t+j= 4

*(a concept. different permu -
tations of the same poem. it
can be read straight through,
and/or using any of the com -
binations listed.)*

slowly (a)
slipping (b)
slim (c)
fingers (d)
between (e)
his (f)
cradle (g)
a (h)
new (i)
civilization (j)
minus (k)
the (l)
dark (m)
continent (n)
of (o)
lashless (p)
eyes (q)
naked (r)
voids (s)
slipping (b)
through (t)
the (l)
heart (u)
of (o)
the (l)
matter (v)
a (h)
floor (w)
crack (x)
creates (y)
a (h)
new (i)
dimension (z)

RUDY'S BUS STOP

Jonathan Kuntz

Rudy was beginning to regain consciousness. He waited fearfully to find out if the searing pain would return. It did not. He opened his eyes and saw a small group of people standing over him, while staring down to the curb where he was lying. He knew none of them. They were all talking loudly, while making hand and arm motions to accent their speech. Rudy understood none of it.

He was remembering some things now. It's Springtime in New York City: balmy breezes, a light sprinkle of rain, and flowers along the avenues. The flowers weren't on bushes, they were part of sidewalk sales, but their beauty and scents were real. What was he doing here, and why were these people above him being so animated?

He remembered, he needed to get a particular bus, and he was almost to the bus stop when he spied it approaching. Rudy was on the wrong side of the street. He ran through six congested lanes of traffic and made it ahead of the bus, almost! His foot went through the broken lid of a manhole cover. It had a 13" hole gaping hole in it's rusty lid, and it was holding Rudy's foot. He tried and tried to free it. The bus was now coming his way, and the driver wasn't even trying to avoid him. He thought, "The driver doesn't see me, and I can't bend my legs, unless I can turn on my back." Rudy tried his best to flip over. It didn't work. The right front wheel of the bus went over his legs, and as fate would have it, he was rolled by the bus tire and came to rest on his back.

Rudy could remember a tremendous amount of pain. He wasn't aware that he was screaming, but he heard screams as he passed out.

"What are these people doing? Why are they staring at me? Why are they rambling on? Don't they have somewhere to go, or something to do?" Rudy's mind was active with questions, but he wasn't getting answers. Maybe if he caught just one person's attention, he could get some answers. He was unable to do that.

Rudy became aware of his position. The middle of his spine was on the top corner of the street curbing, about 5" above the street level. He could feel the pressure point. What annoyed him more, was the angle at which he had to hold his head and neck. If he relaxed, his crown would rest on the sidewalk. In that position, about all he could see was knee level of the crowd

around him. He much preferred to hold his head off the sidewalk.

Looking down across his abdomen, he saw his body come to an abrupt end where the rear, dually wheels of the bus were resting on him. The lower part of his body was as flat as a ribbon.

Rudy thought it strange that there was very little blood. Even more strange was the lack of pain. He was probably better off if the wheels stayed on him. Then again, he wasn't going to go about with a bus on him. At last he understood the crowd of people, sort of. He was the unwitting, main attraction.

Rudy continued to assess his situation. Both of his hands and arms were fully functional. He was getting a crimp in his neck from holding his head off the payment. His heartbeat seemed steady, and he was breathing ok. He thought his first job would be to get the attention of one of these sidewalk gawkers, hopefully to get some help. It hurt if he yelled, so he reached for the pants of an elderly man and started tugging on the cuffs.

The old man jerked his head down and saw Rudy's stare. "Hi there little fella. How ya doin'?"

"God!" Thought Rudy. "How can he ask me a question like that? How do I answer a question like that?"

"You ever have all your blood changed out? I did. In October of '98, that's when. No, it was August, because it was so darn hot. They took me to the hospital in an ambulance where the air conditioner wasn't working. Then this group of medical people were standing around my bed talking about me, as if I wasn't there. That's when they hooked me up to some machine and started to switch out my blood. You ever hear of that? The replacement blood was burning the inside of my vessels like you couldn't believe. Eventually, I got a pain pill. It turned out..."

The old man was abruptly interrupted when a rather large woman burst into the ring of spectators. She was wearing a two piece, beige business suit in a tweed. Her hair was done in a large puff-ball; colored platinum. Accompanying her was a small poodle, also sporting round puff-balls on each leg, the tail, hips and head. The poodle's hair was the same color as the woman's.

She started to speak right away, squelching the old man. She looked down at Rudy, "I don't know what you're doing here, young man, but you're blocking the entire sidewalk, and Betsy and I can't get through. We walk by here everyday. Betsy likes routine, and you are upsetting her."

Rudy couldn't get a word in. The lady was rambling on, oblivious

to anyone else, not caring if she had listeners. Rudy saw the poodle lapping up some of his blood from the street. He thought, "This is going to send her ballistic."

Rudy was pointing, trying to get her attention to the dog, which he eventually did. She saw her dog and let out a yell that sounded like a giant cork being "popped" out of a champagne bottle combined with a sonic boom. She waddled over to the poodle and scooped it up with a practiced hand. "You're a bad girl. You're not Mummy's friend, today. Look at this, all over your mouth and chin, you look like some kind of wild animal. No more walk, you're going straight home and get your face cleaned." She disappeared into the crowd with her dog hanging over her arm, so it wouldn't get blood on "Mummy's" clothing.

Rudy could see the crowd was getting bigger all the time. Suddenly, a man crouched down beside him, and began shaking his hand, almost violently. He had blond hair which was cut short, a flattop. Rudy could tell the guy must be rich, because he was wearing a very expensive suit of shark skin. But, the immediate problem for Rudy was to get the guy to stop pumping his arm. It was beginning to hurt.

He started shouting in Rudy's ear, "Hey, you got a good case here. I could get you millions for this. Here, I'm putting my card in your pocket. It's Simonson and Simonson, Attorneys at Law. There isn't really another Simonson, but don't you think it sounds better this way? Listen, you really need to call me as soon as you can. Don't lose my card. This is going to be big money for you kid."

A woman was leaning over the lawyer. She was showing Rudy a very expensive watch she just received as a present from her company for twenty-five years of service.

A kid came up with a big, "slop-dog", which started licking Rudy's face with a tongue the size of an aircraft carrier. Rudy wanted to fend off the dog, but he didn't have the strength.

A middle-aged man, leaning over the dog, was thrusting a business card at Rudy. "Hey kid, this is your lucky day. I'm going to promote you to the hilt. I'm Sam Seitweiler. It says so, right here on this card. Son, I'm the biggest promoter New York has ever seen, and it's seen some big ones. P.T. Barnum comes to mind. I'm gonna' get you a cool million our first year together. You'll be on talk shows, in advertising; maybe even a movie, or two."

The pressure of the crowd was slowly moving Sam Seitweiler away from Rudy's view. Rudy could hear him talking while he was being shuf-

fled along in the crowd. Sam was still pitching.

At long last, two EMT's showed up and sat down beside him on the curb. One of them spoke, "How're ya doing buddy? Got yourself into a situation here, I see." Rudy just nodded. "I'm afraid we got some bad news for ya. The hospital told us not to do anything. The ER doctor said you're 'triaged' out of the system."

Rudy gave a visible start when he heard that. "What does that mean?"

The EMT picked right up with an explanation. "Oh, that means they don't do nothing, because you're too far gone, know what I mean?"

Rudy didn't reply to the EMT. He thought, "I'm going to die anyway, so they're not going to treat me." He was imagining what it meant, for the last Titanic survivor to slip getting out of the lifeboat, fall, and break his neck. That's what he felt like, although he didn't know if such a thing happened.

Eventually, the two EMTs wandered off into the crowd. Their place on the curb was immediately taken. She was a fair looking woman with a musing look to her. It was as if she were showing half grin and half grim. Said she was a nurse. She wanted to know if she could do anything for Rudy. After he explained the problems he was having, she gave him a pat on the arm and left. To Rudy's delight, she wasn't gone long. She returned with treasures; treasures to Rudy. She had a pillow for his head, a folded blanket for his tortured back, another blanket to keep him warm, and a large bottle of drinking water. She arranged everything so Rudy would be comfortable, then she departed. Rudy thought she must be an angel.

It was starting to get dark, and with it, the damp chill of the street settled in. Rudy couldn't know, but he sensed that the crowd was growing ever larger. More and more people looked down at him and wanted to know what happened. He couldn't answer everybody's questions, he was too weak.

A middle-aged woman poked her head through the crowd to inquire also. She had mouse-brown hair trying to look blond, in a perm. She was wearing a gray skirt with a fuchsia blouse. She applied lipstick very lavishly, a Corvette red, and she didn't 'stay within the lines.' Her mascara was so thick, she gave the impression of a raccoon. She wanted to know what happened.

"What's your name?" Rudy asked.

"Dorry. What's yours?"

She had the very thick, nasal quality of speech that New Yorkers value. Rudy figured she worked in an office.

“My name’s Rudy” he replied. “Tell me, are you a secretary?”

“Glad to make your acquaintance, Rudy. Yea, I’m a secretary. Why do you wanna know?”

“Well, Dorry, you can be my secretary. I mean right here on the sidewalk. All these people ask me what happened, and I can’t be repeating the story again and again. I’ll have you tell them. What do you think of that? Can you do that?”

“Well, yea, sure Rudy, if that’s what you want. Only thing is you gotta tell me what happened.”

Rudy explained the whole incident to Dorry and carefully answered her questions. He wondered how large the crowd had grown, because the background humdrum was getting ever louder.

Suddenly, he was blinded by some very large and bright lights. In an instant, he could feel the heat from them. A woman looked down at him. Her hair must have been varnished, because not one strand moved with the breeze nor became a slave to gravity. The face also looked trapped in plastic. There was not a line, crease or pore showing. She wore a very conservative woman’s business suit, in gray. Rudy thought there were shoulder pads in the jacket.

“Hi! I’m Susie Whittler, from WNYC 7, your local news station. How long have you been lying here like this? What happened to you? I know our viewers would love to know.”

Rudy didn’t even try to answer her. Instead, he called Dorry over. “Dorry,” he said, “Answer this woman’s questions, please. She wants to know what happened.”

Dorry was hesitant. “You want me to tell the news lady what happened? OK...! Ah, tell me again, what is it I’m supposed to say?”

Rudy was thinking, “Say ‘goodnight’ Dorry.”

Rudy was trying to talk to the newswoman, but someone else was wiping his face and putting makeup on him. “God.” Thought Rudy, “What’s next?” He didn’t have long to wait for an answer.

There was a growing crowd of people on top of the bus. They were taking his picture with flash cameras. Others had gone inside the bus, and having removed or opened windows, were also taking pictures of him. Some teen aged boys climbed on top of the bus and were intentionally jumping to intensify the motion. All the moving around was causing the bus to rock. Rudy could feel these movements of the bus as sharp bursts of pain going up his spine.

Darkness came upon the City, respecting no one. Even so, Rudy had

a sense the crowd was still growing. He felt very tired. If only, he could get rid of the TV lights and flash cameras.

His arms were slowly losing their feeling. Somebody came and hooked an IV to him. It was supposed to give him nourishment. He gave himself a modicum of comfort by thinking of the green forests of his Pennsylvania home. He wondered if his family knew what happened to him. They were against his coming to the City, but he explained it was the best place to get a residency in architecture.

All night long news reports kept updating Rudy's plight. It wasn't long before national and international news teams were covering the scene. Shortly before midnight, the mayor's office was notified of the immense crowd gathering in Manhattan. The governor ordered National Guard call-ups for crowd control. The island was barricaded against any traffic trying to enter.

An estimated 250,000 people were expected on the island by morning unless the authorities could make some containment. The sky above wasn't exempt from congestion. Helicopters of the local news stations, combined with those of the national news companies, the Metropolitan Police choppers and assorted military craft were sharing airspace originally intended for a couple of pigeons.

Rudy was getting weaker by the hour. He didn't think he had much time left so he was ready to give up his life, the way desperate people often do, to escape the pain. He tried to signal to the boys on top of the bus, but it only caused them to laugh and jump even harder. He had long noticed the diesel fuel under the bus slowly trickling toward the gutter about his waist level.

Rudy got the attention of one of the spectators and asked him for a cigarette. That was proffered with a lighter. Rudy lighted the cigarette and inhaled on it, then reached down to the gutter and struck the lighter once more. The fuel caught although it wasn't a high flame, still Rudy noticed the fire carried by the fuel, was flowing under a car immediately in front of the bus. When the car's gas tank exploded, everyone panicked. There were pieces of the car falling out of the air, some of it burning. Rudy noticed the boys on top of the bus were scrambling to get down. Some of their clothing was on fire. Then the gas tank on another car, on the other side of the bus exploded and engulfed the under side of the bus and Rudy. Nobody heard Rudy's last words, but one would think he was glad to have it end.

THE BEE'S KNEES

Colin Fleming

Just to hear her was enough for me. She was as loud as anyone I knew. She talked loud. I could understand that. I had a friend. He was Italian. So was his family. They were the loudest people I ever heard. You couldn't talk to any of them on the phone and have your ear up against the receiver. They were just too loud for that. She was like them. Loud. Jolly loud almost. It wasn't like she yelled just to be heard. Hardly. Or like when you're pissed off, or soused, and you just gotta give it that extra loud, 'cause--you know. She was just banging in the ears loud even when she wasn't trying. I felt kind of bad for her for a second when I heard her before I saw her. She was behind me then and we hadn't met.

Stanley's loud too, but not like her. He's the super in our building.

He's Polish. He told me that right when I got here the first time and we shook hands. I guess it's important to him. He's loud, but you never know what he's saying. I'm not even sure if he talks in words, so I don't know how you measure how loud he is. He lent me a book on Krakow once. We're not mates or anything.

He's too old for that. A nice enough book though and the pictures. I tried to ask him whether Polish people paint the bricks on the tops of their buildings, or if they just got bricks of all different colors and stuck them together, because it kind of looked that way too. But Stanley didn't know. He'd just say "Ludza."

And I'd say, "why'd you say Ludza, Stanley?"

"Ludza. People."

"Oh, I see." As if anyone could.

I liked his overalls though. He doesn't wear them much anymore. Now he goes for a vest with gold stitching. It's blue and the stitching is gold and he has glasses too with silver frames, but the part that presses his nose so he has to rub it is sort of gold, and I don't know about this look. It's off with the glasses when he talks to you, like he's all serious, but once when I came down to see him he was reading something and he still had them off, so I'm not exactly sure what they're for. It's hard to figure with Stanley.

Back when she was always around his look was better. Up with some style.

I always wanted to get a pair of overalls like his. Fetching. But that's a big

statement, a lot of “out there” flash, do you know what I mean? Stanley doesn’t have much flash, usually, but neither did she. They’re both loud though. Or she was. I hardly ever hear her these days. The last time I saw her, I don’t even remember when, I saw her out my window walking. She was carrying coffee in a cardboard tray, two cups. It was cold I remember. It was cloudy and sad with the clouds and she was the only person out walking, I guess because it was going to snow, but maybe it already had, a little, because I remember trying to count the footprints she left so I’d know how many steps long our block was. I was bored and she was there and it seemed normal enough, but it was hard to see her anyway.

I tried to squint and she was still fuzzy. She was fuzzy, too, that first time we met because she was so close which was a lot different. Like right in my face. Not exactly, but real close. I remembered how close she got then when I heard her later, in her place next to mine. We share a wall. It was like she was further away but I knew she was close too. Kind of confusing. When I asked him, Stanley said it was because the walls were so thin. Whatever.

It was important for me to try and think about what she had on so I could get a picture in my head to go with that voice. So loud. A voice with flash. But I couldn’t see it with the clothes she wore. She always had shorts on when I saw her in the halls. And a t-shirt too. She changed that a lot. I don’t think I ever saw the same one on her twice. Even when I got to thinking about how she looked in her place being so loud, on the phone, yelling out the window (lots of people walk on the street outside), singing music to herself that didn’t seem to have any words, I just couldn’t imagine more than her t-shirts.

She hadn’t given me much to go on. It’s just that maybe she should have dressed fancier to bring that much attention, do you know what I mean?

Her hair must have been scratchy because I swear you could even hear that too, when I was in my place and she was in her’s. Like she cut some off and stuck it on a broom to clean the walls. So scratchy, I could almost get to predicting when her hair would rub up against the wall. I knew that. And how her hair shot out too. That first time when I met her there were clumps of it poking out all around her head, out under this hat she had on that looked more like a Frisbee. I think it was green but it might have been closer to blue. But it wasn’t all about the hat. That first time when she backed away there were her eyes too. Maybe it was me. You can’t blame a guy if he notices things. Wild wild eyes. Almost freaked. And big and wet. Cows’ eyes. Not irritated wet like when your allergies are acting up, just wet wet. A good kind. Very ladylike. They wouldn’t work on a guy. And even though I

thought they went with that voice, the way everything on her seemed to, I couldn't picture them when I just heard her and couldn't see. Even later, another time, when some other voice said something about them and she said thanks, in her place, I heard it through the wall, real loud, I couldn't stop myself from wondering if he noticed what I noticed too, only I just couldn't recall exactly. To make a sort of picture of it I mean.

So maybe I'm thinking she had lots of guys. I'm not gonna be green about it. But so many, most of them must just have been good friends. One was good at moving stuff, or at least she tricked him into thinking he was, because a lot at night I heard furniture scraping the floor, and he dragged it enough to shake my wall. He also got it so I knew exactly when he came and when he left. He was a real door slammer. I wasn't a big fan.

When I did see her, I tried to make a good show. Why not, you know what I mean? I would have been open to it (I like how I put it like that). We had the same kind of Walkman, that yellow kind that you can drop again and again and it still works. Maybe if it even hits a rock. Top of the line. I'm not sure if she had it on when we met. I think she did. There was that hat like I said. But I noticed her Walkman each time in the hall afterwards. (A good thing about a loud person next door is that you can hear them so loud that you know when they're getting ready to leave, and if you want to you can leave then too but that's just if you want to say something in person.) I didn't make a habit of it, but sometimes I asked anyway what she was listening to, especially if I had mine on. You never know, right?

"Heyding," she would say.

"Oh, how's he?"

"Don't you like him?"

"He's alright, you know what I mean?"

It was always her and her Heyding.

I didn't like how she'd look after we'd talk like that. It was other things too. Sometimes just when I asked what she'd been up to. I always leaned on the wall when I said something like that. In the hallway. So she'd know I could be cool about it. And she'd ask me back. And then she'd wrinkle up her nose. She had a way with that. And making it seem like we sometimes asked each other too many questions.

I always told my mate Teffle about her. Maybe not always, but enough. I didn't want him taking it too far. You pronounce his name a little like Whiffle, you know, as in the bat, but with a T. It doesn't quite rhyme right, but it's close. Close enough. He asked if I liked her and I said I guess, and when that was done he always said that people like things they can't get. Teffle always says stuff that you just sort of nod to, like he means well

but sometimes he's off a bit. I always want things more when I think I can get them. I guess Teffle just sees things different.

Teffle was over a lot so he saw her sometimes. You could hear her shut her door when she left to go out, and then you could stand at the peep hole and look out and see, if you wanted to. I guess Teffle did, because first chance he had a look. Of course, I had really built her up, really nice description. Spot on. I nailed the hair part of her. One night before she left, with her still in that is, he walked right up to her door. Easiest thing in the world for him.

"You like her my man, let's just borrow us some sugar." Fine with me. Whatever it takes. That's what I told Teffle. He could be alright. He'd go the distance for a mate. That's what he always said. Then he'd say that he was my uncle. I let Teffle get away with saying things like that.

And then there they were. He came back with her. It was about a five minute wait. I hadn't expected her to be with him. Or him like that either really. He didn't have any sugar with him. And neither did she. He even introduced us again. She smiled, so I gave it back. I had the microwave going for coffee so nothing was too obvious. When Teffle said that I was his man, I didn't even know how to look. I pretended to see something on the floor. Then I said "fucking hell." It always helps to swear at something, even if nothing's there, when you don't know what to say. She asked what was wrong, and I thought that was obvious, so I said nothing and then she just shook my hand again and left, like she had something to get back to. I didn't really ask Teffle what that was, because I didn't really want to know, but I sort of put something out there, and he just said he didn't think it was that at all. She must have had a casserole on or something like that, you know how they are, and I said "yeah" and we had a beer.

We played pool a lot or we didn't really that much because when we started to we'd all just get to talking instead. Me and Teffle and the others too. They'd come and go, people whose names you never get down, you just call them buddy, like they were, or big chief, which everyone seems to like. They liked to talk about girls and had no problem saying so. I prefer a bit more class. Ladies. I like that.

Teffle would get it going anyway though, girls, ladies, mothers, wenches. They were all some form of that, he'd say. You'd want to watch Teffle after he had a few. He'd chalk up his stick. When he did it for really long, you knew he was going to say something. He liked to say things to me. Needling a bit.

"Weren't you wearing those jeans yesterday?"

"It was a laundry day."

“Doesn’t look like it was much of one.”

“How’s that?”

“They’re dirty as fuck.”

“Maybe I forgot to put them in.”

“See that you don’t next time.”

“Okay Teffle.”

Everyone liked Teffle. He’d bring it.

He’s funny. I sometimes thought she was too. I know that if I was really loud I’d want a good reason for it. Being funny is a good one. And if you are, you want people to know. So maybe you’d be loud a lot. I don’t know about Stanley. Maybe he’s funny in Polish. But maybe she wasn’t. It’s a thin line mates. That’s a Teffle. (You can use his name like that, too. He gets a kick out of it.) But let me tell you this: funniness isn’t weirdness. A lot of people get them mixed up. I had a girlfriend once, one of them, and she really liked watching basketball on television. At first I thought she hated basketball but maybe that was because she didn’t like me watching it with the sound up so loud.

She wasn’t that funny. This one guy she liked, all big and white and clunky, she even told me once that she wanted to lick his arms. That freaked me. She couldn’t leave it though. I would’ve. I wouldn’t even have said it if I thought it. That’d be for getting the sweat off she said. But you know, sera.

None of us really liked her. Teffle said she would be the death of me.

She played mind games he said. I told him that I got rid of her, but she really got rid of me. She met someone else. We weren’t compatible. That was one of her’s. But I liked her look. It wasn’t something you saw everyday, but if you looked enough you could find other girls who sort of had it too. I used to hope, when I heard her all loud and all, that Laura might guess I thought she had it.

It’s not something you just come out and say. At least not to the person who has it. Then you just maybe make it go. That’s not as good and it can be confusing.

People are everywhere, and you gotta keep some of them looking different. And like I said, you don’t want it to get confusing.

The first day might have been the best. I’m not going to lie to you. It was, for certain, okay? Before I heard her too much, and thought too much about hearing her so often. We kept it simple back in the day. When I helped her with moving even before I met her. All of it was good then. Or was about to be.

That’s the best time, when you think you might be open to something (you never know), do you know what I mean? (Oh yes--that’s her name,

Laura. I guess I should have pointed that out before. But there you are.) I like a girl with a European name. Someone was supposed to help her move, but he didn't show, so Stanley got me to give a hand. I don't know why he was involved in the first place. Maybe he had a relative who knew her family and they asked him to help out because he was going to be home anyway. You can find out anything these days if you want to. Even about Stanley. Of course he's pretty loud himself, so he probably just blurted it out that he was going to be around and so why not?

Maybe when she came for walking through her apartment that was going to be hers she heard him. And who's going to refuse an offer like that? I know people who have jumped at less.

He wanked it out that day when she moved in. Mostly hiding in front of the truck, sucking wind even though he wasn't doing anything. But he couldn't stop from saying "Ludza," so I'd say "what's that Stanley?" and he'd work for a minute or two. He's pretty old you know. I like him. But that's not why I'm telling you.

With it being her first day in the building and all, I figured we'd try and make a good first impression. I knew she was a girl. Ha. Sorry. I mean, Stanley said, "how do you say," then he said something sounding like "girl," that's who we were going to be moving, so I caught his gist. Stanley said it was good to be neighborly.

She was late in showing, and we were half-way done. The truck had got there early and we never saw the driver. Weird. But maybe he had other vans to drive that day. It was kind of hot which was a bit off for that time of year.

But wait a day if you don't like it. That's an old one. I thought it was kind of rude, her not being there for the start. Like she expected servants. Good thing she looked nice enough, like she felt bad. She said she was "detained." Stanley was like an actor. He was too quick with that stupid neighborly line of his. "It is, how you say, good to be...." She smiled when he said that. I caught his look. Like he was waiting for her to say something bad. His gut shook a little like he was scared. And when he tried to say something else, he spit by accident. A little, but enough. She didn't even brush it off her face. Pretended it wasn't there. And she smiled at him looking all stupid. He could be the foreman she said. And Stanley cracked a grin like his dream had finally come true. I guess he knew that word foreman. A super probably should. It's his business. And that was her kind of flash, making Stanley to look all like that.

I bet she could do that with anyone. Even if she looked a mess. On a guy that sweat would have been gross. It was all over her. On her forehead. I could count the bubbles of it. And beneath her arms. Big moons of it.

And on her shirt too.

Like a river. All that on a guy, I would've turned and ran 'cause it would've been like he had something and I wouldn't want to get it myself. But it wasn't like that with her.

We went on for awhile and I got bored and started to think. She only carried the really light stuff but if that was the best she could do, at least she made a good show of it. I kind of liked her just for trying. Teffle's big saying was that you couldn't go wrong if you asked a girl to have a cup of coffee with you. I tried it once. It went alright. But that was his trick. He said it never failed. And I was bored and thinking. So I asked her when we were about done. We'd only spoken just a little bit, so it wasn't like we had become friends or anything, so you couldn't say that we had crossed that line and anything else would be awkward and a mistake. It would have to be ice coffee because with the heat. I was flexible at least. So I asked her if she wanted to and it was nearly dark, but she still said another time. It was very hot. And it was. Only I guess she didn't know that you could get cold coffee too, but I wasn't gonna point that out just then. You wait a bit. And since it was a Tuesday then, I figured I'd ask again Thursday. Enough time be casual with it.

But I didn't see her that day even though I spent hours down in the basement doing laundry. That's where I usually see everyone in the building. I guess she had lots of clean clothes. I guess you should when you move. You bag it up.

Nothing gets dirty that way. How could it?

But I got her down there. That doesn't sound good. I mean, I saw her there, it was some time after, doing laundry. Long after that move and long after Teffle had gotten her into my place and even long after I'd gotten used to hearing her, so loud, talking into her phone, or tapping my wall like she was hanging a picture, with someone there to help her out, another guy, I just called Hanger, because I knew his name started with an H, but I could never remember it, so Hanger was good.

I pretended not to notice that she was folding up a bra. But she was. I said, "how'ya?" And if that didn't start her talking.

"Have we met?"

"We have."

"Paul."

"No."

"Mark."

"No."

"Andrew?"

“Closer.”

“Allan.”

“So how you been?”

“You helped me move.”

“Okay.”

“Didn’t you.”

“I did.”

“That was very nice of you. Can you hand me that?”

I gave her the bleach by my arm. There was a table between us. That’s where everyone folded stuff. There was no stopping her.

“How’s Stanley?”

“Fine.”

“He’s from Krakow, huh?”

“Krakow.”

“Have you been?”

“No.”

“I thought he said you were Polish.”

“I’m not.”

“Neither am I.”

It was good to share a joke down there.

I liked how her bangs seemed to tangle into her eyebrows. They were very full. I thought that even as she walked away. With her basket up the stairs. I couldn’t do any of the laundry I’d brought down because she already had some stuff in the washer. Her flip-flops were loud on the metal stairs. Like ping-pong rackets swatting at coins in the air. And thick legs. Not fat. But they almost rubbed against each other when she really went. Still not my type though. That’s the shame of it. A good looking girl. Only I couldn’t see us together. That’s all. It goes like that sometimes, do you know what I mean?

You’re best not trying to make too much of things. That’s what Teffle said at least. He’s straight enough that way.

THE FOX

Christian Ward

A blur of auburn gets caught
in the cracked iris, gargling

on the stillborn air before
dissipating into the shadows.

And then, a moment later,
its echo hits us –

a sound wave rebounding
back at our ignorance

i'M HOME

Peter Layton

My own life follows behind me even though it's been shredded in a shredder.
People look on it with amusement.
And I imagine it could be looked on that way.

From outside it, it's OK to view from a past.

My car, like me, is rusting in its street.

And as a background of cold.
Just like the ducks that are shotgunned as they fly.
Thinking of something so far from this.

SNOW MELTS

Jaz

Reality smacks you hardest in the morning

The pain comes in
from everywhere
and wraps you around
like the coldest winter

Footsteps all over your heart from last night

shut down the air
stomp out the light
and darkness stands tall

The world seems it'll never be right again

tears flow more than the ocean
You gather all corners of your body
to keep from bursting with unbelievable angst
to keep from rotting with grief

Loneliness now sits down in you

and it's apparent that he'll be around
for a long time

But I promise

just as snow melts-

You will shine again.

SINISTER

Walker Manning Hughes

I found Gina and Bone right where I guessed they would be, lying head to toe on the roll-along conveyor near the loading dock of the abandoned Nu-Fizz plant. They were about three days gray and as flyblown as midday road kill seasoned under a blazing summer sun. Their eyes were open and found me as I came in. *You're next*, those eyes said, and a fetid stench stifled any argument I may have had. There were eight other bodies lined up but they were all strangers, and it was the first time in seven days that there weren't at least five of my friends in that hell-bent convoy of death.

"Steven, my favorite customer," the man I was looking for said to me. My stomach instantly seized. The voice was eerily sibilant and flowed as a snake slithered. *Sssteven. Cusstomer.* I turned towards the sound, feeling I had to keep an eye on its owner.

"I need a fix," I said as my eyes found my host in the shadows, where he always was, near a door leading deeper into the dead, chill building. The unnatural white sheen of a well preserved but unmade-up corpse. Piercing, reflective eyes, purplish-blue. Ivory teeth, slightly elongated and pointed. A spook. My heart raced as it always did in his presence until the sound filled my head. *Fump-fump. Fump-fump.*

"Steven needs a fix. Is Steven sick?" the monster taunted. *Sssick?* I didn't know his name. It wasn't the sort of thing that came up during the type of business we conducted. I had also never offered mine, yet this fiend had always known it.

"Yes. Sick," I said.

"And is Steven willing to pay my price? Will Steven make the wager?"

I knew I had no choice. Any small, fleeting chance to avoid this nightmare had fled the instant I set foot in that undercover mausoleum. After twelve times it was almost guaranteed odds that this would be the crusher, a surety that I would lose the bet, and with it my life.

A week earlier I could never have dreamed of being in such a situation.

"Free shit over at the bottling plant," somebody had said, and no way was I going to believe it. I mean, I'd heard it all before. It was one of those things, a legend, that people spouted to watch the junkies twitch and twitter and to see if the freaks would fall for it. And we freaks passed it on because some cat

had pulled it on us, and it was something to say other than what we were always thinking. *I need. I need.* But after a day of roaming, earnestly pan-handling, scrounging for scrap metals and cruising for a score, any score, my feet were just headed that way. Because, after all, I was only half human anymore, the other half full-up of the devil I had sold out to long before, and he'd been thinking *free shit* the whole time and was willing to find out if maybe this time it could be true. And it really was, only it was way crazier than just someone handing out sample smack like welfare gone cool.

The trickiest part was that it turned out to be the best dope in the whole city, maybe the best anywhere. The kind that only takes a bump and no heat. You just cold shake it right in the rig and when you land it you know right away and you just smile. You know God. Hell, you might even be Him.

Standing there in that rot factory, with the maggots wriggling through a guy who had let me hold a dollar on my fix two Thursdays ago, with that lavender-eyed specter of death licking his lips and grinning his all knowing grin, I had to have it. And I absolutely *knew* I could win the bet one more time. Lucky thirteen.

"Yeah, I'll make the wager," I said.

"Excellent," the fiend said and made it sound creepier than anything he had ever said to me. I watched him carefully as he moved towards an old ratty couch that had been dragged in, probably from the dump. There was a decrepit coffee table standing there, somehow managing to hold itself together. I knew the routine. I went over and took a seat. The demon loomed over me.

"You bet your life," he said.

I could only nod.

"In one of these," he said, laying out two syringes, "is what you want. What you live for." The two rigs were worked up already, both holding about a half cc of yellowish liquid. As usual I could tell no difference between them. "In the other is what you don't want. What you die for. Dope in one. Poison in the other." My hands poured sweat and trembled erratically, not from a fear of dying but from a consuming need to be high.

"I can do this," I said, mostly to myself. I studied the offerings on the table. I had done this twelve times before. No problem.

"Only this time there is a third choice." A third identical syringe appeared before me. "I've been watching you. A dozen times you've made the wager. A dozen times you've won. You show little fear. And while I detest junkie filth like you, I also see something else in you. A spark. A

potential. I've decided to offer you something very special. A part of myself that I've never shared before, mixed into a dose of your precious drug."

The pale demon, my tormentor, my savior, swelled as he spoke. I saw a sincerity that I did not expect, and an intensity that went beyond anything he had shown me before. I somehow knew he had said all he was going to say and I asked no questions. Maybe I was unable. Maybe I already knew what he was and what he meant by offering me a piece of himself. I bent to my task. I had two chances of getting right, I knew, and everything else was smoke and mirrors. Before me, ghostly hands shuffled three-card-Monty style. Faster, faster they went. Unnatural speed. Here and there a playful flourish showed me a brief glimpse of a glistening needle amidst the haze of the dope, death, and don't know. And then they were still and my choices lay there, each calling to me in some small perverse way.

On all the other occasions I had done this, I had tortured myself with questions of left and right. His left? My right? I had agonized for long minutes and told myself I was using clear logic. It had always been the need for the heroin that made me stop and choose, that stopped me from procrastinating.

This time I felt peaceful and confident. I sensed there was something more at stake than satisfying an urge, something more than even losing my life. Time slowed. It occurred to me that there was one fundamental difference. There was not only a left and right, there was now a middle. I reached for the middle syringe and grasped it. It was an impulse decision, but Fate demanded I make it and I did.

There was a rubber tourniquet and it was around my arm and I pumped my favorite vein. The half-inch needle settled in snugly and an urgent puff of pinkish blood clouded the watery tube – *where, where, gimme, gimme* – searching for the medicine it longed for. It formed into tendrils, grabbing for the fix, and I trusted it and let it have its prize and dropped the plunger.

A single heartbeat and it was there, everywhere. That old ecstasy, my best friend, and one that could never come too often or ever outstay its welcome. I sank into the couch and that evil ghastrifted closer.

"Thirteen," I said as the train running through my head began to fade.

"No, Steven. Infinity." The spook laughed and at that moment I knew what was about to happen to me and how he had done it. The knowledge burned through me, leaving no memories behind, only a smoky sureness that it had been there. I studied the fiend's thin features and felt the first hint of a chill.

It started in my feet and hands and moved steadily inwards. A deep,

complete cold so numbing it brought on a weightless feeling and I was sick between my feet. There was no prickliness, no needles. Only a freezing wave that choked my senses until I couldn't tell pleasure from pain. The last thing I saw was my impossibly pale hands clutched in some unknowable sensation and a dark, black-red ooze seeping through my skin. My lifeblood left me, pushed out by whatever dark chemistry came mixed with the third choice. I slipped away and died, my eyes still open and staring but seeing only darkness.

When I woke I was dressed in a black, flowing robe and lying in an ancient stone sarcophagus. I felt ... everything. I knew so much more than I should have. Strength pooled deep inside me. I was remade and saw my surroundings through new eyes. The tiniest details were there at a glance, the most mundane things now beautiful beyond imagining. I was aware of my master and longed to be near him. I knew where to find him, but also knew to stay away until summoned. Soon I was called and rushed to him and fell on my face before him as he rose from his ornate coffin.

"Thank you, master. Thank you, master," I repeated in worship until he tired of it. He placed his hand on my head and I saw him much clearer even than the blindingly beautiful image my new eyes gave me. I witnessed his birth and death and remanifestation, the centuries of wanderings, the loves, the wars, the triumphs and defeats. I saw the boredom and hopelessness that had driven him to close dealings with the junkies. I saw the price he had paid to make me and the joy he felt that it had worked.

"You will have a new name," he said, his voice a celestial chime to my ears. "I will call you Sinister."

My master has taught me to kill quickly, and to sometimes drink sparingly. Those that have the sweetest blood are kept alive to make more for the master. They always give out and die after a time. We move often and I go out for the junkies and bring them in. "Free shit," I say and they run to lay down their lives, grasping futile hopes that they can make the choice that will spare them. It amuses the master to see them squirm.

I was one of them. *Steven*. What a hollow sound it makes in my mind now. It was a pitiful little life I put on the line that fateful day. Did I win or lose? The answer seems more than obvious. But I am on the threshold of forever. I need not be hasty in deciding. For now I will serve my master. I will pace myself and not burn through my desires leaving myself bored and in despair. I will search out ways to live up to my new name until it rings in the night.

Sssinister.

TUMBLING DICE

Charles Cuthill

Outside the rain poured and the lightning flashed through the night. The sewers backed up and the traffic—mostly trucks and Greyhound buses—inched along through the flooded streets.

And inside a one-bedroom house, Jack Laramie, a thirty-two-year-old truck driver, unclasped Mary Martin's bra for the first time. She was twenty-four years old and worked at a truck stop cafeteria. She met Jack during the graveyard shift. They dated off and on for three months, but had never gone this far. Tonight, Jack was going all the way.

Her bra dropped to the floor. The lightning flashed and illuminated her breasts. Jack gulped. They were beautiful, soft breasts. He kissed her full lips while brushing his thumb over her nipples. He gazed at her long legs like an explorer gazing at the Grand Canyon.

Mary removed his John Deer baseball cap and kissed him on the mouth. He tasted like a cheeseburger, she thought. But she didn't mind. Her hand glided over his belt buckle.

"I love you, Jack."

"Hmm..." he mumbled, kissing her shoulders.

"I said, I love you."

He smiled.

He only smiled because he was not sure if he loved her the way she loved him. He loved her long legs, her full lips, and her soft breasts. But did he really love her?

"Jack..."

"What?" he said, stroking her stomach. She had a belly like the women in the ab-machine commercials.

"Nothing," she said.

He kissed her flat stomach. She fell back on the bed and he ran his callused fingers under her panties. She moaned like the wind. He tugged at her panties down past her knees. He then stripped off his own clothing.

"Jack?"

"Hm?"

"You OK?"

"Fine..."

He kissed her ear and then her lips, and then, nervously, entered.



When you date somebody, you never know what you are in for. When Jack and Mary first met, Jack was consumed by her physique but not always by her mind or personality. Yet they became friends. And that's what made him nervous—he had known her too long, knew her as a person and not just something attached to a set of boobs. If it was their first date, he would have charged her magnificent body like a mad bull.

But Jack had a credo. It sometimes landed him in trouble but, nevertheless, he lived by it. It simply went like this: “Roll the dice and see what happens.”

He thrust, and she groaned and sweated like a tropical rainstorm. He moaned like a old Mack truck. He pushed harder and faster. And then every cell in both their bodies exploded in rapture.

Behind the blinds, the rain continued to patter against the bedroom window. Mary's flushed face and tangled hair lit up from a sudden crack of lightning. The window rattled from the thunder.

“Jack,” she said, nestling beside him.

“Uh, huh?”

“Do you love me?”

“Hmm?”

“I said, do you love me?”

He just smiled, nervously.

And outside the rain poured and the lightning flashed and the traffic continued to roll through the flooded streets.



THE MIRROR

Angela Little

I look into the reflection.

There I see the familiar furrow wrinkling itself, wedging itself ever deeper between the two eyebrows, like the head of an axe caught in the century-old stump of an oak.

I examine the crease between the comatose brows, and it shows me unhappiness, an unexplained lifetime of discontent, of stolen dreams and overlooked answers.

I step closer to the reflective image.

There I see the powerful ridges of bone protectively surrounding delicate orbs, guarding the precious organs from harm or intrusion like a rampart circling a fortress.

I examine the tissue-thin skin that folds over the once-vital chromatic irises, the green oculi that used to dance with life, and I am shown that years of tears and belligerence have caused the enveloping skin to become creased and dried into puffy, ugly folds.

I again peer into the looking glass.

There I see the expected colorless lips, pursed tightly together, contracting themselves into unattractive gathers, like the uneven lace ruffles created by an inferior seamstress.

I examine the pair of pale, asymmetrical tubes of skin, the external covering of the mouth, and remember the kisses that once brushed against them, the daggered words that once flowed out of them, the unhappy sighs that once escaped them.

I struggle to see something peaceful in this face, something of merit, of satisfaction, but the reflection is silent, speaking only a language that I cannot decipher or interpret.

I feel a trickle of escaping saline and I regretfully realize...

This is not a mirror. I am looking at the woman who gave birth to me, and as once more I examine the face uncomfortably resting in the intricately decorated funerary box, I search for something...anything. I find nothing.

I turn away, my hands reaching up to my own face. I trace the deep wrinkle between my eyebrows, I feel the saggy skin around my eyes, I touch the blanched, dried lips that surround my mouth. And I search for something...anything.

A CHILD IN THE PARK

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

this was no ordinary park, mind you: there were no swings or children laughing; there were different children there. There was recreation: tennis, the pool, and a maze of streets for bicycles and long walks; surrounded by rows of prefabricated homes, each with one little palm tree by the driveway.

People drove golf carts around in the park, or large tricycles, or older couples would walk together just as it was beginning to turn to dusk and long shadows from tree-tops criss-crossed over the streets. In the afternoons, the women in the pool would wear hats and sunglasses, lean against the sides, swing legs in the warm water.

I remember the summer afternoons when it rained in Florida, and after the rain I would go out in the puddles in my roller skates, skate through them, feet soaking wet.

There was even a street named after me in the park, and at the end of Jan Drive there was a pond. I spent hours there, playing imaginary games, pretending I was grown-up, feeding the ducks, watching the fish swim around near the rocks at my feet, looking for the turtles, listening to the wind.

Oh, I remember Mr. Whorall, how he would walk onto his driveway every time I was playing tennis across the street. He would watch me, tell me how I was getting better at the game every time he saw me. And there was also Mrs. Rogers, who lived up the street from me. She saw me riding my bicycle by one day just before Halloween. She invited me in to help carve a pumpkin. Every year she bought me a Christmas present. The sweetest woman. The most beautiful woman.

And there was Ira and Betty Wiggins, who lived on the next street, Sand Drive, with a sign in front of their house that said, "The Wiggins' Wigwam." They had a hammock on their porch, and art so beautiful, so colorful on their walls. They lived in Panama for years, he used to be a doctor. So many things collected from all their travel. They both knew so much, they both loved life. Once they saw me and asked if I wanted to catch a lion. They then went to the side of the road, and with a spoon pulled an ant lion from the top of a sand hill. So many secrets. Every night Ira could be found with cue holder, decorated with Panamanian art, at the pool table, playing my father, or another man who died years ago.

I remember that man telling me that when I was younger he would watch me on Easter Sunday, me in my pastel dress, by myself, spinning, dancing in the streets. He remembered me dancing. This is his memory, how he thought of me.

And I remember the McKinleys, Pete and Lindy, another beautiful pair who talked of Mexico, of all the places they'd gone, all the things they had seen. So many times I would visit them just to hear them talk. And Pete would try to stump me with an intellectual riddle every time I sat with him; he would ask me about astronomy, what I had learned in my classes since the last time I visited the park. Sometimes they would take me to their country club, play on tennis courts made of clay, how strange it felt on my feet through my tennis shoes.

It was like another world there. The park was where I spent my Christmases, my Easters. I remember swimming in the pool, a week shy of thirteen, when my parents told me I was an aunt. Now I talk to my sister on the phone, she asks me if I remember so-and-so from Palos Avenue, from Blue Skys Drive. The couple that had the ornate rock garden in their front yard, or the snow shovel against their light post with the words "rust in peace" painted in white on the metal. Yes, I say, I remember them. Well, so-and-so passed away last week, she says. Heart attack. This is what it comes down to, I think, all these memories are slowly disappearing. So many memories. Where there are palm trees everywhere. It was my other world, my other life, another lifestyle, another everything. This was not an ordinary park, but the children were so much smarter, and still so full of life. So much to teach. So little time.

A RETIRED POLICEMAN TALKS ABOUT THE SUICIDES HE'S SEEN

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

"I remember one lady, we found her in her bathtub, she cut her throat. That's odd, for women, normally they take pills, they don't like to disfigure themselves. But she knew what she was doing, cutting her throat in a full bath. Less messy that way. Autopsy said she was full of barbiturates. She was a nurse, that explained how she knew how to do it, but then we found out that she was pregnant, too.

And to top it off, her brother was a priest."

GOD EYES

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

It was a stupid point to argue about at 2 a.m., sitting in the lobby of the Las Vegas Hilton listening to the clink and whirr of slot machines and the dropping of tokens onto metal. You believed in God, I did not. Even after two rounds of Sam Adams and three rounds of Bailey's I knew you wouldn't change my mind, and I had no desire to change yours.

You told me of a dream you had: in it you and Christian Slater played a game of pool. You won. He looked at his hands and said, "I've got a beer in one hand, and a cigarette in the other. I guess this means it's time for me to seduce someone." And he walked away. You're a funny man. You make me laugh. Your brother even noticed that. And you even spoke like Slater, rough, mysterious.

You were the optimist: yes, there is meaning to life. I was doomed to nothingness, meaninglessness. But to me you were the pessimist: you believed you were not capable of creating the power, the passion you had within you. I had control in my life, even if in the end it was all for nothing. You think we are so different. We are not.

It's now after three and we listen to music: Al Jarreau, Whitney Houston, Billy Ocean, Mariah Carey. Natalie Cole, with her father. "That's why darling, it's incredible -" you mouth as you walk toward the washrooms - "that someone so unforgettable -" take a spin, watch me mouth the words with you as you walk away - "think that I am unforgettable too."

I tell you about the first time I got drunk - I was maybe ten, and asked my sister to make a mixed drink mom had that I liked. She made me a few. So there I was, walking to the neighbor's house in the summertime, wearing my sister's seventies zip-up boots, oversized and unzipped, carrying my seventh drink and sticking my tongue out to see the grenadine. You liked my story. You laughed.

Passion is a hard thing to describe. Passion for life. You must know and understand a spirituality behind it. You do your work, the things in life solely because you must - it is you, and you could not exist any other way. It is who you are. It is a feeling beyond mere enjoyment. You said that the spirituality was a God. I said it was my mind. Once again, we lock horns.

All of my life I have seen people espouse beliefs but not follow them. Tell me you're not like them. Our values are different, but tell me we both

have values and will fight to the death for them. I need to know that there are people like that, like me. We are different, but at the core we are the same. We understand all this. I'm grasping straws here as the clock says 3:45 a.m. and the betting odds for football games roll by on the television screen. You don't gamble. Neither do I. Why must you be so far away? You reminded me that I have a passion in life, that I have to keep fighting. But I get weak and tire of fighting these battles alone. I, the atheist, have no God and have to rely on my will. When I am low, I struggle. You have your God to fall back on, I only have me.

And you looked into my eyes as it approached the morning. You stared. We locked horns once again. I ask you again what you were thinking. And you said, "I see God in your eyes." Later you said it to me again. I asked you what you meant. You said, "I see a God in your eyes. I see a soul." Whether what you saw was your God or just me, my passion, well, thank you for finding it. "Good-bye, Ms. Kuypers," you said when you left for good that day. I said nothing. Good-bye, Mr. Williams, I thought, then I closed the door, walked to the window, started singing unforgettable. I was alone in my hotel room, and the lights from the Stardust, the Frontier, the Riviera were still flashing. I'm not alone. Good-bye, Mr. Williams.

DREAMS 01/19/04 ONE

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I think I watched a comedy sketch on television that talked about ways women should behave to turn on men, and this is why I dreamt this. But All I can remember of my dream is that I was walking outside of my room, it wasn't in my house, I don't remember the place, I just know it was my room, and I was wearing an all tight black vinyl sleeveless top and pants, and my sister Sandy was there, and she asked me what I was doing, and I said "nothing." And I think she asked, but made a guess about why I was dressed like this, and I said "no," and then she guessed if I was dressed this way to attract men, and I got bashful, so she knew that must have been my answer.

I think that might have been the end of my dream because I remember nothing else.

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

Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv

<http://scars.tv>

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